

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

ON BLACKNESS IN ARABIC POPULAR LITERATURE: THE BLACK HEROES OF THE
SIYAR SHA 'BIYYA, THEIR CONCEPTIONS, CONTESTS, AND CONTEXTS

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Abstract

This dissertation offers the first in-depth study of racial difference, and specifically blackness, in premodern Arabic popular literature. I base my study primarily on the historically orally performed chivalric legend (*sīra*) about the Arabo-Byzantine wars of the 7th-9th centuries, *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, and make frequent comparative reference to *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, which concerns the Hilāl tribe's conquest of North Africa, *Sīrat 'Antar*, about the adventures of the half-Ethiopian pre-Islamic warrior poet, 'Antara ibn Shaddād, and other near-contemporary sources. Using these works, the project assesses the portrayal of black heroes in popular lore from the time of their often-miraculous conceptions. This dissertation isolates three main sites of literal and figurative racial construction through which the movement and status of black figures in the *sīra*'s imagined world are elaborated: the black hero's birth, his coming of age as a leader and concurrent establishment of a set of military companions, and the contacts that the hero develops with other black cultures both within Africa and in diasporic contexts. Each such vignette incorporates several subgenres, showcasing how "race talk" manifests across different literary forms such as narrative prose and poetry. Because the *sīras* have long existed between oral and written media, many variations of them exist. I therefore have used several editions of the *sīra* to explore how racialization can shift and change in subtle ways even in the same work as it moves from context to context.

The first chapter of the dissertation offers a primer on blackness in pre-modern Arabic literature, in which I elaborate a set of reading practices and theories through close attention to manifestations of blackness in a selection of exemplary texts, namely the Qur'ān, the 9th-century *litterateur* al-Jāhiz's epistle *Fakhr al-Sūdān 'alā-l-Bīdān* ("The Boasting of the Blacks Over the Whites"), 'Abbasid-era *muḥdath* (avant-garde) poets who dealt with black subjects, and the *1001 Nights*. In the second chapter, I examine the birth narratives of black heroes found in the early *sīras*, two of whom are born non-hereditarily black to Arab parents. I find that in these texts, scientific discourses come to the fore; the heroes' existences are explained mainly through biological accident, demonstrating that scientific precepts have long been a common way—among both high and popular culture—of reasoning through human differences.

The heroes' epidermal blackness and genealogical Arabness confers an ideal balance of the traits commonly associated with the two cultures, rendering them ideal, hybrid heroes. As such, the third chapter examines how the hero's Black-Arab hybridity serves as a means of

negotiating between the Arab and African groups who comprise the Muslim armies in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*. The main hero in the text often engages in relationships of clientage and fosterage with his black peers, drawing them into Arab tribal affinities. I thus propose we can read the central black hero as a medium for the assimilation of other black characters in the text. This reflects an aspect of the spread of Islam that is visible across other near-contemporary literary forms, especially prosopographic works, through which non-Arab converts could have their lineages rewritten so as to be traceable to Arab or prophetic heritages. The fourth chapter evaluates representations of non-Muslim blacks in the text by looking at the portion of the *sīra* that takes place in Abyssinia, and considers in particular the question of how race “travels” between Arabia and Africa; the text demonstrates ample awareness of race as something situational rather than fixed, leading to a complex understanding of racial affinity and animus that transcends the anti-black racism expressed elsewhere. This dissertation shows that pre-modern racial thinking is neither innocuous nor flatly racist, but rather complex and variegated even within a single literary unit. It finds that there were several theories explaining how racial difference occurred biologically, which were used in the *sīras* to heighten tensions, stage Black-Arab relationships, and engender heroes who were simultaneously from prominent lineages and were ethnically disadvantaged, resulting in characters of wide appeal and utility. It also expounds on the dynamics of continuity and evolution between pre-modern and modern racial logic in the Arabo-Muslim world, particularly via both scriptural interpretations and the Classical inheritance of Greco-Roman medical and philosophical works that are common to several cultures.

A Note on Language

As has been widely recognized by scholars, the language of the popular *sīras* is, largely, a Middle Arabic register. This is particularly evident in the poetry—which is often fairly simple and employs colloquial orthographic conventions—and the dialogue between characters, which reflects one’s day-to-day vernacular. Much of the prose in such texts is composed in *sajʿ*, or rhymed phrases. Throughout this dissertation, I have attempted to reflect this register in my translations and to transcribe the original faithfully: all of the repetition that is innate to *sajʿ* is retained, the dialogue is kept more informal, though in a slightly archaic parlance that reflects the texts’ early-medieval contexts, and in the transcription of poetry no attempt has been made to “correct” or standardize spellings found in the original. It is my hope that this generates a set of translations that are simultaneously approachable and faithful to the varieties of language displayed in the sources.

Transliterations overall reflect *IJMES* standards. I have not, however, used *-h* to indicate a *tāʾ marbūʿa*. As such, it is *sīra shaʿbiyya* rather than *sīrah shaʿbiyyah*.

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Introduction

[A] racial imaginary is [...] the way our culture has imagined over and over again the narrative opportunities, the kinds of feelings and attributes and situations and subjects and plots and forms “available” both to characters of different races and their authors. – Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda¹

And there [shall] be unto this black boy wondrous events and strange affairs, which we shall mention in due time, if God Almighty wills. – *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*²

The first martial act of the first hero in the chivalric text *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*—a chronicle of genealogically linked heroic cycles of monumental length, reimagining the frontier skirmishes between Umayyad and ‘Abbasid *ghāzīs* (warrior-raiders) and Byzantine *akritoi* (frontier soldiers) between the 7th and 9th centuries³—is one that, to his mind, restores a known social hierarchy to homeostasis. The Arab general Junduba rides into battle against an older woman, Shamṭā (the gray-haired one), and kills her in mounted combat (a feat at which many had tried and failed). In so doing, he “liberates” Shamṭā’s legion of black slave soldiers, who at first approach him to do battle in her name, but give pause after Junduba makes clear that his killing spree can go on indefinitely. Soon after, Junduba delivers an impassioned address calling the men to his service. He stakes this summons on a concatenation of qualities that Junduba, like many of his peers throughout the text, view as being inborn among black men: their bravery, yes, but also their predisposition toward servility. The text says:

¹ Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda. “On Whiteness and the Racial Imaginary: Where Writers Go Wrong in Imagining the Lives of Others.” In *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind* (Albany, NY: Fence Books, 2015), 22.

² All translations are my own. Throughout this project, sections of the *sīra* will be rendered with the *juz*’ number in Roman numerals with a colon and the page number following. Arabic text of the *sīra* (though not of other sources) is provided in transcription above translated portions, except for the manuscripts discussed in the third chapter, for which consult Appendix A. Unless otherwise indicated, the text of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* that has been used throughout is the 1909 Cairo edition: ‘Alī b. Mūsā al-Maqānibī b. Bakr al-Māzinī and Ṣāliḥ al-Ja’farī, *Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Maktabat al-Maṭaba’a al-Ḥusayniyya, 1909), VII: 15.

³ See the literary review below on editions and manuscripts of the *sīra* and scholarship thereon. Though the text is not yet translated into any Western language, an abridged translation of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* by Melanie Magidow is forthcoming, and I would like to thank her here for her correspondence throughout this project. For a thorough summary of the *sīra*, see: Malcolm Lyons, *The Arabian Epic: Heroic and Oral Storytelling*, vol. 3 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 301-505.

فحملوا على جندبة الأربعين حملة رجل واحد فتلقاهم مثل ما تلتقى الأرض العطشانة أوائل المطر وثبت لهم ثبات الاسود وصاح بهم يا ويلكم ما هذا الرأي وما هذه العمال اما انتم رجال أصحاب عقول واننى والله ما قتلت الشمطا الا على شانكم لانكم أسود وشجعان وانتم تخدموا امرأه عجوز لا قدر لها ولا شان وانى ما فعلت بها هذا الفعال الا لاجل فعالها بالرجال هذه الفعال ولا تركت لاحد من الامراء رأس تنشال وان كان قتالكم من أجل المال فوالله لم أخذ منه عقال فلما سمعوا قوم كلامه بعد ما عابنوا فعاله نظر بعضهم الى بعض وقالوا والله الصواب الذي قاله ثم انهم امتثلوا قوله وقالوا والله العظيم ان هذا الأمير كلامه صحيح والتموا عليه وقالوا له افعل ما تريد ونحن لك من جملة العبيد

The forty [warriors] then rode out against Junduba on campaign as if they were one man, and [Junduba] met them like the thirsty earth meets the first drops of rain, and he held his ground against them with the firmness of a lion pride [*thabata lahum thabāt al-usūd*]. He screamed at them, “Woe upon you! What a sight this is, look what you’ve done! Are you not men possessed of intellect? I have killed Shamṭā for your sakes, for you are bold lions [*usūd wa-shuj‘ān*], yet you were serving an old woman who had no power and no consequence. Indeed, I did this to her because of what she has done to men, for she left no general with his head intact. And had your war-making [*qitālukum*] been merely for wealth I surely would not have taken a share from it [*lam ākhudh minhu ‘iqāl*].” When the people heard his speech, after witnessing what he had done, they glanced at one another and said, “Truly he has hit the mark,” then they repeated his words [amongst themselves] and said, “By Great God, indeed this prince has spoken rightly.” They inclined toward him and said to him, “Do as you wish, for we are slaves to you [*naḥnu laka min jumlat al-‘abād*].”⁴

Junduba then seals the agreement in verse, saying,

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| الا يا آل حام اصغو القول | وخذ عنكم هذا الفضول |
| ولا تبغوا قتالى اليوم بغيا | فيبغيكم حسامى مع كبولى |
| لانكمو ⁵ بني حام ابن نوح | وفرسانا على أعلا الخيول |
| ولا أرضى لكم بالذل يوما | تكونوا تخدموا ذات الحبول |
| تكونوا تحت حكم عجوز سوء | تربت تحت أذيال البعول |
| فعار عليكمو ان تخدموها | وانتم كلكم أسد فحول |
| فريحت العياد الكل منها | وكان لها معى يوم مهول |

⁴ For original Arabic, see appendix. *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, I:18

⁵ Because the *sīras* are composed in a Middle Arabic register, certain irregularities in the orthography repeat throughout. This is especially visible in dialogue, in which colloquialisms and more informal spellings are used, and in poetry, in which human plurals often are indicated with a final *wāw* in contrast to classical conventions.

| | |
|------------------------|---------------------------|
| ترون العز دوما والقبول | فكونوا عصبتي يا آل حام |
| فمنوا بالرضى ثم القبول | وهذا الحصن موهوبا اليكم |
| باطراف الدوابل والنصول | وكونوا فيه من قبلى وصولوا |

O children of Ḥām, listen to my words,
 And take unto yourselves these favors,
 Seek not after my murder, wrongfully, on this day,
 For my sword-blade and iron fetters will then seek you!
 For you are the sons of Ḥām, son of Nūḥ
 And knights upon the highest [rank] of steeds
 I am not pleased by your humiliation, from having
 Lived and served under an anklet-wearer [*i.e.* a woman]
 Acting under the direction of an evil old crone,
 Brought up under the heel of husbands
 Shame on you for serving her
 When you are fierce lions [*usd fuḥūl*]!
 She's bereft now of all festive days,
 I've brought her a dreaded day instead!
 So become my fellowship, o children of Ḥām
 You shall find honorable rank [*'izz*] and acceptance [*qabūl*], for all time
 And this fortress shall be a gift unto you,
 That you may be stirred by pleasure and approval
 [From] within it, go forth before me, and attack,
 With lance-points and spearheads⁶

The black soldiers are persuaded by Junduba's words and join his forces. The success of Junduba's references to procuring the men rank and station, as well as the offering of materiel in the form of a fortress and booty, suggests that the men regard subsuming their autonomy to an Arab general to be a securitizing measure—a band of black men raiding independently will not be able to accrue social capital, and, even worse, may arouse suspicion, draw fire, or be vulnerable to exploitation. Another recurrent trope in Junduba's overture is his manner of addressing the men—“Children of Ḥām, son of Nūḥ.” This nomenclature refers to the Noahic myth of ethno-genesis, in which Noah's son Ḥām is cursed following an encounter with his

⁶ *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, I:19

father while the latter is naked and drunk, and his progeny are consigned to eternal servitude to his siblings, Shem and Japheth.⁷ This imprecation is elaborated in the Hebrew Bible, but takes on increasingly specified racial significances through rabbinic literature (with Shem becoming the progenitor of Semitic peoples, Japheth the Europeans, and Ḥām— who has his face “blackened” by the curse— the Africans), subsequently phasing into a more diffuse set of apocryphal tales and reaching the Muslim world as one of the *isrāʿīliyyāt*, or narratives of the people of Israel, primarily concerning the Hebrew prophets.⁸ Junduba’s liberal and unqualified use of the term in a piece of popular literature to designate black people indicates the widespread, intuitive familiarity with this particular piece of apocrypha. The moniker is even used, seemingly, in an elevating fashion; the reference to Ḥām’s father, Nūḥ (often not included in the ethnonym), plaites the genealogies of the black men together with that of their Arab-Muslim would-be commander.

Also commonly featured in the above passage is the wordplay of lion(s) (*asad*, *usd*, *usūd*), the black (*aswad*) color of the men; at times added to these are words indicating chiefly or eminent status (*sayyid*, *siyāda*, etc.). This paronomasia again is at once elegiac in tone and evocative of the men’s race, capturing their ferocity and bravery but conditioning it on a veiled reference to their skin. That is, even when praised, the men are not permitted to forget their blackness, and therefore are precluded from having a discourse of equals with Junduba.

⁷ Genesis 9:20-27

⁸ This line of communication is particularly visible in the genre of *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyaʿ*, or stories of the prophets. See: Ahmad b. Muḥammad al-Thaʿlabī, and ʿAbd Allāh b. Asʿad Yāfiʿī, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʿ: al-Musammā bi-l-Arāʿis* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Jumhūriyya al-ʿArabiyya, 1900), 49; Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh al-Kisāʿī, *Vita Prophetarum, Auctore Muhammed Ben Abdallah Al-Kisai: Ex Codicibus Qui in Monaco, Bonna, Lugduni-Batavorum, Lipsia et Gothana Asservantur*, ed. Isaac Eisenberg (Leiden: Brill, 1922), 99-100. Cf. David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), *passim*.

Finally, and most explicitly, there is the trope of black, masculine power being posed in tension with that of Arab women.⁹ While black men constitute a significant part of the traditional military establishment in the late-Umayyad and early-‘Abbasid period in which the *sīra* is set, they visibly remain structurally and socially inferior to Arab men. Arab women, by contrast, constitute a controversial and marginal constituency within military institutions, despite female warriors being unusually visible in *sīra* literature, and yet they benefit in wider society from being part of the ethno-racial majority. These two groups are made to vie for purchase within the bellicose context of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, which we may note is the only popular *sīra* to be headlined by a heroine, the eponymous Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma, whose military expeditions with her black son, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, bring this relationship of mutual, at times conflictual marginality between Arab women and black men into intimate, familial focus.

Unlike Shamtā, Fāṭima’s generalship is more enduring and successful, and her characterization as an older, female commander is overwhelmingly positive, though she will nonetheless face the same questions of legitimacy that rendered Shamtā socially threatening and, ultimately, expendable. The tension expressed above between adulation of black strength and anxiety over black autonomy also foregrounds the condition of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb on his quests: he is at once held up as a model of valiance and piety, fighting in the cause of God, and is recurrently presumed to be a slave, undermining his ownership of both himself and his heroic feats. These social pitfalls establish many proving grounds for military and rhetorical showmanship in the text, and such inborn adversities may even be said to be a staple of heroic

⁹ Given the presence of Arab women as martial figures in the *sīras*, it is by no means intuitive that the contest of power exhibited here would be solely between Arab women and black men, to the exclusion of black women, and yet this happens overwhelmingly to be the case. With the exception of ‘Antara’s daughter ‘Unaytira, few black women distinguish themselves in war in these texts, and they are therefore largely not subjects in my study of *sīra* heroes; a notable exception to this is the Ethiopian warrior-princess Maymūna, who is discussed in the fifth and final chapter.

characterization across most literatures, though which adversities are fronted in a given heroic narrative are culturally defined; as shall be explored throughout this dissertation, the fact that the underdog heroes of many *sīra* narratives are black, and that this is their central “flaw,” is a deliberate choice with a range of significant implications for how these texts may be ethically and historically contextualized.

The exemplary passage above— occurring in the earliest heroic cycle of the *sīra* several generations before Fāṭima reaches adulthood and bears her son—sketches these adversities even before our primary heroes arrive, foreshadowing the persistence of a discourse of gender and race and outlining the terms under which it will occur. Or, to use Rankine and Loffreda’s words, the passage exhibits the workings of the “imaginary” behind the text.¹⁰ This brief reading offers a taste of what potentials the close-text analysis of excerpts from this *sīra* might hold with regard to assessing perceptions of race and gender—or more specifically blackness and womanhood—as they appear in a range of medieval Arabic sources.

This dissertation collects and critically analyzes moments such as these, with the aim of conducting the first in-depth study of race and race-making in popular Arabic literature of the early medieval period, with an emphasis in particular on the roles played by blackness and Africanness. In narrowing the focus of this project, special attention will be given to the heroic cycle of the black hero ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, son of Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma, in *Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma* (also commonly known by the titles *Sīrat al-Dhalhamma* and *Sīrat al-Mujāhidīn*).¹¹ ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s character is particularly valuable as a subject of study because not only is he a black hero, but he is also non-hereditarily so; much like Abū Zayd al-Hilālī in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*,

¹⁰ Rankine and Loffreda, “On Whiteness and the Racial Imaginary.”

¹¹ On nomenclature of the *sīra*, see: M. Canard, “Dhū’l-Himma,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

he is unexpectedly born black-skinned to fair-skinned, Arab parents. Though his characterization as a hybrid hero recurs in other *sīras*, in its different instances, non-hereditary blackness is given unique rationalizations. As such, I contend that narratives of non-hereditarily black heroes illuminate the construction of race across various literatures and emblemize elements of popular belief and lived, raced realities.

This study proceeds thematically, focusing on three nexuses of action within the text in which racialization is either actively in flux and development or structurally critical, namely the origin story (entailing the hero's birth and early infancy), the formation of community (often brokered through the conversion and marshalling of militias), and travel to new terrains with variant racial demographics and consciousnesses, and in particular to Africa. In accounting for multiple dimensions of "black experience" in Arabic popular literature, I map trajectories of racialization, locate the significance of race vis-à-vis other social factors ([un]freedom, class, gender, religion), and deconstruct two common, contrasting arguments, namely, that the pre-modern world was categorically "racist," and that "race" as such—typically defined as a social construct articulated in biological terms—did not exist in the pre-modern world at all.

What I Talk About When I Talk About Race

In light of the above, it is important to stake out a definition of race as applied throughout this project. First—though this perhaps goes without saying—I insist throughout on a constructivist model of race. That is, the concept of race has its origins in society and does not describe natural, biological kinds, but rather perceived human groups that have been marked out as such either by themselves or, more often, by other humans. This marking is often based on extrapolating cultural meaning out of certain observables—and especially phenotypic differences—and mapping these meanings onto an aggregate of individuals that may or may not

actually adhere to the physical or cultural differences perceived by others to define them (I discuss the constructivist argument in further detail in chapter 5). In view of this, in his work on race in the Sahel region, Bruce Hall refers to race as a “false categorization,” that “yoke[s] together much that is dissimilar on the basis of a little that is more or less the same.”¹² If we are to follow the thinking of Kwame Anthony Appiah, its falsity should mean that we drop race out of our vocabulary entirely, speaking instead of “racial identities,” and perhaps, if we eventually overcome racism, of no such things at all.¹³ Importantly, though, Appiah’s quarrel is with the future, while our concern here is with the past. As such, in using the term “race,” I evoke historical modes of thinking about human difference along the lines stated above, reasoning from the physical to the cultural in essentialist terms that wittingly or unwittingly participate in asserting or preserving certain types of power and social value.

I also hold throughout that a single term directly translatable from my sources as “race” need not be present for racial thinking to be in evidence. Rather, as in the work of David Nirenberg on the interconnected significances of medieval Spanish words such as “raza,” “casta,” and “lineaje,” which were, in his words, “part of a complex of closely associated terms that linked both behavior and appearance to nature and reproduction,” I argue that it is possible to deduce race-consciousness from a broader semantic field found in the *sīras*—and in the Arabic language in general—the contours of which are described, as in Spanish, in the language of class, kind, and pedigree.¹⁴ To this, I would also add that there is an extensive vocabulary of color-terms and physiognomic jargon, found in such appellations for flesh-tones as *abyaḍ* (white,

¹² Bruce Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 13.

¹³ K. Anthony Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections,” *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* 17 (1996): 51-136.

¹⁴ David Nirenberg, “Was there race before modernity? The example of ‘Jewish’ blood in late medieval Spain,” in *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 248.

often used to mean normatively Arab), *ashqar* (pale or fair, suggesting blonde hair and blue eyes), *asmar* (tawny or quite dark, context-dependent) and *aswad* (black, used almost exclusively for Africans); in nature-based euphemisms such as *adgham*, *ghayhab*, and *ghasaq* (the dark of a starless night and of dusk, respectively); and in terms that evoke “marking” out, such as *sīma* (sign, feature) and *shabah* (semblance, similarity), all of which are terms put to use in classifying humans in physically and socially inclusive or exclusive fashions. Often, these terms and their uses hew to scientific classifications predicated on pre-modern notions of biology and human “speciation.” I expound on the usage of a scientific idiom across Arabic literature both “high” and popular—and literatures both pre-modern and modern—to fabricate racial claims in an authoritative register further in the second and third chapters, in which I compare race’s pre-modern and modern workings at greater length.

As has been stated by many scholars, race and racism in every historical moment and locale is subject to vary; it is not only a construction, but also always a re-construction. As such, race becomes encoded discursively into the social vocabulary of a given space, reflecting that society’s priorities and anxieties; in the words of Geraldine Heng, this renders race open to “stalk[ing] and merg[ing] with” a myriad of other hierarchized factors of local import, such as gender, class, and even language, though, as Bruce Hall notes, often “local ideas articulate with wider social phenomena.”¹⁵ It is therefore perhaps no coincidence that the particular semeiotics of race that emerges in the *sīra* tradition follows a schema not dissimilar to one described much later by the 20th century psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon, whose writing on race has informed my thinking deeply throughout this project. Fanon visualizes a black man’s race as being implicated in a tripartite schema, with the each part layered upon or irrupting into the next: superficially, he

¹⁵ Geraldine Heng, “The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages I: Race Studies, Modernity, and the Middle Ages,” *Literature Compass* 8/5 (2011), 262; Hall, *A History of Race*, 11.

states, the body in general (or more appropriately, the white body) is described by a “corporeal schema,” in which one is conscious of one’s body and movements in the first person. The black body, meanwhile, experiences a “crumbling” of the corporeal schema, and instead is made to signify through skin color rather than through fully realized corporeality (in the words of Sara Ahmed, for Fanon, race “interrupts corporeality”)—what replaces the corporeal schema for black people is the “racial-epidermal schema.” Lying “below” this is what Fanon calls the “historical-racial” schema, whereby one is always constructed from the outside through—and therefore is rendered socially liable for—the history of one’s race real or imagined. Fanon characterizes this as resulting in a third-person cognizance of the self, saying,

I was responsible not only for my body but also for my race and my ancestors. I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features; deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders [...].¹⁶

What is remarkable about the non-hereditary black heroes of the *sīra* tradition is that their identity is shaped by this same schema and simultaneously defies it; to the outside world (here the textual imaginary), the black heroes are categorized almost solely in terms of their skin color, which in an Arabic literary milieu comes to connote such “histories” as unfreedom, bastardy, and African origin. However, the actual ancestral inheritance that underlies and belies their blackness is an elite and purely Arab lineage, or *nasab*, and this hidden nobility is often the feature on which ironies, tricks, and affronts to one’s honor turn in the text. It is also reflective of a historical phenomenon of great concern in the formative period of Islam, namely the authentication of pedigree and therefore of social status.

As shall be seen, *nasab* is of great importance to shaping heroes’ lives in the *sīras*, and is often cast as one of the inescapable, essential truths about a person; even when one loses one’s

¹⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 92.

way or identity, *nasab* always reasserts itself eventually through the rediscovery of lost relatives, the earning of one's inborn freedom, or the gifting of theretofore unknown family heirlooms. As the experience of 'Abd al-Wahhāb in his *sīra* indicates time and again, though, the advantages of high birth can only be conferred when that high birth is known and recognized, and in the case of a black man, this recognition can only come after and in ostensible contradiction to first impressions based on one's appearance. That is, only some kind of disclosure can reveal that one's historical-racial and racial-epidermal schemas are mismatched or counterintuitively transposed. For this reason, another essential term that will recur throughout this dissertation is "passing," or the capacity to appear to outside observers as one race but simultaneously to self-identify with another.

The capacity of Black-Arab heroes to "pass" as black Africans has been noted already in the work of Malcolm Lyons, perhaps the most prolific author on the *sīra* corpus. In Lyons' 2012 monograph, *The Man of Wiles in Popular Arabic Literature: A Study of the Medieval Arab Hero*, he situates Abū Zayd al-Hilālī's and 'Abd al-Wahhāb's blackness as a literary device that conduces to wiliness, or to their characterization among the tricky *'ayyār* of popular literature, because their color enables them to "pass" as slaves (as black people were typically taken to be), allowing them to slip in and out of various courts unnoticed in feats of espionage.¹⁷ Lyons' phrasing may strike an odd chord in light of the association between passing and privilege in contemporary discourse, an association that Sara Ahmed suggests in her statement that being part of the white majority is what enables one to pass through a space unnoticed and unquestioned, encouraging a habit of ever greater occupation of spaces and ever more entitlement to them,

Bodies stand out when they are out of place. Such standing out re-confirms the whiteness of the space. Whiteness is an effect of what coheres rather than the

¹⁷ M. C. Lyons, *The Man of Wiles in Popular Arabic Literature: A Study of a Medieval Arab Hero* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 216.

origin of coherence. [...] If whiteness allows bodies to move with comfort through space, and to inhabit the world as if it were home, then those bodies take up more space. Such bodies are shaped by motility, *and may even take the shape of that motility*.¹⁸

Passing, for our purposes, will therefore not mean passing “upward” into a more privileged racial station, but will simply connote transcending the bounds of one’s natal racial community, and thus can incorporate movement laterally and downward as well. Moreover, most often passing is involuntary rather than, as Lyons suggests, part of a trick—though to be sure there are many instances of disguise and what we might call the performance of “ethnic drag” in the *sīra*.¹⁹ ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and Abū Zayd al-Hilālī are consistently mistaken for slaves throughout their quests despite their high birth, regardless of whether they have elected to manipulate this misidentification to their advantage, and this case of mistaken identity reinforces the divisions of the spaces they inhabit. The ultimate and highly recurrent primacy placed on skin color in the descriptive and prescriptive language of the *sīra* leads me to feel secure in calling these divisions racial in nature.

Historical Background and Literary Review: The *Siyar Sha‘biyya*

It seems fitting here to begin with the question, what is a *sīra*? Broadly construed, a *sīra* is an item of literature, created and perpetuated through oral performance, that is similar to a chronicle or history (it is sometimes called a pseudo-history).²⁰ The term *sīra*, literally meaning a pathway, course, or journey, evinces the texts’ focus on the “life paths” of their protagonists, and

¹⁸ Emphasis in the original. Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* 8 (2007): 159.

¹⁹ This is particularly prominent in the case of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s trickster-sidekick, al-Baṭṭāl, who frequently dons hairpieces and makeup, affects accents or codeswitches into other languages (at which he is quite adept), and wears the clothes of other ethnic groups in order to slip in and out of places unnoticed. Typically, he can be seen pretending to be a Byzantine patriarch, though in one particularly rich side narrative he pretends to be a traveling doctor from the Maghreb in order to pull off the kidnapping of a then-ill foe (*SDH XXXVII*: 40-42).

²⁰ Cf. Peter Heath, *The Thirsty Sword: Sīrat ‘Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996); Peter Heath, “A Critical Review of Modern Scholarship on ‘Sīrat ‘Antar ibn. Shaddad’ and the Popular Sīra,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 15 (1984): 19-44; H.T. Norris, “Sayf b. Ḍī Yazan and the Book of the History of the Nile,” *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 7 (1999): 125-151, etc.

prefigures the use of the term in a modern context to denote biographies. Typically, the *siyar sha'biyya*, or popular *sīras*, memorialize and aggrandize military exploits championed by legendary figures both real and imagined (though even the “real” figures’ narratives are amplified into larger-than-life exhibitions through the medium of the *sīra*), several of whom, as mentioned above, are black characters of Arab or mixed Afro-Arab heritage. Certain among the texts appear particularly fantastical to the modern reader—featuring sorcerers, monsters, and of course an ample helping of *jinn*²¹— and all share in featuring often very broad geographies that are reflective of the territorial reach of their heroes (evoking more physicalized paths in addition to the aforementioned life paths), both pre-Islamic and Islamic. When introducing Lena Jayussi’s translation of *Sīrat Sayf b. Dhī Yazan*, Harry Norris favorably compares the roving, vividly appointed nature of the *sīras*’ landscapes to visual art, calling them “semi-musical frescoes.”²²

The martial orientation of the texts draws the corpus of the *sīras* into comparison with more historicitous conquest accounts such as *futūḥ* and *maghāzī* literature, and of course the genre of *sīrat al-nābī*, or biographies of the Prophet Muḥammad. In light of this, many scholars have conducted studies assessing the extent to which the *sīras* are attempting to rigorously and earnestly account for history, or whether they are using the stylistic conventions of historiographical writing to alternately legitimate, parody, or simply contain their self-

²¹ The *jinn*, though unreal to us, were quite real to earlier readers, and are of course mentioned frequently in the Qur’ān (cf. Q 27:29, Q 37:158, Q 51:56, Q 72:6, Q 114 *passim*, etc.). Moreover, the validation of their existence by the Prophet Muḥammad moreover has set much of the tone for the defense of folktales in the Islamic context, as is particularly evident in recurrent citations in pre-modern fictional works of what has come to be known as the *ḥadīth khurāfa*. On this, see: Rina Drory, “Legitimizing Fiction to Classical Arabic Literature: Ḥadīth Kurāfa,” in *Models and Contacts: Arabic Literature and its Impact on Medieval Jewish Culture*, ed. Rina Drory (Boston: Brill, 2000), 37-45. Amira el-Zein refers argues that the ontological realness of *jinn* and their realm in popular consciousness is cause for referring to them not as imaginary, but as “imaginal,” for though they are invisible to man and thus imagined in form, they are nonetheless widely regarded as being able to produce real effects in the human world. See: Amira el-Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 6.

²² H.T. Norris, “Introduction,” in *The Adventures of Sayf Ben Dhi Yazan: An Arab Folk Epic*, trans. Lena Jayussi (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), ix.

consciously fictive content for want of a more independent model. Thomas Herzog, for example, avers that although discerning receivers of a *sīra* recitation may have recognized it as fictive entertainment, they would have been complicit in a ruse of taking the texts as serious history because of a culturally ingrained disdain for fiction—a sort of *mise-en-abyme* of performances on the part of narrator and audience—saying,

Even if some audiences may have more or less consciously experienced the storyteller's historical narration as a moment of playful imagination situated in the forbidden no-man's-land where 'truth' and 'lie' cohabit, pre-modern Arabic society could not overtly articulate their pleasure, but had to conceal it and pretend that they were listening to serious, truthfully transmitted, educational accounts of history.²³

Less generously, Marius Canard says of the historical narrative presented in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* that, “A simple-minded audience accepted all this with enthusiasm as though it were fact.”²⁴ Criticism of the *sīras* on the part of the pre-modern Arab lettered elite, both from *udabā'* concerned with their monopoly on creative artistry and the '*ulamā'* concerned with protecting their authority over the religio-historical narrative of Islam's rise and propagation, suggests that Canard is not the only one concerned with the gullibility of a “simple-minded audience” with respect to these works.²⁵

It should be noted that encountering the *sīras* as historical literature “proper” dooms them to fail in their presumed project, and thereby partakes in the bias that posits popular literary

²³ T. Herzog, “‘What they Saw with their Own Eyes...’: Fictionalization and ‘Narrativization’ of History in Arab Popular Epics and Learned Historiography,” in *Fictionalizing the Past: Historical Characters in Arabic Popular Epic*, ed. Sabine Dorpmueller (Leuven: Peeters Publishers & Department of Oriental Studies, 2012), 25-45.

²⁴ Canard, “Dhū'l-Himma.”

²⁵ As Dwight Reynolds indicates, not all *literati* were opposed absolutely to the recitation of the *sīras*, though it was the prevailing attitude. Among their supporters was Ibn Khaldūn, who concludes his famed *muqaddima* with a “spirited defense of vernacular poetry.” This impassioned defense, of course, bespeaks the level of the criticism against which he is disputing. See: Dwight Reynolds, *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes: The Ethnography of Performance in an Arabic Oral Epic Tradition* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), 10. On criticism of the *sīras'* public recitation, see: Konrad Hirschler, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands: A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

works, *a priori*, as inferior to high cultural compositions. As such, I am partial to Nabīla Ibrāhīm’s formulation of these texts as works that grapple with questions of historic and even existential proportions on the very “basis that they be able to be understood, for [popular literature’s] treatment originates, fundamentally, with the common individual out of [one’s] sense of the relationship of necessity between the individual and nature, on the one hand, and the individual and time or history on the other.”²⁶ Under this premise, the historicizing bent of the *sīras* appears to be born not out of direct mimicry of high-cultural models, but rather out of a natural, collective impulse to make common human experiences such as love, war, and self-discovery legible through seating the abstract or universal— as so many narratives do— in an interrelated web of particulars, be it with respect to time, space, or character type.

In the context of Western scholarship, scholars have proposed various genre classifications for the *sīras*, with the two largest camps identifying the texts alternately as “epics” or “romances.” In genre theory, epics are generally held to be distinguished by their focus on character development and *bildungsroman* and their preoccupation with ethno-tribal legacy, while romances place the adventures that festoon the plots of either genre on a narrative dais, regardless of which character is carrying them out at a given time. That is, at its most fundamental, epics are character-driven while romances are plot-driven.

Overall, the term “epic” seems to be more regularly applied in *sīra* studies than romance, and this is perhaps due to less to the content than to the compositional nature of the texts, which, when performed, are extemporized by trained lyricists before audiences over several sessions,

²⁶ { هذا التعبير يتعامل مع المسائل الوجودية } على أساس أنها قابلة للفهم، حيث أن هذا التعامل ينبع أساسا عند الإنسان الشعبي من الإحساس بحتمية "العلاقة بين الإنسان والطبيعة من ناحية، والإنسان والزمن أو التاريخ، من ناحية أخرى". See: Nabīla Ibrāhīm, *Al-Buṭūlāt al-‘Arabiyya wa-l-Dhākira al-Tārīhiyya* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Akādīmiyya, 1995), 1.

sometimes taking months to complete.²⁷ These lyricists are studied in the plot contours and *dramatis personae* of the texts, but they have not “memorized” the piece as a whole. Rather, they rely on a series of stable formulas to produce highly structured variants of the “text,” with no two recitations being the same. This mode of composition has come to be known, through the seminal works of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, as the “oral-formulaic” method.²⁸ Because of Parry and Lord’s own ethnographic work on what they dub Serbo-Croatian “epic,” and because of their theory’s application to the Homeric epics, an abiding connection has formed between the genre indicator “epic” and the performance mode of the oral-formulaic method.²⁹

Counterbalancing this is the fact that romance, more than epic, has become the default term in conversations about Persian *dāstāns*, many of which have Arabic variations, such as the *Eskandar-nāmeḥ* and the tales of Amīr Hamza.³⁰ The relatively larger body of scholarship on these Persian versions may encode the designation of romance into work on their Arabic manifestations. To be sure, the tales of Amīr Hamza in Arabic are often described with the term *qiṣṣa*, or story, rather than *sīra*, adding another shade to the way in which tales move and grow between the two languages and their respective genre classifiers.³¹

²⁷ Cf. Reynolds, *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes*; Susan Slyomovics, *The Merchant of Art: An Egyptian Hilali Oral Epic Poet in Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

²⁸ On the application of the oral-formulaic theory to medieval epic and romance lyric, see: James T. Monroe, “Formulaic Diction and the Common Origins of Romance Lyric Traditions,” *Hispanic Review* 43 (1975): 341-350. Though critical of Monroe’s efforts to apply oral-formulaic analysis to pre-Islamic *qaṣīdas*, Gregor Schoeler is receptive to the notion that the theory— if applied to any body of pre-modern Arabic literature— may be best used in a modified form to gain insight into *sīra* composition. See, Gregor Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 110.

²⁹ Cf. Milman Parry, *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs*, ed. Albert Lord (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953-54); Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

³⁰ The relation between *sīras* and *dāstāns* is well-established, though little comparative work between the two sets of textual traditions has been done. This has been raised most recently in Remke Kruk’s *Warrior Women*, in which she notes that the Persian influence on the narrative tradition of the *siyar sha’biyya* is “likely, but the exact connection has not yet been sufficiently researched.” In his account of Arabic and Persian editions of the little-known *Sīrat Fīrūzshāh*, Kenneth Grant declares, “the Persian equivalent of the Arabic *sīrah* is the *dāstān*,” and that the two traditions have a multitude of related characteristics with respect to form and narrative. Kruk, *Warrior Women*, 3; Kenneth Grant, “‘Sīrat Fīrūzshāh’ and the Middle Eastern Epic Tradition,” *Oriente Moderno* 22 (2003): 525.

³¹ Lyons preserves this distinction in his *Arabian Epic* collection. See: Lyons, *Arabian Epic*, 534-586.

I would add that the non-trivial choice of presenting these texts as alternatively epics or romances has the effect of packaging them in a genre framework associated not only with form and content, but also with time. To the English-language reader, epics have a sense of timelessness brokered by the continued curricular usage of such works as the *Aeneid*, *Iliad*, and *Odyssey*, which essentially define the genre in its Western context, or what C.S. Lewis terms “secondary epics” such as Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (or even J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*).³² Romances, meanwhile, are highly circumscribed in Anglo-American culture as something “medieval,” be it the Arthurian romances (which, using Lewis’ framework, we may call “primary”) or more consciously constructed retrospectives on this era such as Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*. A desire to stem these associative channels as much as possible has led me to refer to these texts throughout my work simply as *sīras*.

Two overarching approaches to the popular *sīras* have predominated in research. First, for those encountering the *sīras* as a relatively stable collection of texts that emanated from a multifarious, medieval oral context, there is the literary-analytical approach, as taken by Remke Kruk, Malcolm Lyons (whose stunning three-volume introduction, analysis, and synopsis of a great number of the *sīras*, *The Arabian Epic: Heroic and Oral Story-Telling*, deserves special mention here), Peter Heath, Danuta Madeyska, H.T. Norris, Thomas Herzog, Marius Canard, and so on. Second, for those scholars who examine the continued oral-performative tradition of the *sīras* as a cultural phenomenon, there is the anthropological/ethnographical approach, taken by Dwight Reynolds, Susan Slyomovics, Bridget Connelly, Abderrahman Ayoub, and (much earlier) Edward William Lane. Some scholarship, such as Claudia Ott on the movement of the

³² C.S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), *passim*. The primary/secondary formulation coined by Lewis has been applied by M.M. Badawi in classifying another area of Arabic literature, namely the *qaṣīda*. See: M.M. Badawi, “From Primary to Secondary Qaṣīdas: Thoughts on the Development of Classical Arabic Poetry,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 11 (1980): 1-31.

sīras “from the coffeehouse into the manuscript,” or Konrad Hirschler’s attempt at reconstructing the early “reading practices” that developed through the *sīras*’ initial textualization, bridges these two approaches.³³

Throughout, I will primarily take a literary-analytical approach to the texts, though I do some work to reconstruct the texts’ trajectories toward their definitive textual versions (which arrives in the case of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* in the form of its 1909 print edition, which I discuss further below) by comparing the racially significant vignettes discussed in the third chapter across a variety of manuscripts, with a view towards examining how racial language can shift across the times and spaces out of which the iterations of the text are borne.

Race in the *Sīras*; Race in Middle Eastern History and Literature

Amid the aforementioned works and methods, scholars have long remarked at the visibility of black heroes in the *sīras* vis-à-vis other classes of Arabic literature, with some suggesting their own rationales to account for their existence and others recapitulating the rationales supplied in the texts. Edward William Lane, who summarizes *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* in his *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, falls into the latter category, simply recounting the story of Abū Zayd’s birth as follows,

Emeereh Khadra [...] saw a black bird attack and kill a numerous flock of birds of various kinds and hues, and, astonished at the sight, earnestly prayed God to give her a son like this bird, even though he should be black. Her prayer was answered: she gave birth to a black boy.³⁴

With regard to ‘Antar b. Shaddād, the half-Arab half-Ethiopian pre-Islamic warrior poet who is plucked from the past and rendered as the hero of *Sīrat ‘Antar* (believed to be chronologically among the first of the *sīras* to have been composed), Peter Heath quotes the 19th-

³³ Claudia Ott, “From the Coffeehouse into the Manuscript: The Storyteller and his Audience in the Manuscripts of an Arabic Epic,” *Oriente Moderno* 22 (2003): 443-451; Hirschler, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands*.

³⁴ Edward William Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (New York: Cosimo, 2005), 389.

century orientalist Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall as having attributed the selection of ‘Antara out of the panoply of well-known pre-Islamic warrior poets to a sycophantic move on the part of the *sīra*’s alleged composer, the ‘Abbasid-era *litterateur* al-Aṣma‘ī.³⁵ Al-Aṣma‘ī was positioned in the court of the caliph Ma’mūn, who was himself the progeny of an Arab father and an Ethiopian slave mother. ‘Antara’s casting choice, in von Hammer-Purgstall’s view, made for an ingratiating gesture. R. Brunschvig describes ‘Antar’s *sīra* as a “*roman à thèse*” designed to defend the birthrights of children born of slave concubinage, and adduces the *sīra*’s existence as “proof that the question [of such children] had some immediacy and demanded a liberal answer.”³⁶

In light of ‘Antar’s prototypical status as the protagonist of one of the first known *sīras*, some later authors have simply read black warrior-poet characters as his avatars, understanding the black hero as a stock character who, in order to satisfy audience expectations, merits inclusion in succeeding *sīras*. Though the texts will sometimes draw this analogy themselves,³⁷ the varied etiological circumstances through which successive black heroes come to figure in the texts encourage us to, at the very least, view the *sīras*’ other black heroes as hybrids of ‘Antar with other myths and traits, which have been sufficiently altered as to be distinct characters rather than mere derivations.³⁸ We may then, reasonably, query: why these heroic identities, why these texts?³⁹ I contend, particularly in the fourth and fifth chapters, that this is largely a matter

³⁵ Peter Heath, *The Thirsty Sword: Sīrat ‘Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996), 6.

³⁶ R. Brunschvig, “‘Abd,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman, et al. Leiden: Brill, 2012.

³⁷ Cf. Reynolds, *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes*, 197.

³⁸ ‘Antar, moreover, becomes a trans-racial symbol of chivalric heroism. Heroes in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, such as the Arab Ṣaḥṣāh, are likened to him. Cf. *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* II:2, “Bravery emanates from him like ‘Antar, and with respect to righteousness (‘*afāf*), he is like Ḥaydar.”

³⁹ All of the *sīras* helmed by a black hero fall into the category of “earlier *sīras*,” as formulated by Danuta Madeyska (with the “earlier” ones being known as early as the 12th century and the later ones emerging between the 14th and 16th centuries in mostly Mamlūk domains). See: Danuta Madeyska, “The Language and Structure of the Sīra,” *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 9 (1991): 193.

of the texts' didactic motives; as with many epics and romances, the *sīras* valorize one nation—here the Arabo-Muslim *umma* or a subdivision of the same—coming together to fight its foes, extend its reaches, and seek glory and adventure. Incorporating military heroes who are simultaneously social underdogs and racial go-betweens poises these heroes to enact allegories of assimilation, ascending society's ranks and enlarging its tent as that society conquers and expands its way across the textual landscape.

Malcolm Lyons' account of the popularity of black characters in the *sīras* is equivocal. In his three-volume masterwork on the subject, he writes, "Of the audience to which the narrators of the cycles could appeal, a number must have been either black or of mixed race [...] amongst the élite group of the cycles' major heroes, three are black," referring to 'Antar, Abū Zayd al-Hilālī, and 'Abd al-Wahhāb.⁴⁰ However, he also points out that often representations of black people are negative and stereotypical within the *sīra* tradition more broadly. We cannot, of course, confirm Lyons' speculation on the makeup of the *sīras*' audiences, though his more readily verifiable views on the treatment of black people in the *sīras* will be revisited in the fifth and final chapter of this dissertation.

The above works constitute some major pieces of scholarship on the *siyar sha'biyya*, and each gives the blackness of their heroes due reference where applicable. And yet, despite the acknowledgment of the racial dynamics of these texts and commentary on their black heroes being nearly *de rigueur* in *sīra* studies, no focused study on the historic and literary implications of this racial identity has yet been attempted.

At issue in such a study is the quality and construction of the blackness of these heroes, especially those that are non-hereditarily so. As I have noted elsewhere, the hereditarily Arab yet

⁴⁰ Malcolm Lyons, *The Arabian Epic: Heroic and Oral Storytelling*, vol. 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 24.

black-skinned figure of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, though often read as African by his peers, is culturally estranged from any sense of Africanness, even as he is often vitriolically excluded from identifying with Arabness. When in command of black armies, therefore, the reader cannot necessarily anticipate an underlying sense of affinity between ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and his troops that is channeled through the “affective cords of racial belonging” that, to Boulou Ebanda de B’Béri, structure “Africanicity,” a plastic, trans-geographic sense of shared identity; rather, what emerges throughout the *sīra* is that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb identifies with them on the grounds of their mutual blackness of color.⁴¹ Because of the association (usually coherent and uncontroversial) between blackness and Africaness, applying the language of literary critics that has been used to theorize black presences in texts— such as Toni Morrison’s coinage of the “Africanist” figure as one who abides spectrally in American literature as an often unvoiced or underdeveloped embodiment of the “denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify”⁴²— becomes newly problematic in the context of the *sīras*, and so throughout I have taken care to avoid conflating the one with the other.

The study of race itself in pre-modern Middle Eastern history and literature also continues to be a highly delimited area, a foundational work for which remains Bernard Lewis’ 1990 monograph, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Inquiry*.⁴³ As one can deduce from the title of Lewis’ work, the topics of race and slavery are often understood to be ineluctably linked with respect to the pre-modern Middle East. Indeed, so thorough is the

⁴¹ Boulou Ebanda de B’Béri, “Africanicity in Black Cinema: A conjunctural ground for new expressions of identity,” *Cultural Studies* 22:2 (2008) 25. See also, Rachel Schine, “Conceiving the Pre-Modern Black-Arab Hero: On the Gendered Production of Racial Difference in *Sīrat al-amīrah dhāt al-himmah*,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 48 (2017): 298-326.

⁴² Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 6.

⁴³ Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Inquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

semiotic collapsing of black people in the region with the status of forced servility that, today, an all-too-common way of referring to people of sub-Saharan African heritage in Arabic is ‘*abīd*, or “slaves” (other races that have historically comprised large portions of the slave population in the region, such as Turks, Circassians, and Slavs, do not continue to be identified in this way in common parlance, and historically were often given a differentiated designation as *mamlūks*, literally “owned people”). This usage is so commonplace that Eve Troutt Powell orients the prologue of her masterful book, *Tell this in My Memory: Stories of Enslavement from Egypt, Sudan, and the Ottoman Empire*, around the epithet ‘*abd* and, more specifically, around the ethno-national commitments of the Egyptian public that preclude critical historical inquiry into the origins of this slur, saying,

As I learned from interviews with Sudanese refugees [...] the most painful epithet was ‘*abid*, the Arabic word for “slave,” a word intended for darker-skinned people of African descent. I think the silence around this word, even between the most caring of observers, reflects a larger silence about the legacy of slavery that connects Egyptian history to Sudanese history.⁴⁴

A large number of histories (too large, perhaps, to list here) mention black slave-soldiery in Islamic lands, but the overwhelming focus with respect to military infrastructure has spotlighted Turkic slave-soldiery because it is this that was most germane to upward social mobility, culminating not infrequently in dynastic projects, as with the Tulunids, Ghaznavids, and of course the Mamluks. Some notable exceptions may be found in the works of John Wright and Paul E. Lovejoy, both of whom address the trade in Africans across the Sahara to the Muslim world and beyond, as well as in the forthcoming work of Craig Perry, who is working with documentary material from the Cairo Geniza to recover information about domestic slaves,

⁴⁴ Eve Troutt Powell, *Tell this in My Memory: Stories of Enslavement from Egypt, Sudan, and the Ottoman Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 3

who are largely invisible in literary accounts.⁴⁵ The outstanding event of the Zanj Rebellion, which disrupted the Baṣran power structure for 14 years (869-883) due to an uprising of black slaves and other disenfranchised members of the city's populace, has received special attention in the context of black slave militancy and resistance, though this rebellion was mounted by agrarian slaves laboring in salt mining on the Euphrates. Indeed, one of the oft-cited sources of the rebellion even among 'Abbasid-era historians is the uniquely harsh conditions of agrarian slavery in Arab lands *vis-à-vis* military impressment.⁴⁶

The increased academic awareness of trans-temporal anti-black racism in the region has been accompanied by the recognition that this history of racism means that intellectual and civilizational contributions to the Muslim world made by black Africans have likely been overlooked. In the past several years, interest has flourished with respect to Muslim West Africa, the status of African characters in Middle Eastern literature, and the status of Sub-Saharan Africans as cultural and intellectual contributors to Islamic societies. In addition to the aforementioned works, the recent historical and intellectual-historical studies of Ousmane Oumar Kane, Chouki el-Hamel, and Rudolph T. Ware III, and the literary criticism of Xavier Luffin represent but a few testimonies to this.⁴⁷ It is an admitted shortcoming of this dissertation that, in focusing on African characters as represented in works that had an Arab-majority compositional

⁴⁵ On this and other problems in methods of accounting for the history of slavery during the period in question, see: Craig Perry, "Historicizing Slavery in the Medieval Islamic World," *IJMES* 49 (2017): 133-138.

⁴⁶ Ingram, "Trials of Identity," 18. For a particularly insightful historiographical account of the Zanj Rebellion, see: Ghada Hashem Talhami, "The Zanj Rebellion Reconsidered," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 10 (1977): 443-461.

⁴⁷ Ousmane Oumar Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016); Chouki el Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Rudolph T. Ware III, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Xavier Luffin, *Les fils d'Antara: représentations des Africains dans la fiction arabe contemporaine (1914-2011)* (Brussels: Éditions Safran, 2012).

context, the voices of *actual* persons of African or Afro-Arab heritage will not figure centrally in this study.

In addition to the greater focus on African Islam and Africans in the Arab world, the locus of the Indian Ocean, not unlike the Mediterranean Sea upon the advent of Shelomo Dov Goitein's masterwork, has come to the fore as an organizing topography for thinking about Afro-Asian relations. Across this body of water, communications, goods, and of course, bodies, moved between Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Indian subcontinent; this is particularly highlighted in the work of Roxani Margariti, who uses the port of Aden as a case study in Indian Ocean trade, Omar Ali, who has conducted studies of African diasporic communities on the Indian subcontinent, and others.⁴⁸ In his reader, *Islam in the Indian Ocean World*, Ali explains that,

As growing numbers of people identified themselves as Muslim, incorporating their perspectives and practices into the religion, not only did the Indian Ocean world become increasingly Islamized, but Islam—in its content, character, and composition—became both increasingly Africanized and Asianized. That is, it became Afro-Asianized.⁴⁹

The diversifying population of Muslim practitioners described by Ahmed and Ali did not inevitably and organically foster an attitude of tolerance across ethno-racial lines in the wider Muslim world, but it did extend the horizon of contact for Arabo-Muslim individuals, and *ipso facto* their conceivable economic and social reach, for better and for worse. The trans-Saharan slave trade—which coalesced in the early 700s into a “*regular trade*” under primarily Berber Muslim auspices and was sustained until the 20th century in a pattern that John Wright describes

⁴⁸Roxani Margariti, *Aden & the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Omar Ali, *Islam in the Indian Ocean World: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016). I would like to acknowledge both Alaine Hutson for her generous correspondence and Jazmin Graves for organizing the symposium, Scholars at the Intersection of South Asian and African Studies, hosted by Howard University in April 2017, which provided a rich forum in which to discuss these topics.

⁴⁹ Ali, *Islam in the Indian Ocean World*, 2

as being “largely uninterrupted”— is undoubtedly one of the most devastating consequences of this reach.⁵⁰ According to Wright’s estimates, the number of sub-Saharan individuals transported to Islamic lands quadrupled over the course of the 8th century, doubled again in the 9th century, and grew steadily through the 11th century, reaching a crest of approximately 5,000 individuals per year; the numbers at hand, of course, come nowhere near equaling those of the Atlantic slave trade, leading scholars such as Ehud Toledano to differentiate between early-modern Islamic polities as “societies with slaves” and the Americas and parts of Western Europe as “slave societies,” but the trans-Saharan slave trade nonetheless exceeds the Atlantic slave trade temporally by several centuries.⁵¹ It is at the juncture of the 8th-9th centuries that *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* is largely set, and indeed the ramp-up in the demand for “Sudanese” slaves for military purposes during this period is directly referenced in Danuta Madeyska’s analysis of the *sīra* as a datum that may be used to date portions of the text, reading the racial composition of Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma’s army as significant vis-à-vis the historical and numerical realities of black slave soldiery.⁵²

In addition to the generalized social conditions both within and without the region that have militated against the critical inquiry into race in Middle Eastern history and literature, there is also a stumbling block among some scholars, to which I have alluded above, in the form of the ongoing debate over the salience of the concept of “race” as a heuristic for assessing the ordering of pre-modern societies. Robert Bartlett acknowledges that many scholars of pre-modern Europe have focused mainly on tribal, genealogical, or ethnic distinctions while avoiding the language of race because of its technologized and modernized significances, which crystalized in the

⁵⁰ John Wright, *The Trans-Saharan Slave Trade* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 12-17. Emphasis in original.

⁵¹ *ibid.* 39; Ehud R. Toledano, “Ottoman Slavery and Abolition in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* volume 2, ed. David Eltiss et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 224.

⁵² Danuta Madeyska, “Reflections on the Origin of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*,” *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 43 (1984): 94.

aftermath of the Second World War. He establishes pre-modern “racial logic” as being no less biological than modern racial logic, but with the caveat that a pre-Enlightenment emphasis on Biblically-inflected genealogical considerations led people to acknowledge, fundamentally, “the common descent of all human beings with, as a necessary corollary, the implication that races developed over the course of time.”⁵³ Modern racial logic, meanwhile, adduced biological arguments explicitly to undermine the humanity of non-white races. Decades before Bartlett, W.E.B. Dubois registered this same point, saying, “The medieval European world [...] knew the black man chiefly as a legend or occasional curiosity, but still as a fellow man—an Othello or a Prester John or an Antar.”⁵⁴

Geraldine Heng articulates the necessity of considering race in studies of the pre-modern world, using the case of Jews and Saracens in medieval English literature and material culture, and David Nirenberg does likewise with respect to the Jews of medieval Spain.⁵⁵ To not do so, Heng reminds us, is to ironically privilege the modern West as the place where innovation—including the diabolical innovation of racial “sciences” and racist policies—belongs, saying,

Like many a theoretical discourse, race theory is predicated on an unexamined narrative of temporality in the West: a *grand récit* that reifies modernity as a *telos* and origin and that, once installed, entrenches the delivery of a paradigmatic chronology of racial time through mechanisms of intellectual replication pervasive in the Western academy, and circulated globally.⁵⁶

⁵³ Robert Bartlett, “Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001): 45.

⁵⁴ W.E.B. Dubois, *The Negro* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 11-12.

⁵⁵ Geraldine Heng, “The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages I: Race Studies, Modernity, and the Middle Ages,” *Literature Compass* 8/5 (2011): 258-274; Geraldine Heng, “The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages II: Race Studies, Modernity, and the Middle Ages,” *Literature Compass* 8/5 (2011): 275-293; Geraldine Heng, “Jews, Saracens, ‘Black Men,’ Tatars: England in a World of Racial Difference,” in *A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture c. 1350-c. 1500*, ed. Peter Brown (Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); David Nirenberg, “Was There Race before Modernity? The Example of “Jewish” Blood in Late Medieval Spain,” in *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁵⁶ Heng, “The Invention of Race,” 262-263.

Reading the passage from *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* with which this introduction began in light of these works, one immediately identifies evidence of Bartlett’s point about genealogical thinking founded on a Noahic scheme—a topic also explored extensively by David Goldenberg and Benjamin Braude and Marie-Pierre Gaviano.⁵⁷ Additionally, one may be struck by the resonance of texts such as the *sīra*— which emanate not only from a pre-modern time but also a non-Western locale—with Heng’s critique. The aforementioned scholars, among others, have done significant work to walk the discourse of critical race theory back in time, and this dissertation will in turn extend this theoretical framework further in geographical space, addressing dynamics in texts that have traversed the Arabic speaking world.

Studies of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*

As stated above, *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* has its origins in the 12th century and is set at the Anatolian frontier, proceeding through numerous bellicose episodes that span the 7th through 9th centuries. Its main story follows Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma, her son ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, and his trickster-sidekick, al-Baṭṭāl. Together, these three acquire allies, interface with caliphs, and battle Byzantines for control of Anatolia—in particular Malatya and Constantinople. At every turn, the evil qadi ‘Uqba, a Muslim jurist turned crypto-Christian, tries to thwart them. I have alluded already to the scholarship of Kruk, Canard, Madeyska, and so on, all of which constitute significant works been conducted on the text of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* in particular. Much Western scholarly attraction to this work has stemmed from its anomalousness even amongst the relatively under-studied corpus of the *sīras*, in that it is the singular “heroine epic” in a literary grouping that is otherwise teeming with models of primarily masculine heroism. The titular character, Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma’s (whose *laqab* means “possessor of ambition”) chameleonic

⁵⁷ Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*; Benjamin Braude and Marie-Pierre Gaviano, “Cham et Noé Race, esclavage et exégèse entre islam, judaïsme et christianisme,” *Annales, Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 57 (2002): 93-125.

personality—she is a leader on the battlefield, abstemious and decorous among men, flirtatious among women, a protective mother and a recalcitrant wife, a master of disguise and an out-and-proud female military personality—lays her bare for a multitude of approaches and interests, from military history to gender and sexuality studies. She has even made it into the pages of children’s literature, making her American debut amongst the boldly illustrated trans-cultural coterie of champions in Jason Porath’s acclaimed 2016 anthology, *Rejected Princesses: Tales of History’s Boldest Heroines, Hellions, and Heretics*.⁵⁸

Though her comparative prominence makes her unique, Fāṭima is not the only female military personality in the *sīras*. The women who populate these texts take center stage in Remke Kruk’s monograph, *The Warrior Women of Islam: Female Empowerment in Arabic Popular Literature*, which makes use of five *sīras* (*Dhāt al-Himma*, ‘*Antar*, *Hamza al-Bahlawān*, *Baybars*, and *Sayf b. Dhī Yazan*) to analyze the place of warrior women in “popular imagination.”⁵⁹ The very titles of Kruk’s seminal study and Porath’s more lighthearted account, though, intimate the extent to which Fāṭima’s character has become embedded into feminist-reclamationist discourses that seek to resuscitate lost heroines and empower muted voices, at times expressly in those cultures viewed by white, Western feminists to be in direst need of such rehabilitation. To this point, in the opening remarks to her monograph, Kruk tells us that, “To discover that such martial females appeared on a large scale in Arabic fictional literature of the past is, to most people, a great surprise: the fact does not tally at all with their expectations of Muslim culture.”⁶⁰ Though Kruk seeks, in exploring the roles of these women, to trouble this assumption, she nonetheless comes to a set of conclusions that temper the image of a warrior

⁵⁸ Jason Porath, *Rejected Princesses: Tales of History’s Boldest Heroines* (New York: Dey St., 2016), 212-215.

⁵⁹ Kruk, *Warrior Women*, 15

⁶⁰ *ibid.* 15

woman as an archetypical and unapologetic “strong woman” of the ilk that a modern reader might expect; in particular, Kruk finds that most warrior women are virgins who are ushered quickly offstage when their youth and/or chastity lapses. This trend makes Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma—who is a particularly central, long-lived, and maternal warrior woman in her *sīra*—all the more interesting as a putatively “empowered” figure. In her preface to the most recent translations of excerpts from the *sīra*, Melanie Magidow notes that the autochthony of Fāṭima’s empowerment is embodied in her title of *amīra*:

The term *amira*, here translated “commander” can also be translated as “princess,” “warrior woman,” or “lady,” among other possibilities. It is a noun of feminine gender, and *it signifies a title of respect and a position of authority*.⁶¹

Magidow has translated the portion of the *sīra* depicting Fāṭima’s coming of age story, prior to her ascent to the role of *amīra*, and has a more complete translation forthcoming with Penguin Classics.

In addition to the above sources, there is an array of Arabic-language scholarship on *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* as well. Of note is the entire oeuvre of Nabīla Ibrāhīm, in which she takes a comparative folkloric approach to navigate between the *sīra* corpus, European text-types, and the literary and psychoanalytic work of such figures as the brothers Grimm, Jung, and Freud. To *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, she has also devoted one whole monograph, *Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma: Dirāsa Muqārīna (Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma: A Comparative Study)*.⁶² Also writing in Arabic is Hānī al-‘Amad, whose work, *Malāmiḥ al-Shakḥiyya al-‘Arabiyya fī Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma (Features of the Arab Character in Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma)*, subsumes all of the heroic figures in the *sīra*, despite gender or even ostensible ethno-racial

⁶¹ Melanie Magidow, “Epic of the Commander Dhat al-Himma,” *Medieval Feminist Forum*, Subsidia Series no. 9, *Medieval Texts in Translation* 6 (2019): 3. Emphasis my own.

⁶² Nabīla Ibrāhīm, *Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma: Dirāsa Muqārīna* (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1968).

otherness, under the aegis of Arabness (*al-shakṣiyya al-‘arabiyya*), looking specifically to the poetry of the *sīra* as the literary terrain in which this Arabness is enacted.⁶³ Also noteworthy is the work of Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn al-Ḥajjājī on the “birth of the *sīra* heroes,” both metaphorical and literal, and Nādir Kāzīm’s extremely detailed essay on the role played by blackness in the *sīras*—certainly the most extensive study of this prior to the present dissertation, and to which I owe much gratitude for helping my thinking, despite only happening upon it quite late in the writing process.⁶⁴

Most works that analyze *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* make use of one of two editions of the text, namely the 1909 Cairo edition published by the Maktabat ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Aḥmad al-Ḥanafī, or the 1980 Beirut edition, published by the Maktaba al-Thaqāfiyya; Claudia Ott has done extensive work reconstructing the manuscript stemmata that led to the production of these editions, as well as to a myriad of other iterations of the *sīra*. Ott’s indispensable work dates the *sīra*’s likely first point of composition to between 1100 and 1143, following the time of the preeminence in Syria of the Mirdasids, who traced their lineage to the Banū Kilāb, that is, the central players in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* from whom all the main heroes are descended.⁶⁵ Another, not mutually exclusive theory is offered by Marius Canard in his entry on the text for the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. He proposes that the text is a fusion of two previously distinct

⁶³ ‘Amad’s reading of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb as a prototypically Arab character appears to center on two points, namely that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is of definitionally Arab lineage, with his father being of *sharīfan* descent and his mother having a bloodline studded with heroes of the tribe of Kilāb (Fāṭima b. Maẓlūm b. al-Ṣaḥṣaḥ b. Junduba b. al-Ḥārith al-Kilābī), and that he fights on the “Arab side.” On this, ‘Amad writes, “When the Arab militias heard the poetry of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, they came to his support, whether they were of the Arab tribes or of the Sudanese and Ethiopians [*al-sūdan wa-l-ḥabashān*].” Hani al-‘Amad, *Malāmiḥ al-Shakṣiyya al-‘Arabiyya fī Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma* (Amman, University of Jordan Press, 1988), 73.

⁶⁴ On these scholars’ arguments, see especially chapters 2-3. Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn al-Ḥajjājī, *Mawlid al-Baṭal fī-l-Sīra al-Sha‘biyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1991); Nādir Kāzīm, *Tamthīlāt al-Akhar: Ṣūrat al-Sūd fī-l-Mutakhayyal al-‘Arabī al-Wasīṭ* (Beirut: al-Mu’assasa al-‘Arabiyya li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 2004).

⁶⁵ Claudia Ott, *Metamorphosen des Epos: Sirat al-Mugahidin (Sirat al-Amira Dat al-Himma) zwischen Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit* (Leiden: Universiteit Leiden, 2003), also cited in Magidow, “Epic of the Commander Dhat al-Himma,” 3.

traditions.⁶⁶ According to him, “the first and shorter part goes back to a bedouin and Syrio-Umayyad cycle [...] The second, principal, and longer part of the romance [...] represents not only the Turkish romance but also a cycle which H. Grégoire and I have called a Melitenian cycle,” because of the prominence of ‘Abbasid-era Malatya as an anchoring setting in this portion of the text.⁶⁷ Madeyska agrees with Canard and Grégoire that these two narratives of different provenance come to nest in the *sīra*, but adds that the presence of the (pseudo-)narrator of the story, Najd b. Hishām (attributed across many versions of the text as the first of its *rāwīs*) and the initial tale of our friend Junduba likewise seems to have come from an independent production that was later incorporated into the text. This tale, now the first heroic cycle in the *sīra*, constitutes “the original core of its [Ḥijāzī] part.”⁶⁸

To our knowledge, the textualization of the *sīras* begins at least as early as the 12th century, however, the preponderance of manuscripts that we possess of various among the *sīras* hail from significantly later, with the earliest known, dated manuscript fragments of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* being dated to 1430-31.⁶⁹ The earliest extant manuscript of the corresponding Ottoman Turkish variation of *Dhāt al-Himma* to which Canard alludes, the *Baṭṭāl-nāmeḥ*, is dated to nearly the same time (1436-37), and has been analyzed in depth in Yorgos (Georgios) Dedes’ dissertation, “The Battalname, an Ottoman Turkish Frontier Epic Wondertale.”⁷⁰

Chapter Summary

This dissertation consists of five body chapters. In the first chapter, I offer a primer that looks beyond the tradition of the *sīras* to answer the question, where does one look to find

⁶⁶ Ott, “From the Coffeehouse into the Manuscript.”

⁶⁷ Canard, “Dhū’l Himma,” *EL2*.

⁶⁸ Madeyska, “Reflections on the Origin of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*,” 96.

⁶⁹ Ott, “From the Coffeehouse into the Manuscript,” 444.

⁷⁰ Georgios S. Dedes, “The Battalname, An Ottoman Turkish Frontier Epic Wondertale: Introduction, Turkish Transcription, Translation and Commentary” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1995).

blackness in the pre-modern Arabic literary corpus writ large—and, once found, how do we read it? In this chapter, I stake out reading practices for grappling with portrayals of black people and blackness as they appear in the Qur’ān; in al-Jāhiz’s famed *munāẓara* (responsum, debate) treatise, *Fakhr al-Sūdān ‘alā-l-Bīdān*; *muḥdath* (modernist) poetry by two luminaries—al-Mutanabbī and Ibn al-Rūmī—who each meditate on blackness in different and highly socially significant ways; and, finally, the infamous frame tale in *Alf Layla wa-Layla*, or the *1001 Nights*. I argue the Qur’ān makes several subtle associations between blackness and infernality that reflect not only a set of idioms common to many Semitic languages but also certain commonalities with other scriptural traditions in the region, however, I also find that these Qur’ānic references are used only rarely in making a case for the negative implications of somatic blackness. More commonly cited is the apocryphal Curse of Ham, and this is taken to task in al-Jāhiz’s work and also indirectly referenced in Mutanabbī’s poetry through his association between blackness and natural, permanent slavery. Such negative perceptions, stripped of even an attempt at justification, come to a head in *Alf Layla wa-Layla*’s frame tale, which we might understand as one of the most extreme cases of virulent stereotyping in Arabic popular literature; the *sīra* tradition, as I argue throughout this dissertation, takes a comparatively delicate, consciously motivated, and variegated approach to the literary use of racial language.

The second chapter deals with the birth stories of two of the three most prominent black heroes in the *sīra* corpus, ‘Antar b. Shaddād and Abū Zayd al-Hilālī, as a means of foregrounding this dissertation’s central case study, that of the above-mentioned, complex birth narrative of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. Though ‘Antar is hereditarily black—born to an Ethiopian mother and an Arab father of elite pedigree from the tribe of ‘Abs—and thus does not have what the *sīras* often represented as a simultaneously miraculous and catastrophic non-hereditarily black

birth, his birth story nonetheless intimates something that will be of great interest throughout this project, namely, the value placed on *nasab* within the *sīras* as a way of troubling and transcending racial station. Here, ‘Antar’s *nasab* is made to be doubly exceptional because of his high-ranking father and his secretly royal mother, who was a princess in Ethiopia prior to her capture and enslavement. Likewise, in the birth story of Abū Zayd al-Hilālī of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, his mother’s status as a *sharīfa*, or descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad, makes her both a covetable marriage prospect and makes her black son all the more shocking and damning. As we shall see, explanations of Abū Zayd’s color vary markedly from those of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, tying themselves in with a more mystical and symbolic set of ideas about how God fulfills wishes and answers prayers, and how color is linked to other attributes in nature.

Chapter three explores the birth story of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb in depth, focusing in particular on the correspondences between the (pseudo-)scientific explanations of racial differentiation and the production of blackness detailed in his *sīra* and a set of other, primarily belletristic (*adab*) sources. What emerges most starkly is the tension between the text trying to recuperate ‘Abd al-Wahhāb as a hero despite his sinful etiology—being conceived during his mother’s menses—and propounding didactic warnings against menstrual sex that operate primarily through fear tactics about how the unruly female body, when ritually impure, becomes that much more dangerous a terrain for fetation. Across various versions of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, menstrual sex is said to result in progeny that may be black, but may also be “deformed” or “warped” in other ways, and I explore this set of beliefs in the context of a broader, autochthonously Near Eastern set of folk-medical understandings and rabbinic and Zoroastrian sources. The scientific and speculative discourses adduced in explaining ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s birth ultimately gesture to a diversity of racial thought that extends far beyond the climatological sciences to which racial differentiation

is usually attributed, and moreover indicate that such discourses were used in various instances to discipline and to educate with different lessons in mind.

Chapter four turns to the “after” picture, looking at ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s role as a fully-formed character in the narrative rather than as a curiosity in his infancy. In particular, I consider the stakes of placing ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, whose lineage is purely Arab despite his African appearance, at the helm of battalions in the Muslim army populated entirely by black Africans; to what extent does Africanness hold significance for these characters within the text, and if not, why not? Ultimately, I argue that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s main function vis-à-vis these characters is to aid deracinated Africans in a process of assimilation into the *umma* via an assimilation into Arab social norms and structures. He brokers this both figuratively by modeling ideal black Muslim behavior and literally by cultivating relationships of fosterage and pseudo-filiation (often embodied in *walā’*, or clientage) between himself and his African peers, thus inducting them genealogically into Arabness. This, I argue, is a process that reenacts the very real and commonplace practice of fabricating Arab *nasab* amongst non-Arab, Muslim communities. I term this entire arc from Africanness to Arabness an “allegory of assimilation,” and use a particularly illustrative case in which ‘Abd al-Wahhāb converts an African warrior to Islam to walk through this allegory in microcosm.

Chapter five moves from considering how ‘Abd al-Wahhāb interacts with African Muslims within the text to the premises and dynamics under which he encounters African non-Muslims by analyzing what I designate the “African cycle” of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, in which ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and his peers travel to Ethiopia in pursuit of one of the text’s central villains. In the ensuing portion of the *sīra*, the Muslims encounter a number of African peoples, from the Ethiopian princess Maymūna who falls in love with ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, to the fierce cannibals of

the Banū ‘Uqfūr and Lamlam. I find that many of the African peoples and ideas about African geography and customs discussed in this section conform closely to representations found in universal histories and geographies from the early medieval period, evincing once again a loyalty on the part of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* to scientifically-grounded verisimilitude, this time relating to geography and ethnology rather than the biological substrate embedded in ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s birth story. Though many pernicious stereotypes make their appearance in this section of the *sīra*, they often do so in ways that are unexpected, and thus this portion of the story gives us occasion to consider two major questions: how does the *sīra* not only depict but also *use* race, and how does race travel when the narrative moves from one cultural habitus to another? I find that the text demonstrates a consciousness and sensitivity to how racial insiderness and outsidership shifts contextually, centered in particular on the status of the Black-Arab ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s perceived status amongst Africans. I also find that, in keeping with this consciousness, racial stereotypes that appear in the text have a degree of ambivalence that often turns onto how racial actors are absorbed into different power structures; when pagan and adversarial, African “brutality” connotes a threat to Muslims, while when Islamized, it transforms into an asset.

The expansionist, future-looking vision of the *sīra* thus means that, seemingly against the thrust of the stereotypes, the text cannot take an entirely hostile stance against African non-Muslims. Instead, it often focuses interest on fleshing out the accounts of proto-Muslim figures among them. Indeed, one may be struck throughout this dissertation by the frequent unitary refrains that crop up throughout the *sīra* tradition, in which black heroes can rise to prominence out of faith and devotion to the Muslim cause, showing that most anyone can belong and serve in Muslim society, if in a state of precarity, contestation, and peripherality vis-à-vis that society’s Arab core.

Reading Blackness in Early Arabic Literature: Preliminaries and Practices

The clearest objective feature of the human animal is that it doesn't have any color. And in particular it's impossible for it to be black, really black, any more than it can be white, let alone yellow or red [...] So we need to be aware of any symbolization, collective assessment, political venture, or overall judgment that would purport to include a color, of any kind, in its system.—Alain Badiou⁷¹

There were 1,800,000 [Byzantines], with the Muslims like a white blaze on a black bull. And the edges and flanks of the earth darkened, and silhouettes [ashbāh] swayed and blurred, and spirits were seized, and the winds of death raged. Squadron cleaved to squadron in battle, division upon division blended together, fate towered over them and the day became like night.—Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma⁷²

The objective of this chapter is to offer some answers to the question, where does one look to find blackness in Arabic literature? In asking such a question, I seek to survey the body of texts into which blackness is embedded from the earliest stages of Arabic literary production, to philologically and literarily assess the signification of blackness therein, and to establish the connections and comparability among these sources. Ultimately, what will emerge from this inquiry is a complex of language and literature featuring blackness and black actors, in which the representations of the black heroes of popular lore such as ‘Abd al-Wahhāb are incorporated.

While there are certain texts in which blackness looms large and explicit—such as various medical literatures, geographies, and slave-purchasing manuals or deeds of ownership⁷³—this chapter will focus mainly on pieces of literature in which blackness is

⁷¹ Alain Badiou, *Black: The Brilliance of a Non-Color* (Stockport: Polity Press, 2017), 103-104.

⁷² ‘Alī b. al-Māzinī, Mūsā al-Maqānibī b. Bakr and Šālih al-Ja’farī. *Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma*. Cairo: Maktabat al-Maṭaba ‘ah al-Ḥusayniyyah, 1909, IX:55. Translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

⁷³ On race in Islamic medical texts or as a biomedical concept figuring in other literature, see: Paul A. Hardy, “Medieval Muslim Philosophers on Race,” in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2002), 38-63; Milan Hrabovský, “The Concept of Blackness in Theories of Race,” *Asian and African Studies* 22 (2013): 65-88; Kathryn Kueny, *Conceiving Identities: Maternity in Medieval Muslim Discourse and Practice* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013); On sub-saharan Africa in Islamic geographies, see: I.A. al Adawī, “Description of the Sudan by Muslim Geographers and Travelers,” *Sudan Notes and Records* 35 (1954): 5-16. On use and delimitation of the term *bilād al-sūdān*, or “land of the blacks,” to connote variously the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa, portions of West Africa, and/or the Nilotic Sudan, see: R.S. O’Fahey, John O. Hunwick, and Dierk Lange, “Two Glosses Concerning Bilād al-Sūdān on a Manuscript of al-Nuwayrī’s *Nihāyat al-Arab*,” *Sudanica Africa* 13 (2002): 91-100. Though even al-Nuwayrī’s text, to say nothing of his marginal commentators assessed in this article, hails from the 14th century, his more atmospheric use of the term *bilād al-sūdān*, to which the commentaries add detail regarding trade routes and peoples, is indicative of the trajectory from generic to particular descriptions of Africa and Africans in Muslim geographies as contact with the region increased, particularly from the Mamlūk period onward. One of the best-known early manuals on slaving is that written by Ibn Buṭlān, *Jāmi‘at al-Funūn al-Nāfi‘a fī Shirā al-Raqīq wa-Taqlīb al-‘Abīd*, which is discussed at length in chapter 5

accidental rather than essential to the discourse. In such texts, the inclusion of blackness is more open to analysis along the lines of authorial choice or the specificities of social climate and historical moment, as opposed to those manifestations of blackness that are predetermined by strictures of genre, as an embedded feature of medical and physiognomic works that deal with human phenotype; cartographic and universal historical discourse that must, as a matter of course, cover Africa; or slaving manuals in an economy populated, from its earliest history in Islamic lands, with a large proportion of black Africans.⁷⁴

Often, as we shall see, literary sources that feature blackness do so through a contrastive dialectic—in which blackness is posed against whiteness or black people against Arabs—or while enumerating an array—in which blackness keeps company with an assortment of other colors, races, and kinds. As such, in surveying blackness in Arabic literature, one necessarily sketches its boundaries and its neighbors, finding the black situated amongst the red, the brown,

and in which he makes use of racial and ethnic typologies to recommend the best purposes for various types of slave; on its implications, see: John O. Hunwick, “A Region of the Mind: Medieval Arab Views of African Geography and Ethnography and their Legacy,” *Sudanic Africa* 16 (2005): 122. Evidence from the Mamlūk and Ottoman periods suggest that ethno-racial diversity was sufficiently *de rigueur* among slaves, and that ethnic differentiations among Africans were held to be sufficiently nuanced, that at these times ethno-racial labels were often supplied formulaically on deeds of ownership and of manumission, even when other physiognomic descriptions—which manuals guiding purchase tend to thoroughly expatiate—were absent. See: Don P. Little, “Six Fourteenth Century Purchase Deeds for Slaves from Al-Ḥaram Aš-Šarīf,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 131 (1981): 297-337. See also: Yaron Ben-Naeh, “Blond, Tall, with Honey-Colored Eyes: Jewish Ownership of Slaves in the Ottoman Empire,” *Jewish History* 20 (2006): 315-332.

⁷⁴ Due to the Sasanian subjugation of formerly Axumite-controlled Ḥimyar in the late 6th century, it is widely presumed among scholars that a large proportion of slaves taken in war in the Arabian Peninsula on the eve of Islam were of Ethiopian descent. On this, see: R. Brunschvig, “‘Abd,’” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman, et al. Leiden: Brill, 2012. Moreover, though we lack concrete demographic data on the pre- and early Islamic slave populace, scholars have noted the anecdotal visibility of slaves and freedmen in narratives of early Islamic conversion, with Thomas MacMaster stating that the lack of qualitative distinction between free and unfree persons in the Qur’ān is, “a not surprising policy for a movement in which slaves and freedmen had been among the first converts.” It is therefore perhaps of little surprise that a number of early converts that receive ample coverage in early Islamic historical writings, like Bilāl b. Rabāh (the first *mu’adhdhin* in Islam, discussed below) and Sumayya b. Khayyāt (the purported first martyr in Islam) were Ethiopian. All of this is to say that not only were enslaved and formerly enslaved blacks a common phenomenon in the pre- and early Islamic period, but they also early on became a part of Arabo-Muslim sociopolitical, literary, and even religious consciousness, and as such occur naturally in certain bodies of text. See: Thomas J. MacMaster, “The Transformative Impact of the Slave Trade on the Roman World, 580-720” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2015), 205.

and the white. Thus, in presenting a set of reading practices for dealing with blackness, I also engage pre-modern Arabo-Muslim taxonomies of race and ethnicity more broadly. I have limited my analysis to the following roughly chronologically ordered sources: the Qur’ān and selected early *tafsīr*, al-Jāhiz’s famed treatise *Fakhr al-Sūdān ‘alā-l-Bīdān* (*The Boasting of the Blacks Over the Whites*), the respective satire and ode to black figures of the *muḥdath* (modernist) poets al-Mutanabbi and Ibn al-Rūmī, and the infamous frame-tale of *Alf Layla wa-Layla*, or the *1001 Nights*.⁷⁵ I have selected these items both for their enduring popularity and for the fact that each can be said to constitute a distillation of broader trends in representing blackness in the Arabic literary corpus. In unpacking these key texts, I aim to offer a set of practices and lenses through which to read and critically engage with blackness in these works, making this an annotated syllabus of sorts.

A Note on Defining ‘Blackness’

All typologies involve a reduction, a collapsing of the part into the whole or a generalization of the whole to determine treatment of the part, à la Bruce Hall’s idea of “false categorization.”⁷⁶ Nietzsche referred to this process of “forgetting” arbitrary individual differences for the sake of creating a broad category as that of isolating the *qualitas occulta*, or

⁷⁵ A methodological problem which must be acknowledged at the outset is the fact that, with the much-debated possible exception of al-Jāhiz (as discussed below), I have selected texts that represent blackness *from the outside* rather than presenting black people *in their own words*. My reasons for doing so are several: black self-articulation will figure prominently as a theme in the third and fourth chapters of this dissertation, during which much comparability will arise between the sayings of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and those of the so-called *aghribat al-‘arab*, or “crows of the Arabs,” who represent some of Arabic literature’s earliest examples of black self-articulation through their verse. Second, Bernard Lewis has already offered useful analyses of the works of this loosely-networked cadre of poets. Third, the works of these poets, though they bear commonalities, have historically been treated collectively despite the fact that the poets’ grouping within the *aghribat* is both retroactive (though not by much, according to Lewis, who claims the term was in use as early as the 8th century) and premised seemingly primarily on their skin color, rather than on their communication with one another, elements of their literary style, or their co-contemporaneity. Critical engagement with the construction of the *aghribat al-‘arab* category as a racially-bounded aggregating paradigm of literary criticism is required, but this is outside the scope of the present study. On these poets, see: Bernard Lewis, “The Crows of the Arabs,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 88-97.

⁷⁶ See Introduction pages 8-9.

“hidden quality,” behind a mess of tentatively related objects or behaviors.⁷⁷ Grouping humans through the assignation of color—the “symbolization” and “collective assessment” discussed above by Alain Badiou—relies on a similar process of reduction: how often has anyone seen an individual who, when stood against a painter’s palette, one could call “black?” How often white? And how alike do the individuals placed under these labels truly appear? And yet, we often now speak in these terms of monochromatic designation in classifying the melanin-variable, diverse forms of humankind. Moreover, many contemporary societies have thoroughly hierarchized and politicized this nominally color-based system of human classification.

The Medieval Arabic lexicon partakes in such reductions as well: people from sub-Saharan Africa are commonly described as black (*aswad*), and the expansive territory they inhabit is designated the *Bilād al-Sūdān*, or land of the blacks, as mentioned above. Bernard Lewis has argued that in the pre-modern period, all the races of the world could be depicted in an Arabo-Muslim context using a tricolor scheme of red, white, and black.⁷⁸ An oft-cited *ḥadīth* adducing Islam’s racial inclusivity quotes the Prophet saying, “I was sent to the red and the black,” (*bu‘ithu ilā-l-aḥmar wa-l-aswad*), with the two colors being understood as accounting for all the many shades of humankind.⁷⁹ It seems fitting, then, that an exploration of how blackness is represented in pre-modern Arabic literature should begin not with a discussion of the human element, but the chromatic one: in order to understand blackness in its racialized form, we ought to first understand what, aesthetically, has been meant by an Arabic speaker

⁷⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,” in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, Raymond Guess and Ronald Speirs, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 145.

⁷⁸ There is, it seems, no getting around the fact that Lewis has been foundational to the exploration of race in pre-modern Muslim societies, however I wish to note here that his often poisonous works give the author much pause in citing him in this essay, and that his use as a source should not be mistaken for agreement with his espoused views on Islam and Muslims. Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Inquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁷⁹ Cf. Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-Bārī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. 2 (Medina: Maktabat al-Ghurabā’ al-Athariyya, 1996), 218.

when speaking of the color “black.” What range of cultural and emotive associations does this color evoke, what may it be used to describe, and what not?

In a European, Christian context, the pejorative significances that accrue to somatic or racial blackness are framed by the conception of blackness as an extreme opposite of whiteness—whiteness, being the color of light, purity, and salvation, must take as its opposite a blackness that signifies the profane, evil, and infernal.⁸⁰ While the color theory of the ancient world did “dwell on the antithesis between black and white, or darkness and light,”⁸¹ it is Christian religious discourse that is said by many to have freighted the colors with their negative and positive connotations. The depiction of the profane using blacks and dark colors—sometimes termed the “theologization” of blackness—results in no small amount of literary and ideological contortionism.⁸² How, for example, can the flames of hell, made of light, be subsumed in this paradigm? For Milton, hell becomes a place of “no light, but rather darkness visible.”⁸³ How might a black African saint—by definition a salvific figure—fit within the medieval Christian iconographic canon? His blackness must be apotropaic or else constitute a nod to the territorial ambitions of globalizing Christianity, but in either case, the enigmatic depictions of the black St. Maurice in 13th century Germany arguably speak to worshippers in the future tense, suggesting a whitening, lightening world.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Certain theologians, such as Octavius Gaba, have attempted to stage an intervention into this dichotomy, aspiring toward a “biblical basis for a systematic theology which affirms both darkness and light,” as essential aspects of God’s revelation and presence. See: Octavius A. Gaba, “Symbols of Revelation: The Darkness of the Hebrew Yahweh and the Light of Greek Logos,” in *The Recovery of Black Presence: An Interdisciplinary Exploration*, Randall C. Bailey and Jacquelyn Grant, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 143-159.

⁸¹ John Gage, *Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 11-12.

⁸² Herman Pleij, *Colors Demonic and Divine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 5-6.

⁸³ John Milton, ed. Sam Barrow et al., *Paradise Lost*, book 1 (London: John Bumpus, Holborn-Bars, 1821), 5. On interpretations of and inspirations for Milton’s portrayal of hell, see: R.J. Edgeworth, “Milton’s ‘Darkness Visible’ and ‘Aeneid’ 7,” *The Classical Journal* 79 (1984): 97-99.

⁸⁴ Geraldine Heng, “An African Saint in Medieval Europe: The Black St. Maurice, Martyr and Knight,” in *Sainthood and Race: Marked Flesh, Holy Flesh*, Molly H. Bassett and Vincent W. Lloyd, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 18-45.

Modern anthropology, sociolinguistics, and philosophy have all been mobilized in puzzling out the almost ubiquitous connection between darkness and the profane. In meditating on the meaning of the phrase, “darkness of the human soul,” Badiou describes the casual way in which, under the influence of this connection, we slip between talking of color and of morality, saying “we’re already leaving the realm of colors or indeed of the dialectic of day and night, of light and dark, of white and black: if the blackness of the soul is opposed to its purity, it is because *black connotes impurity*.”⁸⁵ We find, too, a somewhat ironic echo of blackness’ religiously- and morally-inflected signifying power in the battle scene from *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* quoted above, where set against a dark and thunderous sea of unbelieving (white-skinned) Christian foes, the Muslims are rendered as a bright white spot. The battle begins when the “darkness” of the enemy begins to move and merge, blotting out the light.

We may then ask, does the Qur’ān offer a platform, as does Jewish, Christian, and even Zoroastrian scriptural and mythic literature,⁸⁶ for the “theologization” of color, and thus for the assignation of symbolic and even moral import to certain hues? When surveying the Qur’ān for discourse on race, scholars have tended to find little material. Chouki El Hamel emphatically declares that, “[N]either the Qur’an nor the Hadith make any evaluative racial distinctions among humankind,” saying that instead “religious” justification for color prejudice comes in through an apocryphal back door, in the form of the Hamitic myth, which was used to “extend Arab and

⁸⁵ Badiou, *Black*, 37-38. Emphasis in the original.

⁸⁶ I do not reference texts outside of the scope of those scriptures belonging to communities historically regarded as *ahl al-kitāb* because they have had less bearing on discourses within and around Islam, however an instructive chapter on the lore of racial etiologies around the world may be found in David Goldenberg’s recent work, *Black and Slave*. See: David Goldenberg, *Black and Slave: The Origins and History of the Curse of Ham* (Boston: DeGruyter, 2017). A striking theological connection between somatic blackness and demonism is visible in the Zoroastrian text, the *Buhandišn*. In both the Indian and Iranian versions, the text includes a tale of the etiology of black Africans (the term for which is homographic with the term for unbelievers), who arise from the intercourse of a man and a demon-woman (*parīg*), mandated under the rule of the devilish king Dahag. See: Bruce Lincoln, “Human Unity and Diversity in Zoroastrian Mythology,” *History of Religions* 50 (2010): 7-20.

Berber cultural prejudices about race that preexisted Islam.”⁸⁷ Bernard Lewis agrees, finding that in the two passages in the text that seemingly address race, “the Qur’ān expresses no racial or color prejudice.”⁸⁸ Instead, Lewis locates the uptick in negative representations of blackness in Arabic sources in the 7th and 8th centuries, under the purportedly Arabo-centric auspices of the Umayyads.

These authors attribute the paucity of scriptural commentary about race to the Qur’ān’s social aspirations, such as the reification of an *umma* of believers whose worth is staked not on lineage but on common values; to this end, the Qur’ān is cognizant of difference, but takes an egalitarian view. In examining the signification of color in the Qur’ān rather than its explicit statements about race, I aim to isolate not those passages where interpreters of the text have read racial logic *out of* the Qur’ān’s language, but rather those moments where it is possible to read racial logic *into* the source, as with the metastasizing of the Hamitic myth from its non-racial Biblical origins into a theory of human difference.⁸⁹ With this aim in mind, I will focus mainly on references to the three colors mentioned above: red, white, and black. This tricolor scheme appears prominently in verses that treat eschatological, natural/environmental, and ontogenetic topics.

I argue that in describing the Qur’ān as neutral on the topic of race, some scholars have arrived at the incorrect assumption that no racial language or logic may therefore be derivable

⁸⁷ Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 62.

⁸⁸ Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, 21.

⁸⁹ In tracing the progressive racialization of the so-called “curse of Hām” (Genesis 9:25-27), Benjamin Braude and Marie-Pierre Gaviano find the first mention of Hām’s face turning black in tractate Sanhedrin of the Babylonian Talmud, though they ascribe a figurative meaning to this, in which being “black-faced” indicates shame or debasement. It is with the 3rd-century Christian thinker Origen, though, that they locate the first unambiguously racialized interpretation of Hām’s curse: Origen terms his *genus* “discolored,” and names them as ancestors to the Egyptians, whom he views as a degenerate people. See: Benjamin Braude and Marie-Pierre Gaviano, “Cham et Noé: Race, esclavage et exégèse entre islam, judaïsme et christianisme,” *Annales. Histoire, Science Sociales* 57 (2002): 114-115.

from the text, even in the hands of acutely racially-motivated interpreters; it is of course a truism of any sacred text that its interpreters may approach it with certain motivations and preconceptions that the text itself may not “want” one to import, and so any reading of the Qur’ān that is attentive to its openness to misappropriation or racialization should place the onus of this on the text’s interpreters. The notion that the Qur’ān has remained immaculately free from use as a tool toward racist ends has already been questioned in the scholarship of Sherman A. Jackson, who notes that the 8th-century Meccan jurist Ṭā’ūs found a Qur’ānic rationale for prohibiting mixed-race marriages on the basis that such would, sacrilegiously, “alter God’s creation,” as is repudiated in Q 4:119, which states that Satan misleads unbelievers into changing God’s creation and committing other acts of sacrilege (*wa-la-amurannahum fa-la-yughayyirunna khalq Allāh*, “I will command them and they will alter God’s creation”).⁹⁰ Moreover, the signaling of moral or doctrinal value through the use of colors that take the Qur’ānic text as their referent is a widely recognized phenomenon, as in the benign case of green coming to prominence in Islamic arts and political iconography because it hearkens to the Qur’ān’s descriptions of the paradisiacal *janna*.⁹¹

As we shall see, not only is the Qur’ān suffused with language that intimates a world in which colors can come to have particular signifying capabilities, but even the Qur’ān’s most explicitly egalitarian passages can develop certain racialized significances in later *tafsīr* (exegesis) and apocryphal literature: blackness is highly associated in later writings and artworks with the hellish and the demonic, though a mere few eschatologically-focused verses supply a

⁹⁰ Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 103. All translations of the Qur’ān, unless otherwise noted, have been taken with some modifications from: A.J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted: A Translation* (New York: Touchstone, 1996). Cf. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, 118.

⁹¹ Cf. Q 18:31, Q 55:76, Q 76:21, etc.

ground for this; to be sure, in later works that trace the negative connotation of blackness in Islam the reason given is often still the curse of Hām, but these aspects of Qur’ānic interpretation speak to a diffusion of interpretative modes through which anti-black thinking pursues links between black inferiority and divine will. By contrast, the color-free verse 49:13, which reminds believers they have been created as tribes and peoples in order to know one another, becomes used in several exegetical works toward the redemption of black Africans. In short, in answering the question, “where does one look to find blackness in Arabic literature?” one may begin with the Qur’ān.

Darkness, Light, and Color in the Qur’ān

As stated above, the language of blackness, darkness, or dark materials is concentrated in three main categories of Qur’ānic narrative: eschatological verses depicting judgment, heaven, and hell; descriptions of nature; and discourses on the origin of humankind or creation. As shall be seen below, the saved and damned in the Qur’ān are often vividly divided in the mind’s eye according to a black-white color scheme; grief and joy, or punishment and relief, insofar as they are microcosms of the experiential extremes one may undergo on the Day of Judgment, are likewise often described in terms of shadow and light. In a more earthbound context, black is more likely to be seen organically and neutrally coexisting alongside red and white, and in some cases amid a rainbow of colors; such polychromy inheres in the colors of the land and the shading of the skies at different times of day, and these different hues all may be equally said to testify to the creativity and craftsmanship of God.

The etiological texts present the most complicated cases of black-white signification, in that man has two distinct material origins in the Qur’ānic text; one is exclusive to the human protoplasts, which God fashioned from pliable earth that is described alternately as soil (*turāb*),

clay (*tīn*), and a dark, fetid mud (*hama'*), while the other accounts for how man is reproduced, beginning with the translucent-white *mā' mahīn*, or “disdained water” that is euphemistic for seminal fluid. From both of these unlikely substances—one dark and putrid, the other white yet contemptible—God produces wondrously complex, noble bodies. In the analogousness of these two materials, I argue that we may find a complication of the black-white polarity that is in evidence elsewhere throughout the Qur'ān. Moreover, this complication is consistent with the Qur'ānic assertion that all of humankind is equal in principle, but distinguished through action and belief. Below, I address each of these types of pericope. I close by reconsidering the two passages in the Qur'ān that have been identified by previous scholars as dealing with race, namely Q 30:22 (“And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth and the variety of your tongues and hues. Surely in that are signs for all living beings.”) and Q 49:13 (“O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races [*shu'ūb*]⁹² and tribe [*qabā'il*], that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most godfearing of you. God is All-knowing, All-aware.”), in light of the present analysis.

Eschatology: Some Faces Shall Whiten, Some Faces Shall Blacken

A particularly stark expression of the white-black division between those bound for heaven and hell is delivered in verses 106-107 of Sūrat al-‘Imrān, a lengthy chapter focusing largely on the punishments for disbelief and rewards for belief. In verse 106, we see that the Day of Judgment will bring about a tincturing of the visages of man,

[It shall be] the day when some faces are blackened [*taswaddu*], and some faces whitened [*tabyaddu*]. As for those whose faces are blackened— [to them shall be said], ‘Did you disbelieve after you had believed? Then taste the chastisement for that you disbelieved!’⁹³

⁹² Though Arberry translates *shu'ūb* as “races,” it may alternately be understood as peoples or nations, and is typically understood as a group of interrelated humans that exceeds the numbers of a tribe (*qabīla*).

⁹³ Q 3:106-107.

Here we see that blackening of the face is reserved for a specific type of unbeliever, namely one who loses faith after having had it. Exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr, as such, preserve traditions in which those whose faces are blackened are described as *munāfiqūn*, or hypocrites, or else as *khawārij*, or separatists. Other traditions aver that the unbelievers in this passage could also come from the ranks of Christians and Jews, who had been adherents of their respective faiths but went astray. The dichotomous coloring of the believers and unbelievers mark them for differentiated treatment by the divine; while the black-faced ones are held under accusation and instructed to “taste” their punishment—a sensory description that renders the image of the face all the more central by alluding, metonymically, to the mouth—the white-faced ones are “within the mercy of God,” and will be so for eternity (*hum fīhā khālidūn*). That is, in addition to the disparate coloration of believers and unbelievers, the believers’ bodies are sublimated into immortal beings, while the corporeality of the unbelievers’ bodies is reinforced, with their punishment visited not only on their countenances but also their senses.

Several Muslim exegetes—including Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209) and Abū Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī (d. 1111)—would reinforce this literal, corporeal understanding of the above verse, averring that people’s faces would actually change color before God, and that this would be a graphic means of organizing the masses of people held to account on the Day of Judgment.⁹⁴ We may extend this visible marking of the body yet further through reading the Qur’ānic *wajh*, or face, as “a metonymy for the human self” as suggested by Christian Lange in his work on the Qur’ānic semiology of the face;⁹⁵ the sinner’s blackness may have covered not only one’s visage,

⁹⁴ Advancing a reading of Q 3:20 in conjunction with a number of *ḥadīth*, Lange argues persuasively that one’s visage was often a byword for oneself as a whole unit. The texts he cites express instances of “surrendering” one’s face, “distancing” one’s face from hellfire, and so on, all of which make little sense unless the rest of the body is also involved. See: Christian Lange, “‘On That Day When Faces Will Be White or Black’ (Q3:106): Towards a Semiology of the Face in the Arabo-Islamic Tradition,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 127 (2007): 432.

⁹⁵ *ibid.* 432.

but the entirety of one's form. It should be noted, though, that the countenances of the guilty and damned in the Qur'ān are not monolithically black or featureless, rather, they are at once black of complexion and inlaid with pale, limpid, or blinded (*zurq*) eyes (Q 20:102). Kristina Richardson has identified several possibilities for why pale, shining eyes may have been frowned upon by the pre- and early Islamic Arabs, some of which are physiological (pale eyes suggested a range of physical maladies, from dehydration to blindness and cataracts), and some more abstract; the extraordinariness of light or blue eyes in the Arab world may have led them to be viewed as supernatural and therefore unsettling. Such is evident in 7th-century tales of the sibyl Zarqā' al-Yamāma, a blue-eyed woman possessed of superhuman vision whose eyes are gouged in reprisal for her witchcraft.⁹⁶ In a Qur'ānic context, though, the physiological association between blindness and light eyes may be used to ironic effect in that those who are sightless are thought to live in darkness. The obscurity associated with blindness could engender a rhetorical transitivity between the blind, the dark, and the unbelieving in verses such as Q 13:16, which questions with regard to those who ascribe partners to God, "Are the blind and the seeing man equal, or are the shadows and the light equal?" or Q 17:19, which states that on Judgment Day unbelievers will be assembled, all of them "blind, dumb, and deaf." As such, the faces of the bright (blind?) eyed, blackened unbelievers have inscribed on their bodies a multifarious record of the darkness that afflicts their minds.

The notion that grief and disgrace darken the face—prevalent also among other late antique societies—is likewise proverbial in the Qur'ān, and the idea that on Judgment Day the

⁹⁶ Kristina Richardson, "Blue and Green Eyes in the Islamic Middle Ages," *Annales Islamologiques* 48.1 (2014): 15. Zarqā' is mentioned in a number of universal histories, from Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh* to Ibn al-Athīr's *al-Kāmil fī-l-Ta'rikh*; for a broad account of her biography and appearances in different texts, see: Irfan Shahīd, "Zarqā' al-Yamāma," in *Encyclopedia of Islam II*, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, et al. Accessed 24 June 2019, http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_8127.

faces of the heaven-bound will be brightly tintured while the hell-bound will be darkened (either through the casting of dust upon them or through a more supernatural process) is common in other verses. While the heavenly garden is characterized by a panoply of colors, dazzling to the eye, with believers robed in green silks and sitting upon embroidered cushions amid gushing rivers and pearlescent, fair women, hell is notably bereft of anything but blackness, shadow, and heat. Q 14:50 portrays the garments of the denizens of hell as being made from pitch-black tar. In Q 56:41-44, a similar flourish to that undertaken by Milton in describing hell as “darkness visible,” is taken by the Qur’ānic narrator, who, unto a desert-dwelling people for whom water and shade connote a cooling and relieving respite, declares, “The Companions of the Left (O Companions of the Left!) amid burning winds and boiling waters and the shadow of a smoking blaze, neither cool, neither goodly [...]” In much the way that heaven is stocked with pleasures bereft of their periodic barbs, like wine that does not induce headaches and a lote tree denuded of thorns, hell is not merely a place of darkness, but a place in which darkness—represented here as a shadow or shade of black smoke (*ẓill min yaḥmūm*)⁹⁷—is sapped of any of its potentially redeeming features.⁹⁸ If one stitches the above portraits of hell together, one is presented with a dramatic image of black on black: people with blackened faces and black robes ensconced in

⁹⁷ *Yaḥmūm* is a *hapax legomenon* in the Qur’ān, and so its meaning is somewhat ambiguous. Al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī (d. 1108), among others, relates it to the dark black smoke that billows from *ḥamīm*, or scalding water. Al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī, *Mufradāt Alfāz al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: al-Dār al-Shāmiyya, 1992), 255. Elsewhere, hell is also said to have three columns of shadow (*ẓill dhī thalāth shu‘ab*) that do not shade one against the flames’ heat (*lā ẓalīl wa-lā yughnī min al-laḥab*) (Q 77:30-31).

⁹⁸ Cf. Q 37:46-47, Q 56:28.

deep shadow.⁹⁹ The heavenly foil to this seems to be not merely described by whiteness and light, but by a vivid range of color.¹⁰⁰

Notably, though, heaven does seem to be peopled with the pale, with the believers' visages being lightened in preparation for their ingress into the garden and the maidens of heaven, or *hūr*, described as well-hidden eggs (*bayḍ*)—the whiteness of which is etymologically embedded in the *b-y-d* root—and pearls (*lū 'lū'*).¹⁰¹ Moreover, in direct contrast to the bleary-eyed, black-skinned denizens of hell, the *hūr* carry in their name the image of one whose eyes have great contrast between sclera and iris, with *ḥ-w-r* connoting the “intensifying of the whiteness of the eye and a blackening of the blackness of it, [by which is meant] that which encircles the pupil.”¹⁰² This romantic ideal of the pale, black-eyed virgin and its repugnant counterpart of the black-skinned, hazy- or blue-eyed man becomes a trope that pervades much of the literature we will encounter below, including *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* itself.

Nature: The Whites, the Reds, and the Deepest of Blacks

The interplay between darkness and light seen in depictions of heaven and hell is to be found also in the world of man, where it still often occurs on a grand or cosmic scale. Perhaps the most obvious cosmological manifestations of the contrast between light and dark are that of day and night, or of the celestial bodies and the darkness. Like many scholars, Todd Lawson

⁹⁹ The use of a black-on-black scheme in depicting hell may also have a numerical valence, in that the term for blackness (*sawād*) can also be used to connote a crowd or multitude, which perhaps indicates that hell is a place for the masses while heaven is a place reserved for the elect. On this use of the *s-w-d* root, see: Wolfdeitrich Fischer, *Farb- und Formbezeichnungen in der Sprache der altarabischen Dichtung: Untersuchungen zur Wortbedeutung und zur Wortbildung* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1965), 273.

¹⁰⁰ For further reading on Qur'anic eschatology and imagery concerning hell, consult the following: Fazlur Rahman, “Eschatology,” in *Major Themes in the Qur'an* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 106-121; Christian Lange, “Hell,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam III*, Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, et al., eds. (Leiden, Brill: 2010). On Islamic demonology and the association of jinn with darkness and the infernal, see: Simon O'Meara, “From Space to Place: The Quranic Infernalization of the Jinn,” in *Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions*, Christian Lange, ed. (Leiden, Brill: 2016), 56-73.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Q 37:49, Q 56:22-23.

¹⁰² Muḥammad b. Mukarram b. Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1955), 1043.

finds such naturalistic oppositions as those between day and night, moon and stars, or male and female to be a structural staple of the Qur'ān, adding that,

[These dualities] appear to have something in common with similar pairs of opposites, near-opposites, and other pairs of ethical moral religious values and qualities invoked in and found also throughout the Qur'an [...]¹⁰³

These oppositions, among which are those between faith and unbelief, good and evil, and lying and truth, in turn share common resonance with ultimate, apocalyptic dualities such as reward and punishment. Lawson argues that the unifying quality of all of these dualities is not one of mere structural similarity, nor is it something as simplistic as the construction of implied antonyms; rather, dualism in the Qur'ān places the content of the text on an "epic" scale, with a focus on balance that is at once cosmic and individual prevailing throughout the text. That is, though night and day or darkness and light may not have explicitly opposed moral significations like the dyads of belief-unbelief or heaven-hell, they may have opposed ontological or cosmological import.

Semantic oppositions such as those enumerated by Lawson are often found seated in syntactic or prosodic multiples, such as parallel clauses or successive pieces of *saj'*.¹⁰⁴ In certain situations, the affirmation of these oppositions is made explicit through statements of categorical inequality.¹⁰⁵ Through this harmonizing of form and content, the Qur'ān may underscore the antonymic nature of the pairs of phenomena it identifies, or through repetition, it may prime the

¹⁰³ Todd Lawson, "Duality, Opposition, and Typology in the Qur'an: The Apocalyptic Substrate," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 10 (2008): 30. Cf. Angelika Neuwirth's assessment of Qur'anic structures, in which she terms these dichotomous pairings in descriptions of heaven and hell "dypticha," evoking their similarity to Christian visual arts and iconography. See: Angelika Neuwirth "Structural, Linguistic, and Literary Features," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 104-105.

¹⁰⁴ For further reading concerning the meaning and use of *saj'*, see: Devin J. Stewart, "Saj' in the Qur'an: Prosody and Structure," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 21 (1990): 101-139.

¹⁰⁵ Lawson, "Duality, Opposition, and Typology," 30.

reader to exercise the “fluent logic of the imagination” and “complete a conceptual syzygy or duality,” even when a term often incorporated in a duality appears without its mate.¹⁰⁶

Of interest to us, then, is the fact that the opposition between night and day, unlike that between several of the other phenomena listed above, is often mediated; though their cosmological opposition is absolute, they are ontologically continuous with one another. This is indicated in the Qur’ān in some instances through verbiage that depicts the night and day as merging, rather than dividing, and elsewhere through the inclusion of references to twilight—a red or rosy interstice between white day and black night. Unlike the aforementioned representations of heaven and hell, day and night admit this third color, in an intermediate position, and so too with descriptions of the hues of rock formations. Because of the medial status of “red” in the nature verses examined below, I argue here that we may construe these two colors as opposite poles on a “brown-scale,” or a gradated continuum that proceeds from black to white with shades of red and brown in between. This may in turn have implications for the “scaling” of color and the perception of color difference when related to the skin tones of mankind.

An example of the appearance of red as an intermediary color between black and white appears allusively in Q 84:16-18, which states, “No! I swear by the twilight, and the night when it envelops, and the moon when it is at the full.” Perhaps because *al-shafaq*, the term used here for twilight, is a *hapax legomenon* in the Qur’ān, many exegetes grapple with its meaning. Ṭabarī cites a disagreement amongst interpreters as to whether the twilight signified “redness upon the horizon” (*al-ḥumra fī-l-afaq*) or simply daylight (*al-nahār*).¹⁰⁷ This tension is reflected in the

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.* 31-32.

¹⁰⁷ Ṭabarī, Q 84:16, *Tafsīr Jāmi‘ al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, <http://altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=84&tAyahNo=16&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

early commentators Muqātil (d. 767) and Mujāhid (d. 722), with the former saying *shafaq* signifies what light that remains after the sun has set, and the latter citing a tradition in which it is defined as “daylight in its entirety” (*al-nahār kullihī*).¹⁰⁸ Qushayrī— a Ṣūfī thinker whose writings meditate often on the nature of light and enlightenment—declares the *shafaq* red without citing a contrasting opinion. This liminal redness is followed by an enveloping night which “gathers and encloses,” only to be mediated again by the moonlight that “levels out and draws [things] closer together.”¹⁰⁹ Qushayrī thus states that the oaths in Q 84:16-18 toggle between states of gnosis, with the red twilight representing what occurs when seekers “are made to taste the separation in one of their states.”¹¹⁰ Thinkers such as the Shī‘ī al-Ṭūsī cite the disagreement among prior thinkers by way of carving a middle ground, stating,

Indeed the correct thing is that the *shafaq* is a soft red [*huwa-l-ḥumra al-raqīqa*] in the west after sunset, and its origin derives from *al-shafaq* with respect to labor, [with respect to which] it is the gentle repose [*al-riqqa*] upon breaking off from it.¹¹¹

Many of these exegetes were, of course, rather more urbane than the Qur’ān’s original audience, and this too may affect modulations in how the sunset appears to the various commentators and hearers of the text. Wolfdietrich Fischer paints a vivid picture of how the pre- and early Islamic

¹⁰⁸ Muqātil b. Sulaymān, Q 84:16, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, <http://altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=2&tTafsirNo=67&tSoraNo=84&tAyahNo=16&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>; Mujāhid b. Jabar al-Makhzūmī, Q 84:16, *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, <http://altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=2&tTafsirNo=78&tSoraNo=84&tAyahNo=16&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

¹⁰⁹ Abū-l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī al-Naysābūrī, Q 84:16, *Tafsīr Laṭa’if al-Ishārāt*, <http://altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=3&tTafsirNo=31&tSoraNo=84&tAyahNo=16&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, Q 84:16, *Tafsīr al-Tibyān al-Jām‘a l-‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, <http://altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=4&tTafsirNo=39&tSoraNo=84&tAyahNo=16&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

Bedouins found the sunsets particularly red in harsher, wintry climes due to the particulate sand that would fill the dry air,

In a very dry and cold wintertime, the horizon is so thick with fine particles of dust that the sunset glows especially bright red, an appearance—albeit rare—that may also be observed in our region. For the Bedouin Arabs, this phenomenon was characteristic of dry and cold winters, and as a result it signified draught and famine for man and beast. One such winter, Ru‘ba (=Rabī‘, *sic*) 22/122, was designated the ‘red winter,’ *al-shitā’ al-aḥmar*.¹¹²

We may conclude from the above that, if nothing else, for many the Qur’ānic term *shafaq* called to mind a reddening of the sky, between the day and the night, which elsewhere are said to be interpolated into one another (*yūlaj*) by God (Q 3: 27, Q 22:61, Q 31:29). In these three verses, the night is said to be interpolated into the day a total of six times. By contrast, the night is said to be divided or differentiated (*kh-l-f*) from the day a total of five times in the Qur’ān (Q 2:16, Q 3:190, Q 10:6, Q 25:62), though of course the fact that God makes the division between the two manifest implies a potential alternate condition in which such a differentiation does not exist. Elsewhere, God is said to make the daylight (*al-nahār*) veil or cover over (*yughshī*) the night (Q 7:54). Overall, of the 92 times that night (*layl*) is mentioned in the Qur’ān, 16 of those are absent any daylight-related opposite such as *nahār* or *shams* in the same verse.

The notion that there is some ambiguity in separating day and night is further supported by Q 2:187, which offers insight into when to begin one’s fast, which is only requisite once the white “thread” (*al-khayṭ al-abyaḍ*) of daylight has become distinct (*yatabayyan*) from the black thread (*al-khayṭ al-aswad*) of night. This call for distinction clearly implies an antecedent period of indistinctness between the two, during which the colors of day and night may appear interwoven, so to speak. The nexus at which this interpolation occurs, be it a physical horizon or an ephemeral meeting of light with dark, would also likely have been imagined as some shade of

¹¹² Fischer, *Farb- und Formbezeichnungen*, 335.

red. As such, these associations cast redness as a liminal coloration, gradating between black and white poles. This differs from our modern notion of red as a nonparticipant in the shading of black into white, which instead progresses in our conception along a gradient of grays.¹¹³

The identification of a dividing of the heavens between light and dark through an intervening redness is rendered in more violent terms in the apocalyptic imagery of Sūrat al-Raḥmān, according to which the Day of Judgment will be signaled by the heavens splitting open, unleashing an oil-like, rosy color (Q 55:37). This mixing of color and texture suggests, to some exegetes, changeability, with the word *warda* (rose) hinting either at the flower or at horses that are *warda*, with coats that change from bright bay to dark bay between seasons. The split heavens on Judgment Day thus appear as an amplified version of a sunset, exhibiting a gradation of hues implied in a single term. Here, “redness” again spans darkness and light.

Turning to a different typology of natural entities in the Qur’ān—this time relating to variations in the colors of rock formations—the intermediacy of the color red is indicated by its syntactic placement between white and black. In the twenty-seventh verse of Sūrat al-Fātir, the many colors found in nature are twice adduced as proofs of God’s creative power,

Hast thou not seen how that God sends down out of heaven water, and therewith we bring fruits of diverse hues [*thamarāt mukhtalif alwānuhā*]? And in the mountains are streaks white [*bīḍ*] and red, of diverse hues [*ḥumr mukhtalif alwānuhā*], and pitchy black [*gharābīb sūd*].

Like the many-hued fruits, so too does the red and red-brown terrain show a great degree of variance. All of this variation is at once nestled between and cast in counter-distinction to the

¹¹³ The argument for a brown-scale being more thoroughly acknowledged in early Arabo-Muslim discourse is supported also by a dearth of color terminology for gray(s). In his discussion of *lawn*, or color, Alfred Morabia states, “Grey, a fusion of black and white, does not have a precise colour. It does not have a primary term in Arabic.” Instead, terms for concepts such as “dusty,” (*aqhab*) or ones adopted from other colors that can signify a grayish tinge within that tone (i.e. *akhḍar* being associated with darkness of the sky) are used. A. Morabia, “Lawn,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam II*, P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, et al., eds. Accessed 5 December 2017, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0577.

two poles—the categorical, unqualified white (*bīd*) and the darkest, jet black (*gharābīb sūd*). That the multiple shades of red gradate from the white to the black is emphasized in the arrangement of the verse, wherein the red (*ḥumr*) is again set between the two. The preceding two verses—Q 35:27 and Q 55:37—are the only places in the Qur’ān that explicitly mention colors that map onto English-language conceptions of browns, reds, and rosiness/pinks; in both cases, darkness and light or black and white are also in attendance.

Considering the racial encoding of these three color terms on the knowledge that on the continuum from white to black “red” played an intermediary role may be illuminating with respect to where and why the “color line” was drawn in proto-Arab and Arab thought. Though Bernard Lewis has noted that the Arabs—who increasingly self-identified as “white” throughout the early Islamic period, though they would at times identify themselves as dark-skinned using terms such as *aswad* or *akhḍar*—designated the Persians “‘the red people,’ with a suggestion of ethnic hostility,” they may in the same breath be adumbrating a sense of relative closeness with the Persian other in their midst vis-à-vis the black African, whose coloring places him at a greater distance if only in the purely visual terms of the brown-scale, indicated in the Qur’ān to be the chromatic vernacular in which natural phenomena were understood and compared.¹¹⁴ Lewis claims that this signification of race through “redness” expands geographically concurrent with the Islamic conquest, coming to refer to “the conquered natives of Spain, to the Greeks, and to other Mediterranean peoples of somewhat lighter skin than the Arabs,” (though perhaps here “lighter” might be best replaced with “ruddier”) but finds that this extension of redness is

¹¹⁴ Indeed, Lewis describes the Arabs as seeing themselves in early sources as “black” vis-à-vis the Persians but as “white or red” vis-à-vis Africans, and so their relativistic conception of their own color would shift them to being closer to Persians in skin color than Africans. See: Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, 22.

commensurate with a tightening of the descriptive lexicon for complexions in other respects, saying,

The early poets used a number of different words to describe human colors, a much wider range than is customary at the present time. They do not correspond exactly to those that we use now and express a different sense of color—one more concerned with brightness, intensity, and shade than with hue. Human beings are frequently described by words which we might translate as black, white, red, olive, yellow, and two shades of brown [...]¹¹⁵

Later, Lewis finds these terms reduce in number and calcify into “ethnic absolutes,” with white, black, and red shouldering greater signifying responsibility as the subtle, individuated differences expressed above become flattened in favor of exploiting a supposed *qualitas occulta* under which an entire population or number of populations may be designated. What becomes clear from the above analysis of nature descriptions in the Qur’ān, though, is that we need not presume a narrowing of the color lexicon equates to a reductive shift in actual color perceptions, rather, it can indicate a new politics of signification in which, as a culture expands and its interlocutors multiply, the relational meanings of racially descriptive terms become less a matter of describing the individual and instead are used to efficiently represent the collective. In other words, “[I]f people are talking about races, it is because they have, or think they have, experience of races” as aggregate entities.¹¹⁶ As such, the “red” races may have, at least at one point, still been understood to subsume the whole range of reds and browns we have found the color term to encapsulate above. We may think of the white, red, and black not as a triad of discrete, “absolute” colors firmly dividing ethnic groups, but as a spectrum—a “brown-scale”—upon which natural phenomena, of which humans are one, could be arrayed. Such thinking allows us, per W.E.B. Du Bois’ original definition of the “color line,” to construe the question of

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹¹⁶ K. Anthony Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections,” in *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 34.

racialization as one of formulating the “relation of the *darker* to the *lighter* races of men,” rather than as a relation among absolute, distinct categories.¹¹⁷

Etiology: Black Mud, Disdained Water

In the Qur’ān, as in the Hebrew Bible, the matters of ethnogenesis gestured toward above—the process by which a people develops its identity vis-à-vis other peoples—are distinct from those of ontogenesis—the process by which people, as organisms, come to exist. As previously stated, two pathways towards the generation of humankind are elaborated in the Qur’ān: the initial process in which God acts upon inert earth to create the first living creature, and the reproductive process through which God remotely sets bodily fluids in motion to concoct humans from humans. Kathryn Kueny identifies several substances from which God selects in crafting man,

In contrast to the Hebrew dust (‘*afār*’), the Qur’ānic God prefers clay (*tīn*) in his molding of humanity: “It is he who created you from clay (*tīn*) then decreed a term.” However, the Qur’ān does not limit him to *tīn* alone. Other verses mention God’s use of potter’s clay (*ṣalṣāl*); mud (*ḥama*’); sticky clay (*tīn lāzib*); and dust (*turāb*).¹¹⁸

Though some exegetes do hierarchize these materials, and certain apocryphal literature even ascribes characteristics to certain of the substances that will provide for a later ethnogenetic impetus (Adam is, in some lore, said to be hewn from clay drawn from all corners and colors of the earth, making him a ready father to all peoples), the Qur’ān itself does not plot out such a relation between substance and essence except in the case of the sticky clay (*tīn lāzib*), from which are formed particularly recalcitrant unbelievers (Q 37:10-13).¹¹⁹ In several verses, it appears that God refines dark mud (*ḥamā*’) into sounding clay (*ṣalṣāl*) through manipulation as

¹¹⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1994), 9. Emphasis my own.

¹¹⁸ Kathryn Kueny, *Conceiving Identities: Maternity in Medieval Muslim Discourse and Practice* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 21.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.* 21.

part of the creative process, making the mud an anterior though not necessarily inferior substance.¹²⁰ Rather, a defining characteristic of each of these substances seems to be its ubiquity, such that God may pluck undiscerningly from any form of land the constitutive elements for the whole of his creation.

As indicated above, earth is multicolored in the Qur’ān’s own conception. This does not mean, however, that there are not certain color-qualifiers appended to certain types of earth; *hamā’* is often regarded as “black clay” (*al-ṭīn al-aswad*). This blackness comes, ostensibly, from putrefaction: *ḥama’* is often described as fetid and vegetal, which may also imply its fertility. The use of the term clay, or *ṭīn*, in the aforementioned clarification of the term *hamā’* as “black clay” suggests that *ṭīn* may have itself been considered color-neutral. Texture seems to have been of some import in designating these elements as well; as with stickiness implying recalcitrance in Q 37:11, in Q 30:20, human behavior is obliquely likened to the behavior of the dust (*turāb*) from which it comes, with humankind “dispersing” (*tantashirūn*) across the land.

The idea that man, in his original form, was extracted from elements of variable textures and colors, or a mixture thereof, appears in later commentaries as well. In an elaboration on both the notion of earth as multicolored—as depicted in Q 35:27—and on the concept of dust-like global human dispersal, the exegete and collector of prophetic lore al-Tha‘labī writes that the clays used in Adam’s creation were consciously multifarious, enabling him to fully embody his role as the father of all mankind. In al-Tha‘labī’s account, God sends several angels to the surface of the earth (a grammatically feminine entity) to take handfuls of her dirt (*turābihā*). Each falters because the earth beseeches God to spare her from their grasp; finally, God dispatches the Angel of Death (*malik al-mawt*), who, heedless of the earth’s pleas,

¹²⁰ Cf. Q 15:26, 15:28, Q 15:33, etc.

Grabbed handfuls from her four corners, from her loftiest surfaces and her silt [*sabakhatihā*] and her clay [*tīnihā*], and from her red and her black and her white, her soft turf [*sahlihā*] and her hard turf [*ḥaznihā*]. In this fashion, there would be among Adam's offspring [*dhurriyyat Ādam*] the good and the wicked, the sound and the vile, and the beautiful and the ugly. Likewise, they would differ in their visages and colors.¹²¹

Here *turāb* seems to indicate the ubiquitously distributed dirt or dust, while *tīn* appears to signal something more specifically clay-like and pliant, being that it is juxtaposed with swampy alluvium (*sabakha*). The types of the earthy substances enumerated here may be categorized by provenance, texture, and color. Because Adam contains these multitudes, all of which are taken in ostensibly equal measure (a handful apiece), he possesses equal potential to propagate any of the range of human types, which here are arrayed according to qualitative dichotomies rather than represented through a list of equally weighted characteristics; one is left wondering whether Tha'labī and his interlocutors thought differences in “visages and colors” to proceed from differences in moral comportment, in accordance with the structure of his text, which places moral qualities directly prior to physical ones. This implication would run against the grain of the Qur'ānic narrative, though, in which the various substances from which humankind is made appear equal to the point of often being interchangeable.

As creative agents, the earthy substances from which the human protoplast is formed through a multi-step process may be considered analogous to the humble seminal fluid, alternately termed *nutfā*, or a sperm drop, or “disdained water” (*mā' mahīn*). Disdain is related to weakness across a number of exegetical sources, though oft-cited *aḥādīth* in medical literatures indicate that this notion of weakness was premised on the fluid's relation to the creation resultant from it rather than its status among other such fluids. Although seminal fluid may appear a weak

¹²¹ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Tha'labī, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā': al-Musammā bi-l-Arā'is al-Majālis* (Bombay: Maṭba' al-Ḥaydarī, N.D.), 37-38.

and unseemly vector for spawning the complex human form, it is nonetheless stronger than female ejaculate, which is perceived as “yellow and thin,” vis-à-vis the “white, thick” issue of the male.¹²² That is, like the fecund yet fetid *hama*’, the *mā’ mahīn* holds the paradoxical connotations of being at once potent and lowly. And most significantly, for our purposes, the equivalency amongst all of these varied materials indicates the equal operability of black and white entities in effecting the same result. That all men, with their many shapes and hues, derive from an identical range of origins, and that these origins moreover are coequal amongst themselves regardless of texture and color, appears to militate against the hierarchizing of humankind *qua* its corporeal manifestations. Instead, as the Qur’ān repeatedly asserts, it is man’s actions and beliefs—not his appearance or birth station—that subjugate him or exalt him over others.

“In Order that You May Know Each Other:” The Qur’ān’s Racial Correctives

In addition to the implicit human equality expressed in the etiological verses, the Qur’ān aims elsewhere to explicitly jettison the impulse towards hierarchizing one’s fellow persons, most visibly in the two verses identified above as the sole Qur’ānic passages to address race, Q 30:22 and Q 49:13. Both of these verses assert that God fashioned man into differentiated groups—in the former man is differentiated by color and language, in the latter by people and tribe—and that these differences should be recognized among mankind and taken as intimations of God’s creative power and exalted status. As has previously been stated, these verses are commonly adduced in arguing for the Qur’ān’s neutral or even positive attitude toward racial diversity. While the message of these two verses appears universal—extolling all human variation as an aspect of Creation—certain groups of people are inevitably better serviced by

¹²² Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq and Muḥsin ‘Aqīl, *Ṭibb al-imām al-Ṣādiq* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-I‘lāmī, 1998), 520. The qualities of the male and female *nutfā* are also discussed in depth in chapter 3.

assertions of equality and positive affirmations of difference than others; those who stand to gain the most are those whose status is lowest or whose difference is perceived as most extreme.

Along similar lines, Chouki El Hamel raises the following *ḥadīth* as evidence of a bifocal pattern in Islamic doctrine of viewing racism as at once a general ill and a targeted social issue affecting certain types of people most acutely: “You should listen to and obey your ruler even if he was an Abyssinian (black) slave whose head looks like a raisin.”¹²³ In light of this, El Hamel concludes that this and other such pronouncements “[reflect] the preexisting negative perception of color among many Arabs in the new social order that Muhammad had introduced.”¹²⁴

We might then ask not simply what social conditions the above two Qur’ānic verses serve to correct—the answer is clearly enough against prevalent forms of xenophobia and ethno-linguistic elitism— but moreover *for whom* this corrective is most salient. On this, the exegetical tradition of puzzling out *asbāb al-nuzūl*, or reasons for the historical revelation of a Qur’ānic verse *in situ*, is particularly instructive, especially because this interpretive mode reframes the Qur’ān as an episodic dispensation of divine wisdom to an audience socially primed for context-specific units of revelation. In the case of these verses, *asbāb al-nuzūl* narratives alight upon a specific type and direction of racial animus in the incipient Muslim community, namely that of Arab against black.

One of the earliest extant *tafāsīr* in our possession is that of the 8th-century Muqātil b. Sulaymān. In his expatiation of the revelatory context of Q 49:13, he contributes the following anecdote:

Indeed the Prophet, peace be upon him, issued a command to Bilāl [b. Rabāḥ al-Ḥabashī] upon the conquest of Mecca, so he ascended the rear portion of the Ka‘ba and recited the call to prayer. [The Prophet] had wished to debase the polytheists by doing this. When Bilāl went up and gave the call to prayer, Abū

¹²³ El Hamel, *Black Morocco*, 63.

¹²⁴ *ibid.* 63.

‘Attāb b. Usayd said, ‘Praise be to God, who seized Usayd before this day.’ Al-Hārith b. Hishām said, ‘I’m shocked by this Ethiopian slave, could the Messenger, peace be upon him, find no one save this black crow?’ Suhayl b. ‘Amr said, ‘If God detests a thing, he changes it,’ and Abū Sufyān said, ‘As for me, I shall not speak, for if I said anything the sky would bear witness against me and the earth would inform on me.’

Then Jibrīl descended upon the Prophet, peace be upon him, informing him of [their] words. Thus, the Prophet, peace be upon him, summoned them and said, ‘What did you say, o ‘Attāb?’ He said, ‘I said, praise be to God, who seized Usayd before this day.’ Then he said, ‘You’ve spoken veraciously.’ Then he said to al-Hārith b. Hishām, ‘What did you say?’ He replied, ‘I was astounded by this Ethiopian slave, could the Messenger, peace be upon him, find no one save this black crow?’ He responded, ‘You’ve spoken truthfully.’ Then he said to Suhayl b. ‘Amr, ‘What did you say?’ He said, ‘I said, if God detests a thing, he changes it.’ He responded, ‘You’ve spoken truthfully.’ Then he said to Abī Sufyān, ‘What did you say?’ He replied, ‘I said, as for me, I shall not speak, for if I said anything the sky would bear witness against me and the earth would inform on me.’ He said, ‘You have spoken truthfully.’ Then God Almighty sent down among them [the phrase], ‘O people,’ meaning Bilāl and these four, ‘O people, indeed we created you male and female,’ and he meant Adam and Eve. ‘And we made you peoples,’ meaning the chieftains of the tribes of Rabī‘a and Muḍar and the Banū Tamīm and Azd, ‘And tribes,’ meaning the clans of Banū Sa‘d and Banū ‘Āmr and Banū Qays and the like. ‘In order that you may know each other,’ with respect to genealogy. Then he said, ‘Indeed the most honorable of you,’ meaning Bilāl, ‘before God is the most righteous of you,’ meaning that the most righteous of you is Bilāl.¹²⁵

Many later commentators would agree with the notion that “peoples” (*shu‘ūb*) were those of more distant kin relations or of greater number, while “tribes” (*qabā’il*) represented smaller, more closely-related groups of people. Many also regard this verse as a condemnation of preoccupation with genealogy over piety. Certain Shī‘ī commentators, such as al-Ṭūsī, add a caveat to this censure of genealogical one-upmanship: because prophets are inherently righteous, one who counts prophets among his forefathers (and particularly the Prophet who was “sent to

¹²⁵ Muqātil b. Sulaymān, Q 49:13, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, [altafsisir.com](http://altafsisir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=2&tTafsirNo=67&tSoraNo=49&tAyahNo=13&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1), accessed 27 September 2017, <http://altafsisir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=2&tTafsirNo=67&tSoraNo=49&tAyahNo=13&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

us,” i.e. Muḥammad) is greater in station.¹²⁶ A handful of later exegetes reproduce this particular vignette about Bilāl’s history-making call to prayer.¹²⁷

Muqātil, writing in the formative period of the ‘Abbasid dynasty in the mid-8th century, during which the Islamic realm witnessed the reign of the half-black caliph al-Manṣūr, may have found this anecdote merited preservation more for its remark on his own times than for its clarification of the historical revelatory environment. At the same time, the fact that Muqātil’s exegesis is one of the earliest extant, comprehensive Qur’ān commentaries known to us may permit us greater credulity: perhaps this lengthy account is found here because it was fresher in the minds of the early Muslim community. Indeed, it captures the reality that, in the words of John Hunwick, “Black Africans were the earliest type of slave known to the Arabs,” an assertion corroborated in R. Brunschvig’s statement that, despite sparse evidence, “It may be allowed that immediately before the Hijra, the great majority of slaves in western Arabia [...] were coloured people of Ethiopian origin (*Ḥabasha*).”¹²⁸ In light of recent findings, we may even venture that the conceptualization of black Africans as an enslaved or enslaveable *ethnos* in Arabia could predate the crystallization of Arab identity itself, or even abet it; it perhaps goes without saying that the notion of “others” is instrumental in the consolidation of an in-group identity.¹²⁹ In his

¹²⁶ Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, Q 49:13, *Tafsīr al-Tibyān al-Jām‘a l-‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, altafsir.com, accessed 27 September 2017, <http://altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=4&tTafsirNo=39&tSoraNo=49&tAyahNo=13&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

¹²⁷ It should be noted here that Bilāl is not the only black man closely associated with Qur’ānic narrative. Perhaps the most famed example is the sage Luqmān, for whom a *sūra* of the Qur’ān is named, who is believed by many to have been a black African and former slave, though his genealogy (*nasab*) is not elaborated in the Qur’ān itself. Other authors ascribe his lineage to the erstwhile tribe of ‘Ād. See: B. Heller and N.A. Stillmann, “Luqmān,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam II*, P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, et al., eds. Accessed 6 December 2017, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0586.

¹²⁸ John O. Hunwick, “Arab Views of Black Africans and Slavery,” [yale.edu](http://glc.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/events/race/Hunwick.pdf), accessed 26 September 2017, <http://glc.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/events/race/Hunwick.pdf>; R. Brunschvig, “‘Abd,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman, et al. Leiden: Brill, 2012.

¹²⁹ On the development of a self-conceived Arab *ethnos* during the ‘Abbasid period, see: Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

analysis of Muqātil’s use of the ethnonym “Arab” in his exegesis, Peter Webb claims that a reader can detect a “reticence” on Muqātil’s part to define the Arabs as a cohesive community, though his work shows he is able to “conceptualise the Arabs as a ‘race’ in genealogical terms.”¹³⁰ Perhaps Muqātil’s dim acknowledgment of a trans-tribal Arab identity and comparatively surefooted perception of Ethiopian ethnic otherness leads him to regard Bilāl’s case as a more striking demonstration of the ethic behind this verse than the intertribal politics that earn the increased focus of future commentators.

In any case, what is patent is that the exegete uses this scene to expound on the split focus of the verse, with condemning tribalism being one of its implications and redeeming the slave underclass—tethered to a tribe only through ownership or clientalism due to their “natal alienation” from their own original lineages—the other.¹³¹ Bilāl proves a model subject not only because he is a former black slave, but also because he is a righteous convert hand-picked by the Prophet to serve as a mouthpiece. The attack on Bilāl’s fitness to serve in this role is entirely racialized, with al-Ḥārith b. Hishām expressing stupefaction at Bilāl’s Ethiopian roots and applying the bromidic trope of the “black crow” to point up his otherness and his unworthiness. Abū-l-Layth al-Samarqandī, one of the authors to reproduce Muqātil’s anecdote in summary, isolates al-Ḥārith’s statement, “could the Messenger find no one other than this black crow?” as the primary impetus to this verse’s revelation.¹³²

Though the presentation of Bilāl’s case in interpreting this verse stands out from the litany of commentaries that view this verse as pertaining in the main to tribes and not to races, it

¹³⁰ *ibid.* 186.

¹³¹ On the definition of “natal alienation” and its role as a central aspect of the experience of slavery, see: Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

¹³² Abū-l-Layth al-Samarqandī, Q 49:13, *Tafsīr Baḥr al-‘Ulūm*, altafsir.com, accessed 27 September 2017, <http://altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=2&tTafsirNo=11&tSoraNo=49&tAyahNo=13&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

is also remarkable that interpreters who do view this verse in racial terms do so only with direct reference to black African alterity—which the revelation of this verse seeks to amend—or else deal in vagaries. In one of the only other interpretive glosses on this verse that may be categorized under *asbāb al-nuzūl*—found in the 10th-century commentary of al-Samarqandī—it is reported that a man attending a *majlis*, or session, at which the Prophet was instructing, objected to being trod upon by a latecomer of high status who jostled for a good seat. In response, the latecomer insults the objector’s mother, precipitating the revelation of the verse.¹³³ Though the lineage of this man is conspicuously not mentioned (he is rendered *ibn fulāna*, or “son of such-and-such a woman”), because of the insult being directed at his mother rather than his father, we may speculate that he was the progeny of a slave concubine and Arab father, or else a bastard whose father is either not known or does not acknowledge him. That is, racial and tribal exclusion appear to blur together as mutually reinforcing conditions in this alternate narrative. Though racial specifics are not mentioned here, in light of the demographics of the early Islamic world mentioned above, we may see this vignette as potentially addressing related circumstances to those of Bilāl: an individual of possible African ancestry or slave lineage being degraded on those terms. We may note that aside from African heritage, no other particular races or ethnicities are singled out explicitly for redemption in these *asbāb al-nuzūl* narratives; there is no mention of, say, a Persian equivalent of Bilāl.

That is not to say that the Persian others in the Arabs’ midst do not also receive an olive branch from the *mufasssirūn* when assessing the Qur’ān’s race-related verses. In his interpretation of Q 30:22, Muqātil glosses the diversification of human language as a division into ‘*arabī* and

¹³³ *ibid.*

'ajamī, adding an *et cetera* (*wa-ghayrihi*) after this dyad.¹³⁴ On the diversification of human color, Muqātil predictably comments that this means “white and red and black.”¹³⁵ The appended *et cetera* after the two language types that Muqātil lists suggest that *'ajamī* must here mean Persian, rather than being used in its occasional incarnation as a catchall term for non-intelligible or non-Arabic tongues, and so Persians are here receiving some special treatment, albeit more obliquely than in the above case; they are not being actively redeemed so much as acknowledged.

The tailoring of these verses’ import to a specific racial climate emerges not from a literal reading of the verses themselves but from a contextualizing maneuver on the part of later exegetes, who meaningfully connect the abstract or universal elements of the verse to particularities of their real-world experience. The trajectory of these verses’ reception can, of course, not be said to invalidate the claims by scholars looking strictly at the Qur’ān itself that the text makes no racially evaluative statements or, in more ardent terms, that,

[F]rom the perspective of the Qur’an, [...] the divine purpose underlying human diversity is to foster knowledge and understanding to promote harmony and cooperation among peoples [...] Indeed, whether we recognize it or not, our diversity is a sign of divine genius.¹³⁶

In fact, we can view the exegetical trend of steering these passages toward indicting a specific mode of intolerance—as it does the intolerance of black Africans—as interpretive triage, in which the population that stands to reap particular benefit from a Qur’ānic injunction is raised to the attention of its readers through the exegete’s gloss. This gloss may be said in turn to be

¹³⁴ Muqātil b. Sulaymān, Q 30:22, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, altafsir.com, accessed 27 September 2017, <http://altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=2&tTafsirNo=67&tSoraNo=30&tAyahNo=22&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*

¹³⁶ Ali S. Asani, “Pluralism, Intolerance, and the Qur’an,” *The American Scholar* 71 (2002): 54.

inflected by the so-called “prior text” of the exegete’s *milieu*.¹³⁷ If we are to assess whether the Qur’ān holds space for a theologization of color or race, we must acknowledge that the space held will be filled mainly through the conscious or unconscious implantation of this prior body of socio-cultural knowledge, intuition, and experience.

Conclusion: The Qur’ān as Scriptural Matrix

Above, I have examined the Qur’ān for evidence of aesthetic and moral valuations of black and white, or darkness and light, with the aim of unearthing any hermeneutic stepping stones that might lie between blackness in the Qur’ān and anti-blackness in Islamic societies. In doing this, I have drawn from the premise that other scriptures are open to a “theologizing” of color, and that the Qur’ān might similarly admit of such readings. From this exploration, we may conclude that the Qur’ān does negatively encode darkness into images of Hell and damnation, with concrete somatic implications: the bodies of hell’s occupants are described as black, and some exegetes are known to have taken this literally. In nature, black is opposed diametrically to white (with an intervening, professedly many-hued “brown-scale” between the two poles) but is not necessarily its lesser counterpart. In etiological accounts, black, fetid mud is numbered alongside more generic terms for earth and clay as one of the mean, meager starting points for man—but this is no different than the translucently white “disdained water” of the semen. As such, the Qur’ān presents as equivocal on chromatic blackness, much as it has been presumed to be on racial difference.

Looking to the Qur’ān’s later reception, though, one sees a disturbing uptake of the Qur’ānic treatment of blackness, not only in the implications of the commentaries of al-Rāzī and al-Ghazālī on the black bodies bound for hell, but also particularly in artistic renderings of

¹³⁷ On the concept of “prior text” as a determining factor in approaches to scripture, see: Amina Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5-6.

demons and *shayāṭīn*, many of whom appear dark-skinned in Persian painting. At times these figures are so subtly demonic that art historians are hard-pressed to judge whether they are monsters or black Africans.¹³⁸ This is a manifestation of the post- or extra-textual theologization of color, much like the racializing of the curse of Hām in Jewish and Christian thought. Yet by the same token, we find that Qur’ānic verses that represent color diversity as a sign of God’s creative power are marshalled in the exegetical tradition to redeem the black figure Bilāl, and to in turn shield all those who look like him from color prejudice. On the basis of such treatment, the beloved Bilāl, as opposed to the accursed Hām, is subsequently appropriated into genealogies of black Muslims across the world as a testament to their historical membership in the community of believers from its earliest days.¹³⁹

It is perhaps a banal point to say that readers of the Qur’ān will make of the text what they wish for good or ill, but it is worth noting that we may trace these interpretations and attitudes toward Qur’ānic content across time and space, from which we may derive a sense of the text’s societal implementation. Muqātil’s focus on race vis-à-vis later commentators’ focus on tribes is an example of the shifting significance of these verses; as a narrative of the pre-

¹³⁸ Robert Hillenbrand, “The Image of the Black in Islamic Art: The Case of Islamic Painting,” in *The Image of the Black in African and Asian Art*, David Bindman, Suzanne Preston Blier, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 230-231.

¹³⁹ A contemporary manifestation of this has been examined by Edward E. Curtis IV, who notes that narratives of Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ and Zayd b. al-Ḥāritha’s respective closeness to the Prophet Muḥammad were used in particular by early Aḥmadī Muslim missionaries in the United States seeking conversion among African-American communities. These stories, which Curtis reads as “black history narratives,” are appropriated into visions of Islam that are tailored to the black American experience, in much the way that the Exodus narrative in the Hebrew Bible acquires intensified import among Christian African-American communities. A further example may be found in the work of Earl H. Waugh, who concludes that the originally sub-Saharan African *ginawa* of Morocco have a multi-layered sense of inheritance from Bilāl, expressed both in their shared blackness and their shared musicality. Xavier Luffin has examined Nigerian and Malian ethnic groups who identify Bilāl as a common ancestor, in some cases claiming him as their first king or chieftain. See: Edward E. Curtis IV, “African-American Islamization Reconsidered: Black History Narratives and Muslim Identity,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73 (2005), 665; Earl H. Waugh, *Memory, Music, and Religion: Morocco’s Mystical Chanters* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 108-110. See also: Edward E. Curtis IV, *The Call of Bilal: Islam in the African Diaspora* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2014); Xavier Luffin, “‘Nos ancêtres les Arabes...’ Généalogies d’Afrique Musulmane,” *Civilisations* 53 (2006): 204-205.

Islamic past as a period of internal fractiousness amid the Arab *ethnos* gradually took form, these verses may have been recontextualized to fit within that historiographic model. Samarqandī's inclusion of another *sabab al-nuzūl* perhaps speaks to renewed anxieties about the assimilation of the children of slave concubinage or of those who lacked certain tribal bona fides into Muslim communities, though given his perch in the Samanid emirate, this may have pertained more to Persian and Turkic populations.

Ultimately, because Q 49:13 and 30:22, taken together, offer a wide range of types of human difference—linguistic, racial, tribal, and familial—interpreters can use these verses to signal their distinct priorities by selecting one or another valence of otherness to place under scrutiny. That some transmit traditions taking anti-blackness to task shows us, at minimum, that anti-blackness was commonly held to exist during the lifetime of the Prophet, and that the Qur'ān could be read as revealing a context-specific corrective to this, albeit in universalized terms. We must thus peer past the Qur'ān's equivocal portrait of peoples and races into the habitus in which it was revealed and disseminated to further our understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics of racial differentiation and stigmatization. It is to this project that we now turn, with the help of the satirical litterateur al-Jāḥiẓ and other 'Abbasid-era litterateurs.

Al-Jāḥiẓ's *Fakhr al-Sūdān* 'alā-l-Bīḍān, Precedent and Paradigm-Breaker

When the Basran polymath Abū 'Uthman 'Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 869) set down in words a brief, satirical catalogue of the virtues, literary triumphs, and unjust calumnies born by black people of the *Dār al-Islām*, he perhaps wittingly set up one of the greater interpretive quandaries for modern scholars of Arabic literature. Much work has been done on al-Jāḥiẓ's extensive oeuvre, and within that several authors devote attention to the treatise *Fakhr al-Sūdān* 'alā-l-Bīḍān ("The Boasting of the Blacks Over the Whites"), a particularly paradoxical piece

amid al-Jāhiz's sweeping collection of tongue-in-cheek *munāẓarāt*, a satirical prose genre that may be likened to mock debate and is characterized by the dialectical juxtaposition of opposed (often inanimate) entities. With this text as proof, some scholars ascribe al-Jāhiz as the grandfather of the Afro-centrist movement.¹⁴⁰ Others, noting his affiliations with Mu'tazilī rationalism, aver that he was above all a humorist (in both the comedic and Aristotelian sense), who vaunted the blacks only out of a contrarian keel, but held in other pieces, as in his entry on crows in his *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, that the blacks were a deficient population by dint of their climatological disadvantages.¹⁴¹ Yet others view *Fakhr al-Sūdān 'alā-l-Bīdān* as evidence of the allegedly part-African al-Jāhiz—a notorious anti-*shu'ūbī* polemicist—going turncoat and fashioning his own rebuttal to Arab superiority; yet other scholars believe this work to be a parody of the same, farcically heckling *shu'ūbī* thinkers by exaggerating their arguments *ad absurdum*.¹⁴² The only other extant treatise in this particular subgenre of apologetic—Ibn al-Jawzī's 28-section *Tanwīr al-Ghabash fī Faḍl al-Sūdān wa-l-Ḥabash* (*Illuminating the Darkness Concerning the Virtues of the Sudanese and Ethiopians*)—provides a far more plain-spoken motivation for its own existence: after seeing a band of black men crestfallen over their deep complexions (*tatakassar qulūbuhum li-ajl iswidād al-alwān*), the author resolves to write a treatise demonstrating that their virtue is not skin-deep.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Paige Mandisa Ingram, "Trials of Identity: Investigating al-Jāhiz and the Zanj in Modern Pro-Black Discourse" (master's thesis, University of Texas Austin, 2015), 21.

¹⁴¹ Thomas Hefter, *The Reader in al-Jāhiz: The Epistolary Rhetoric of an Arabic Prose Master* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 122-129. Cf. al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* volume 2, ed. 'Abd al-Salām Hārūn (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1996), 314.

¹⁴² Akhbar Muhammad, "The Image of Africans in Arabic Literature: Some Unpublished Manuscripts," in *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*, Volume One, John Ralph Willis ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 51; Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Inquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 68-70.

¹⁴³ Imran Hamza Alawiye, "Ibn al-Jawzī's Apologia on Behalf of the Black People and their Status in Islam: A Critical Edition and Translation of *Kitāb Tanwīr al-Ghabash fī Faḍl 'l-Sūdān wa 'l-Ḥabash*" (PhD diss., University of London SOAS, 1985), 231.

Regardless of where we place al-Jāhiz's motivations, what emerges vividly from his treatise is a not-so-long-ago, pre-Islamic past in which Africans living among Arabs commanded respect, often due to their perceived civilizational impact on the region, and particularly that of the Abyssinians. This history has, seemingly, been so well-expunged from his era's common consciousness that al-Jāhiz sees fit to recapitulate it in his brief treatise. Moreover, he seeks to point up the continued presence of black persons who have sustained this glory and achievement within a more recent Islamic past, from the aforementioned Bilāl to the Companion Julaybīb,¹⁴⁴ and the manumitted slave of Ja'far b. Sulaymān, Faraj al-Ḥajjām (literally, "The Cupper"), who is described being so just and honest that he was asked to testify in numerous legal cases.¹⁴⁵ In this fashion, not unlike the historical revisionists who sought to rehabilitate Ancient Egyptian civilization as an African socio-cultural project in the 20th century, al-Jāhiz may be said to be engaging not in a construction of new knowledge, but in the recovery of an epistemology of blackness that has been subsumed under the rhetorical and social dominion of Arab Muslims, even to the point of crowding out narratives of black Muslim champions in their own midst.¹⁴⁶

In advocating an alternative episteme—one in which the positive qualities of blacks are recognized as lofty virtues rather than as mere accidents, amusements, or consumables—al-Jāhiz typifies the satirist's process of raising an alternative morality to his audience's attention by reframing certain aspects of one's observable reality: in the words of Kevin L. Cope, satire is a "voluntaristic" enterprise on the part of the litterateur, committed to a utopian ethical vision. He

¹⁴⁴ In the section of his *ṣaḥīḥ* devoted to the virtues of the Prophet's companions, Muslim offers a chapter called *Bāb Faḍā'il Julaybīb* enumerating Julaybīb's virtues in the eyes of Muḥammad. In one anecdote, upon Julaybīb's death, Muḥammad is distraught and states "He is of me and I am of him" (*hādha minnī wa-anā minhu*). This anecdote is also reproduced by al-Jāhiz in his epistle. Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj and Mūsā Shāhīn Lāshīn, *Faḥ al-Mun'am Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* volume 9 (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2002), 454; Abī 'Uthmān 'Amr b. Baḥr b. Maḥbūb al-Baṣrī, *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2000), 126.

¹⁴⁵ Al-Jāhiz, *Rasā'il*, 127-128.

¹⁴⁶ On the historiography of Ancient Egypt as an African polity, see: Maghan Keita, *Race and the Writing of History: Riddling the Sphinx* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

states, “More a voluntarist than a rationalist, the satirist must produce a system of values which reason neither discovers nor provides.”¹⁴⁷

Indeed, the generic form that al-Jāhiz elects to express a selection of views on blacks is underpinned by a principle of revealing truths through re-litigating (often mockingly) that which is socially accepted. The mannered genre of the *munāzara*, or satirical dialectic—which etymologically is linked to the concept of making things face one another—is thought by some medieval literary critics to go back as far as the figure of Abraham in the Qur’ān, who takes the position of the *mustadill*, or the one who guides through demonstration, vis-à-vis a ruler who is cast as a *munkir*, or a denier, with the denied entity in this case being the one true God (Q 2:258).¹⁴⁸ When the king avers that he, like God, can cause life and death, Abraham retorts by saying that God causes the sun to rise in the east, and demands the king make it spontaneously rise from the west. In exposing the profound wrongheadedness of the king, Abraham simultaneously engenders two literary registers, related through their respective capacities to disclose a hidden reality: farce and revelation. The king may not understand that he is being made a fool of (indeed, he is said to have become “bewildered,” *buhita*, by Abraham’s response), but he does apprehend Abraham’s revelation; more knowing hearers of the Qur’ān may recognize both resonances. In a similar vein, scholars such as Linda Hutcheon hold that the very operation of irony—a staple of satire and farce, in which it plays a “corrective” role—creates a “critical edge” which has a capacity to include and exclude, and is thus revealing for some readers and obscuring for others.¹⁴⁹ Those who “get” the irony do so because they are from a

¹⁴⁷ Kevin L. Cope, “The Conquest of Truth: Wycherley, Rochester, Butler, and Dryden and the Restoration Critique of Satire,” *Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660-1700*, 10 (1986): 24.

¹⁴⁸ Abdessamad Belhaj, “L’Argumentation Scripturaire du Coran: Une Forme Dialogée à Effet Rhétorique,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 63 (2010): 27-38.

¹⁴⁹ Linda Hutcheon, “The Complex Functions of Irony,” *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, 16 (1992): 219-234.

specific, antecedent reading community, or, to quote Hutcheon, “it may be less that irony creates communities than that communities make irony possible.”¹⁵⁰ We may thus read al-Jāḥiẓ’s alternative episteme not only against our historical knowledge of the time in which he wrote but also with a view toward the perceived reality of his imagined audience. Indeed, *Fakhr al-Sūdān ‘alā-l-Bīdān* with its *munāẓara* structure demands such a reading by taking a moralized, didactic posture from the outset, with a guiding defendant (*mustadill*) and a subordinated detractor (*munkir*) who arrive to dispel the audience’s misapprehensions.

Throughout his argument, al-Jāḥiẓ advocates the epistemic restoration of black eminence to Arabo-Muslim consciousness mainly through quotations of literary sources and micro-historical accounts of interpersonal exchanges. While the polyphonic structure of al-Jāḥiẓ’s account may simply be understood as a conventional, anthological way of signifying his own far-ranging expertise on the matter, it may also have the effect of lending texture to an otherwise monolithic “side” in a debate between two unwieldy entities—the blacks and the whites.

Of particular interest to us will be the way in which al-Jāḥiẓ pits with intimacy the often highly masculinized glories of a black past against the often-emasculating indignities of a black present. Whether or not al-Jāḥiẓ’s impression of a halcyon pre-Islamic racial past brought to ruin by Arab ethnocentrism and the egomania of conquest is “true” is ultimately of less import than the fact that such a strain of historiography existed at all. Moreover, in penning his often tongue-in-cheek treatise, suffused with exposition on the sexual peccadillos and embattled masculinities of black people and their interlocutors, al-Jāḥiẓ puts his finger on the pulse of a broader phenomenon ushered in by the way in which the rise and territorial expansion of Islam has restructured society: as the slave underclass in Muslim lands grows, rules and taboos—both

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.* 230.

written and unwritten—develop to govern their bodies, movements, and sexualities. These social codes in turn come to affect perceptions of black people in Islamic lands as the association between blackness and slavery ossifies in the early period.¹⁵¹

At the intersection between these contemporary conditions and the recollected past lies the black body, on the color of which the text is premised and on the merits of which the work largely focuses.¹⁵² Through centering the body, al-Jāḥiẓ’s treatise reflects the hermeneutic through which black people—and especially the so-called Zanj—in his milieu were typically regarded, namely as commodities valued primarily for their physical capacities. These capacities are considered not only through the prism of race but also, often, of gender. To contextualize this phenomenon, I rely not only on al-Jāḥiẓ’s depiction, but also the illuminating comparative cases of the poetry of al-Mutanabbī and Ibn al-Rūmī, each of whom were near-contemporaries of al-Jāḥiẓ and offer further meditations on black physicality, the former male and the latter female. I rely also on Kecia Ali’s account of gender relations with respect to practices of domestic slaveholding, concubinage, and marriage. Al-Jāḥiẓ uses the fact of black bodily commodification

¹⁵¹ Elizabeth Savage describes the early stages of the expansion of the Trans-Saharan slave trade in Islam as a period of flux, in which newly converted Ibādī Berbers actively take control of the market and transform themselves from the enslaved to the slavers, drawing their stock primarily from the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa, and this demographic shift also shifted popular perceptions about who slaves were. Not only did Muslim slaving bring many sub-Saharan Africans into the central Islamic lands, it also diffused Islam further into the African periphery; Montgomery Watt speculates that slave raiding may have “accelerated the diffusion of Islam among the pagan peoples of East Africa, as conversion was the easiest way of escaping recruitment,” in that enslaving a fellow Muslim was forbidden. See: E. Savage, “Berbers and Blacks: Ibadi Slave Traffic in Eighth-Century North Africa,” *The Journal of African History* 33 (1992): 351-368; W. Montgomery Watt, “Ḥabaṣh, Ḥabaṣha,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam II*, P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, et al., eds. Accessed 16 October 2017, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0247.

¹⁵² It should be noted that the black body and the African body are overlapping but not identical categories according to al-Jāḥiẓ. Black is a designation not only for people from the *Bilād al-Sūdān*, but also dark-skinned south Arabians, Berbers, and south Indians. That is, al-Jāḥiẓ speaks of non-collocated black races rather than a relatively collocated, singular black race originating in sub-Saharan Africa, as we often do now. Importantly, though, throughout his treatise al-Jāḥiẓ still tends to numerically emphasize the accounts of people described as *ḥabashī* (Abyssinian) or *zanjī* (a fluid term often applied to eastern and central Africa, but which may by al-Jāḥiẓ’s time have been a generic epithet for any and all black Africans). On the use of the term *zanj* in the works of al-Jāḥiẓ and his peers, see: Ghada Hashem Talhami, “The Zanj Rebellion Reconsidered,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 10 (1977), 450-452.

in Arabo-Muslim society to indicate that, ironically, the valuation of at least some of black people's positive qualities is a *fait accompli* in his milieu, though his peers' appreciation for the provenance of these traits and their erstwhile application in undertakings of statecraft is lacking. That is, rather than disrupt the central position accorded to black physicality in much of society or the stereotypes that accompany it, al-Jāhiz focuses on placing these features in a more positive light and linking them with a set of other, more underrepresented virtues, such as eloquence, honor, and loyalty.

Memory and the Body in al-Jāhiz, al-Mutanabbī, and Ibn al-Rūmī

The notion of recalling the past is present from the outset of al-Jāhiz's treatise, which he begins with a characteristic overture of praise upon his correspondent, saying,

May God draw you close and preserve you, and aid you in obeying Him, and position you amongst the winners of his mercy. You mentioned—I petition God for you against false pretense!—that you read my missive on the case of the pure-bloods before the mixed-bloods, and the rejoinder of the mixed-bloods, and the response of the paternal uncles of those of mixed race. Indeed, I had not mentioned anything concerning the virtues of the blacks. Know—may God keep you—that I postponed this intentionally.¹⁵³

In the fashion of Thomas Hefter's reading of al-Jāhiz's salutations—which he views as a means of minimizing direct confrontation with a reader over controversial topics through introducing the “intermediary” and empathetic figure of the addressee¹⁵⁴—we may likewise read much into the specific praises that al-Jāhiz calls down upon his avid correspondent; he asks that the correspondent be preserved by God, set among the ranks of winners (*fā'izīn*) of divine mercy, and that he be led not into deception. In light of what is to follow, namely, the recuperation of the forgotten virtues of the blacks, one might read these prayers as prophylactic, willing that the

¹⁵³ Translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own. Al-Jāhiz, *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*, 128-130.

¹⁵⁴ Thomas Hefter, *The Reader in al-Jāhiz: The Epistolary Rhetoric of an Arabic Prose Master* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 34-36.

interlocutor not suffer a fate similar to those about whom he is curious—one in which he is forgotten, conquered, and vulnerable. Al-Jāhiz’s reference to a prior (no longer extant) treatise on the debate between those of mixed race and those of “pure” lineage, with those of mixed-race as defendants (*Kitāb al-Ṣuraḥā’ wa-l-Hujanā’*), suggests an analogous social standing between black people and those of mixed and/or non-Arab heritage more generally. However, as al-Jāhiz is careful to note, the case of black people has ample enough material and is sufficiently particular to merit its own, separate treatment.

The value of memorializing the past is made especially explicit in the first piece of verse that al-Jāhiz quotes at length, allegedly composed by the Abyssinian Ḥayquṭān, who, having been mocked by the ribald Umayyad-era poet Jarīr for appearing, clad in a white shirt, like “the penis of a donkey swathed in parchment (*ayr al-himār luff fi qirtās*),” offers the following lesson in history:

Though I be frizzy-haired, with deep-black skin,
 I am open-handed, and of resplendent mien
 And indeed blackness of color is not among my flaws,
 When on the day of battle, I strike forth with a sword
 If you so covet glory for inessential trifles,
 Then the troops of the Negus prove more glorious than you!
 While Julandā, Ibn Kisrā, and Ḥārith,
 Hawdha and al-Qibṭī and the august Caesar all disdained [the faith],
 Out of all the kings, [the Negus] attained prosperity through it,
 His rule lengthened before him, impregnable and enriched
 And Luqmān was among [the blacks], and his son, and his half-brother
 And Abraha, the ruler who is not to be ignored
 Abū Yaksūm waged war against you, in the Mother of your abodes
 And you were like a handsome pinch of sand, or even more,
 [Yet] you were like water fowl when, in the wasteland,
 A dark creature, talons hooked, lusts after her
 Were it not that God cast his protection over [Mecca],
 You would have learned something,
 And the man of experience is the most knowledgeable of people
 And what all is [your] glory, except that before [the Ḥarām]
 You pitch your tents at evening, close by, your fires flaring?
 Every so often, a leader from among you toddles forward, grudge-bearing,

Time and again we contest him; time and again he retreats!
 And for all you've remarked of being entwined with prophethood,
 You do not even have custodianship over the cloth-covered Ḥarām!
 You have said, '[Ours is] a tax-free state, we don't fork over tribute!'
 Yet giving over tribute is easier than flight.
 And were there a desire to be crowned over her,
 Surely Ḥimyar would have alighted upon her with its sovereign
 Yet within her [confines] there is no place to pass the winter, nor the summer,
 Nor do her waters spill forth like Baḥrayn's Ju'āthā
 There is no place to pasture livestock, nor a hunting-ground,
 But then, there's commerce... and trade makes people coarse.
 Are you not a little Kulaybī dog? And is your mother not a ewe?
 You achieve shame and fame but by fatness of your sheep!¹⁵⁵

We may note here the delicacy with which Ḥayqūṭān dances around the pitfalls of conflating Mecca's sacred Ḥaram and the greater city itself, for which he has little affection, as well as the way in which he balances acknowledging the inherent veracity of Islam while also affirming the historical importance of Ethiopian Christian leaders such as the infamous Abraha. He achieves this primarily by seeking to reconcile erstwhile Axumite military superiority (a topic on which several of al-Jāḥiẓ's other cameoed authors dwell)—bolstered by more generalized images of black valor—with the sudden divine investiture of the Muslims. The reasons that Ethiopians ultimately kowtow to Arab-Muslim rule are presented as twofold. On the one hand, God's support of the Muslims has mooted the question. On the other hand, it's not as if they would ever have wanted Mecca anyway (even when in control of Ḥimyar, with the city so close at hand).

The poem, perhaps because of the nature of the insult to which it is responding, focuses especially both implicitly and explicitly on vindicating the virility of the Abyssinians while emasculating the Arabs, and the gendered subtext of the poem consistently places the Arabs in the position of either being feminized or else having their agency displaced to another source, such as divine intervention on their behalf. This begins explicitly enough with the image of

¹⁵⁵ Translation my own, with reference to al-Jāḥiẓ and Tarif Khalidi, trans., "The Boasts of the Blacks over the Whites," *Islamic Quarterly* 25 (1981): 3-51. Cf. al-Jāḥiẓ, *Rasā'il*, 128-130.

Ḥayqūṭān brandishing his sword on the battlefield, but the image of differential masculinities also resounds in the following line, in which Ḥayqūṭān rebukes Jarīr for “covet[ing] glory for inessential trifles (*tabghī-l-fakhr li-ghayri kunhihi*).” The verb *tabghī*, meaning also, “to whore,” places Jarīr in the position of corrupting the purity and essence (*kunh*) of *fakhr*, or pride and glory, while the bold warrior Ḥayqūṭān is rendered its defender.

The idea that the Arabs are ill-equipped to safeguard their virtue and that of their women is also encoded in the discussion of the Axumite siege of Mecca, in which the general al-Ashram Abū Yaksūm, marched on the Ka‘aba. In addition to being his patronym, the term Abū Yaksūm also evokes al-Ashram’s role as the leader of the denizens of Axum, the territory of the Abyssinians. This “father” (*ab*) of a nation is cast as staging an assault against the “mother” (*umm*) of the Arabs’ abodes. Like the masculine figure assailing the feminine figure in this stich, so too are the Abyssinians masculinized and Arabs feminized in the subsequent line, with the assailants manifesting as a dark, clawed beast that “lusts” (*hawā*) after the grammatically feminine flock of water fowl (*ṭayr al-mā’*).

Even when the Arabs produce a leader, this figure is depicted as juvenile: he toddles (*yadlif*) forward, his temperament moody as he nurses an old resentment (*ḥafīza*). He is cast as retreating (*yadbur*), which may also literally mean to turn one’s back. One is reminded of the image, common to much wine poetry of this period, of the sexually yielding, inexperienced male youth. This general impression of unmanliness is then consummated in the subsequent line, in which the Arabs are cast as unable even to guard the cloth-covered *bayt al-ḥarām*, meaning the Ka‘aba enrobed in its traditional *kiswa* tapestry, but also evoking an abstract and putatively inviolable (*ḥarām*), veiled (*musattar*) feminine entity. All of these gendered putdowns are bracketed by recurrent uses of the root *f-kh-r*, connoting boasting, glory, and pride, as well as the

genre of poetry in which vaunting of one's qualities occurs (and of course, this also echoes the treatise's title). *Fakhr* of the likes had by the unnamed masses of troops (*raḥṭ*) commanded by the Negus, or Abyssinian king, is not found amongst the Arabs, least of all the Kulaybī Jarīr (whose *nisba* also means "little dog"), whose people are only suited to being the caretakers of sheep.

Ḥayqūṭān is not the only figure in *Fakhr al-Sūdān* who recalls a time when black masculinity was given its ennobled due. According to al-Jāḥiẓ, an unnamed collective of Zanj were heard to comment to the Arabs that,

It is an indication of your ignorance that you thought us fit to marry your women in the days of the Jahiliya, but when the (egalitarian) justice [*ʿadl*] of Islam was established you thought it reprehensible [*fāsid*], even though we did not avoid you. The desert, on the other hand, is full of our brethren who intermarried with you, became chiefs and lords, protected your honour and sheltered you from your enemy. You made proverbs about us and magnified our kings, in many instances preferring them to your own. This you would not have done if you had not thought us superior to you in this respect.¹⁵⁶

Here the taboo of interracial marriage is described as only applying to the marriage of a Zanjī man to an Arab woman, and there is a clear historical cause behind the gendering of this issue. One of the most marked disparities in representations of blackness in Arabic literature lies in the dynamics of black Africans' sexualization according to gender: black men in literature are often reviled as wild, hyper-sexual, uncontrollable and undesirable, while black women are discussed in terms of their utility as objects for sexual gratification and reproduction. This is attributable at least in part to legal shifts from the pre-Islamic period to the Islamic era with respect to marriage, slaveholding, and concubinage. During the early period, the institution of slavery demanded juristic circumscription particularly around the issue of domestic servants and household dynamics. The physical collocation of slaves and wedded women, as well as the analogousness

¹⁵⁶ Khalidi, "The Boasts of the Blacks," 13.

of their respective legal status within the home, brings the issues of marriage and of slavery, in the view of Kecia Ali, into intimate and entangled relation:

Slaves and women were overlapping categories of legally inferior persons constructed against one another and in relation to one another [...] Slavery was frequently analogized to marriage: both were forms of control or domination exercised by one person over another. The contracting of a marriage was parallel to the purchase of a slave, and divorce parallel to freeing a slave. Marriage and slavery intersected at the institution of concubinage (*milk al-yamīn*), which legitimized sex between a man and his female slave and made any resultant progeny free and legitimate.¹⁵⁷

The practice of concubinage especially is a complicating factor in the household dynamic between enslaved and wedded persons, because it is strictly proscribed married women using slaves in the way of married men, despite the fact that women did periodically own male slaves.¹⁵⁸ If we consider the differentially gendered representation of black sexuality and desirability in Arabic-language texts through the lens of the differential treatment of slaves in the home—in light of the aforementioned commonality of conflation between black people and slaves—the Zanjī complaint against their new ineligibility is not simply a matter of changing tastes. Rather, it is a systematized separation, reified by social anxieties over the superficial indistinctness between the hypothetical relationship between an Arab woman and a black man and the relationship between a free woman and a slave. As shall be seen especially in the *1001 Nights*, this type of relationship—between free Arab female and black male slave—becomes a locus for fantasy, fear, and violence. Moreover, the entire discourse around black male sexuality, and not merely that of slaves, is tainted by this taboo.

¹⁵⁷ Kecia Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 8.

¹⁵⁸ Several jurists such as ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī and Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī give account of legal arguments in which female owners of male slaves inquire as to whether they may use them for sexual gratification. These arguments unanimously prohibit a free woman having intercourse with her slaves. That is, though a woman can own a slave, she cannot have usufruct in the form of concubinage (*milk al-yamīn*), which connotes a specifically masculine type of proprietary control. Ali, *Marriage and Slavery*, 12-15.

This discursive dichotomy between the sexualizing of black women and the shunning of black men occurs also in other cultures that have rapidly increased their black slave populations.¹⁵⁹ Historian Jennifer L. Morgan notes of European—and especially British—travelogues recounting African tours in the 16th through 18th centuries that black men are often portrayed as “monstrous,” and thus undesirable for all but the most strenuous of labor criteria, while, “African women’s African-ness seemed contingent on the linkages between sexuality and a savagery that fitted them for both productive and reproductive labor.”¹⁶⁰ Frequently installed in domestic occupations, the “productive” labor of many black women in Arabo-Muslim lands would have involved food preparation and service. Reproductively speaking, these women were of course often used for sex. The parallel carnalities of sexual and sensual satiation—of sex, food, and drink—are often entwined in Arabic literature much as they were in real life, and black women are in turn sometimes represented as combining the two.¹⁶¹ A brief example of this is to be found in the *dīwān* of our friend Jarīr (the one who had so insulted Hayqūṭān above), who

¹⁵⁹ We may note that there is an almost direct parallel between the hypersexual and solicitous way in which black women are often depicted in medieval Arabic sources and the corresponding “ravishability” of the (often feminized) Orient, described by Edward Said as one of the “remarkably persistent” elements of Orientalist discourse. Moreover, this may be read as a commentary on the parallel conditions of the colonial “subject races,” and the enslaved races of different times and places as articulated by the powerbrokers in these respective dynamics. Hypersexualization and the presumption of sexual access form a doctrine that bolsters the legitimacy and entitlement of the hegemon in a fashion that falls within the ambit of Said’s four core dogmas of Orientalism, namely that the Orient is in absolute contrast to the West and therefore backward, that its history and text is always preferable to its present and its people, that the Orient is describable by a calculatedly general vocabulary, and that it is “at bottom something to be feared [...] or to be controlled;” representations of Oriental or African subjects as overly sexual or undersexed may be subsumed under this fourth dogma, in that these are conditions that call for control. This is not to say that Orientalism and anti-blackness are identical, but rather that both share in a certain vocabulary of power which has a significant and patterned sexual component. Symptomatic of this at a macrocosmic scale, Ali Mazrui notes that, “Male chauvinists have sometimes regarded Asian and African societies as ‘feminine’ in their conquerability, docility, maleability, and fundamental inferiority.” See: Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 300-301, 309; Ali A. Mazrui, “The Re-Invention of Africa: Edward Said, V.Y. Mudimbe, and Beyond,” *Research in African Literatures* 36:3 (2005): 66-82.

¹⁶⁰ Jennifer L. Morgan, “‘Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder’: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54 (1997): 186.

¹⁶¹ Food and sex were occasionally dubbed the “two good things” (*atīyabān*), and often in pre-Islamic poetry generosity with one was used to signal or reinforce generosity with respect to another, as is in evidence in the famed camel-slaughtering passages in the *mu‘allaqāt* of both Imru’ al-Qays and Labīd. Geert Jan Van Gelder, *God’s Banquet: Food in Classical Arabic Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 109.

paints a graphic portrait of a black woman preparing meat for visitors, a ritual that he casts as inducing such rhapsody as to be a “religion” unto itself,

What religion is it, when a black girl [*sawdā*']
Grills up her young fowl
And glasses of her wine keep coming?
When the Iraqi smith visits her,
She slaughters pigeon chicks,
[Such that] her pigeon lays eggs in shame! ¹⁶²

The images of fertility peppered throughout these poems, from the birds verging on adulthood and flight (*nawāhiḍ*) to the recently hatched pigeon chicks (*farākh al-ḥamām*), paired with the intensified verb meaning “slaughter” or “massacre” (*dhabbaḥat*) rather than their more mundane analogue of butchering (*dhabaḥat*) indicate the productive violence of the scene: animals are killed and grilled, and thus bodies are transformed into a feast. This feast is then consumed by a masculine visitor, with the black woman being an indirect yet highly agentive generator of his satiety. Differentials of power and gender conspire in much Arabic literature to the effect of demonizing the appetites and sexuality of black men while treating those of black women as implements for male enjoyment, as with the Iraqi smith in this passage. These gendered divergences are made especially apparent through the comparison between the works of two greats of the “avant-garde,” or *badī*’ school of poetry that arose in the middle of the ‘Abbasid period, namely Abū-l-Ṭayyib al-Mutanabbī and Ibn al-Rūmī.

Ibn al-Rūmī is a near-contemporary of al-Jāḥiẓ and was likewise situated for much of his career in Baghdad, and so the demographics of his *milieu* may be presumed to differ little from those of our satirist. Al-Mutanabbī meanwhile lived nearly a century after the other two, and was itinerant between the Hamdanid court of Aleppo and the Ikhshidids of Fustat. Despite the fact that al-Mutanabbī was active at a time during which the central ‘Abbasid lands are believed to

¹⁶² Jarīr b. ‘Aṭīyya b. Kulayb al-Tamīmī, *Dīwān Jarīr*, (Beirut: Dār Bayrūt li-l-Ṭiba‘a wa-l-Nashr, 1986), 424.

have significantly diminished their ratio of stock in African slaves (with a comparative increase in the number of Turkic *mamlūks*), the polities by which al-Mutanabbī was patronized likely experienced no such change. Indeed, Jere Bacharach hypothesizes that the Ikhshidids of Egypt, like the Tulunids before them, may have themselves diverted much of the ‘Abbasids’ potential trade in slaves from the African continent to shore up their own militias. Some decades prior, the power dynamics dictating the flow of slaves between parts of central Africa and Arabia were already shifting somewhat due to ‘Abbasid administrative changes. Beginning under the reign of Ma’ mūn, the ruler of Nubia began to lapse on the terms of Nubia’s pact (*baqt*) with the Muslims—in place since the mid-7th century—that required a remittance of several hundred Nubian slaves to the caliphal court annually in exchange for territorial security; subsequently, the terms of this agreement were renegotiated.¹⁶³ It is also in this era of shifting demography of the empire’s slave populace, Bacharach claims, that “a particular idea of how armies should be organized came to be accepted by Muslim rulers,” with specializations conferred according to geographic and racial schemes. Turks were often trained as cavalrymen and poised for the upward mobility that this higher rank enabled, while black Africans were placed in the infantry, often going unmentioned by chroniclers and limited by their lower status.¹⁶⁴ Exceptionally, though, al-Mutanabbī’s patron at the Ikhshidid court was the regnant Abū-l-Misk Kāfūr, a black eunuch and former slave.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Though this quantity of slaves was likely more symbolic than materially consequential, the renegotiation of the *baqt* speaks to the early ‘Abbasids’ more general willingness to disengage themselves from securing African territories and political agreements in favor of prioritizing their more easterly enterprises. See: Jere L. Bacharach, “African Military Slaves in the Medieval Middle East: The Cases of Iraq (869-955) and Egypt (868-1171),” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 13 (1981): 471-495; Yūsuf Faḍl Ḥasan, “Main Aspects of the Arab Migration to the Sudan,” *Arabica* 14 (1967): 16-17.

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.* 491.

¹⁶⁵ It is worth taking a moment to consider Kāfūr’s name, the literal meaning of which is “Camphor, Father of Musk,.” The *laqab* of camphor, a fragrant white perfume extracted from laurels, was supposedly given to Kāfūr by Muḥammad b. Ṭughj al-Ikhshīd, his former owner. Meanwhile, musk, or *misk*, of which his name indicates he is the “father” is often noted in literature for its deep black color. Margaret Larkin speculates that this reference to a

When al-Mutanabbī leaves the court of Kāfūr on poor terms, he composes one of the most notorious racial invectives in pre-modern Arabic literature.¹⁶⁶ Even with Kāfūr having been a eunuch—a fact which itself earns much mockery from al-Mutanabbī—his satire contains the unmistakable shadow of the stereotype of black men as wild and carnal. Kāfūr is described as having other types of insatiable appetite, hungrily consuming al-Mutanabbī’s earnings (*jaw ‘ānun ya’kulu min zādī*). Kāfūr and his peers are elsewhere likened to foxes who have stolen through Egypt, eating the ceaseless supply of her grapes to the point of sickness (*nāmat nawāṭīru miṣrin ‘an tha ‘ālibihā faqad bashimna wa-mā tafnā-l-‘anāqīdu*). The rapacious eagerness of the foxes that this line describes, glutting themselves on grapes that have yet to be refined into wine while the vineyard minders (*nawāṭīr*) are asleep, indicates a feral and uncivilized sort of immoderation. For his part, al-Mutanabbī describes himself as inclining toward a pure red vintage (*kumayta-l-lawni ṣāfiyatan*).¹⁶⁷

Above all, al-Mutanabbī asserts that the only way to bring Kāfūr to heel is through violence. After bemoaning Kāfūr’s consumption of his earnings, al-Mutanabbī follows this by saying that strong-backed battle camels were made for situations such as this (*li-mithlihā khuliqa*

bright-white perfume was meant to “contrast [with] the extreme blackness of his skin,” which is highlighted by his pseudo-patronymic. This effort to minimize or counteract blackness through positive epithets appears reminiscent of the discourse common to black poets of the early Islamic period, who often claimed to have “white” souls despite their color. See: Margaret Larkin, *al-Mutanabbī: Voice of the ‘Abbasid Poetic Ideal* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2008), 66.

¹⁶⁶ To be sure, even al-Mutanabbī’s praise poetry for Kāfūr periodically exhibits his disdain for his patron on the grounds of his non-Arab roots. As Margaret Larkin puts it when introducing al-Mutanabbī’s panegyrics of his Ikhshidid patron, “An unabashed apologist for Arab racial superiority who mourned the loss of military and political power to non-Arab rulers, al-Mutanabbī now had to sing the praises of a eunuch and former slave [...]. It makes sense, therefore, that some verses of [his] first panegyric to Kafūr can be read as suggesting the regent’s own sense of greatness was his alone and quite unwarranted.” *Ibid.* 67. Other more neutral poems exhibit this tendency as well. An exemplary line was delivered by al-Mutanabbī in a poem composed upon hearing of the death of his prior patron, Sayf al-Dawla, while still in Kāfūr’s employ. He states, “I will not keep taking wealth that debases me, nor delight in that which dirties my repute (*wa-lā uqīmu ‘alā māl udhallu bihi wa-lā uladhdu ‘irḍī bihi darin*).” Cf. al-Mutanabbī, *Dīwān Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Mutanabbī*, ed. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ‘Azzām (Cairo: Maṭba‘a al-Ta’līf wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Nashr, 1944), 469. On this poem, see also: Larkin, *al-Mutanabbī*, 73.

¹⁶⁷ For a full translation of the poem, see: Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender, and Ceremony in Classical Arabic Ode* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 225-228; Cf. *ibid.* 314-316 (original Arabic).

mahriyyatu-l-qūdu). Derisively, al-Mutanabbī queries whether Kāfūr, the gelded black man (*al-aswad al-makhṣī*), learned his manners from his white company or his princely forefathers, or whether it was instead abused into him while his ear bled in the hand of his slaver as he was told that he was only valued at two coppers (*falsayn*). Perhaps the most quoted aphorism advising violence as a means of controlling Kāfūr is al-Mutanabbī’s statement, “do not buy a slave unless you get the stick with him” (*lā tashtari-l-‘abd illā wa-l-‘aṣā ma‘ahu*). Several centuries later, this had become a stock phrase, but particularly with respect to black men like its original referent. In his comprehensive slave-buying manual, *al-Qawl al-Sadīd fī Ikhtiyār al-Imā’ wa-l-‘Abīd*, the Mamlūk-era author Maḥmūd b. Aḥmad al-Amshāṭī cautions would-be buyers thus,

It is said that the best of slaves is one for whom you break a stick, and the vilest of them is the one for whom you purchase a stick, and if a slave requires a stick then there is no object and no good in him. As for the saying of some that you ‘should not buy a slave unless you get the stick with him,’ by this they intend the Zanj, for they are the worst of slaves and it is said that one does not want such slaves save for menial service (*mihna*), for indeed they are not put aright except by the stick.¹⁶⁸

We may contrast the above views of black men as unrestrained and appetitive in a way that merits violent management with the views expressed in Ibn al-Rūmī’s homage to a black courtesan, in which her voluptuousness and erotic excesses are cause for celebration. In a *qaṣīda* composed for the ‘Abbasid leader Abū-l-Faḍl ‘Abd al-Mālik b. Ṣāliḥ, Ibn al-Rūmī praises a black woman serving wine at his patron’s festivities.¹⁶⁹ He begins to address the topic of the woman by declaring her far more luminous than white women, playing off of the polysemy of the term *jawna*—which can mean both a dark-haired camel and the sun in the process of

¹⁶⁸ Muḥaffar al-Dīn Abū-l-Thanā’ Maḥmūd b. Aḥmad al-Amshāṭī al-Ḥanafī, *al-Qawl al-Sadīd fī Ikhtiyār al-Imā’ wa-l-‘Abīd* (Ms. orient A 1237, Universitäts Erfurt/Gotha), v. 4.

¹⁶⁹ For the original Arabic, see: Ibn al-Rūmī, *Dīwān Ibn al-Rūmī* vol. 1, ed. ‘Alī b. ‘Abbās b. Jarīj (Beirut: Dār al-Raqm, 2000), 677-682. For a full translation of the *qaṣīda*, see: Geert van Gelder, *Classical Arabic Literature: A Library of Arabic Literature Anthology* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 53-57.

setting—in describing her. The comparatively darker orb descending in the sky, according to Ibn al-Rūmī, is nonetheless more luminous than the pale, ephemeral “spark” (*ramaq*) of a white woman. In keeping with the commonplace trope of blackness deriving from an externally administered tincture or stain, Ibn al-Rūmī claims that she is “dyed with the dye of a love-besotted heart,” rendering her the color of the eye’s pupil, such that both scruples and perspicacity (*al-ḍamā’ir wa-l-abṣār*) depart in her midst.¹⁷⁰ This opening caveat about the loss of wits and self-control renders the black female subject open to what then becomes a libidinous exposé of her sexual qualities by the poet, with the implication that she herself, in her abundant charms, provoked such descriptions from the newly uninhibited poet. In contrast to the representation above of black men as appetitive, here the woman offers much to be consumed: she is likened to an ebony branch (*ghuṣn al-ābnūs*) thick and trembling with the “buxomness” (*nāhidiyya*) of its fruits. Whereas the excessive consumption of Kāfūr is reproached by al-Mutanabbī using the image of a wild fox glutting itself on fruit, the excessive, fleshy “fruits” of the ebony-colored woman are meant to be glutted on by a lust-maddened Ibn al-Rūmī.

The content of the poem grows even more salacious when, playing again with the idea of the woman as bright and fiery—as with her likeness to the tawny, setting sun—her vagina is described in the *qaṣīda* as burning as if from the heat from her lover’s heart, and its tightness is likened to that of a slipknot in a noose (*wahq*). The fatal attraction that this image evokes is further embellished in a succeeding line, when the poet declares that the woman’s most fitting purpose (*akhliq bihā*) is to stand astride a male organ like a hilt encases its sword, adding that many sword-hilts, after all, are black. The image of the black sword-hilt is likely meant to evoke

¹⁷⁰ On the idea of blackness as the effect of dyeing or of divinely-ordained disfigurement (*maskh*), see below.

a contrast with the color of the sword itself, as swords are often referred to in poetry as *bīd* (white things) due to their silvery-white color when they catch light in mid-swing during combat.

The stranglehold of the woman's vagina portrayed in its comparison to a noose and the (far more hackneyed) imagery of the man's penetrating, sword-like penis conspire to create an image in which the sexual entanglement of the poet and his black lover appears violent and mutually destructive, and is perhaps a nod to the poem's overall apologetic tone in which lauding the merits of a black lover is presented as deviant, and thus socially costly. The frequent references to fire and heat evoke the simultaneously exotic and climatologically explicatory geographic origins of Ibn al-Rūmī's paramour—the reason that a black woman makes for such an arousing lover is implicitly linked with her native African environment, the heat of which would have considered responsible not only for her somatic qualities but also her temperament.

This notion of an innate hypersexuality on the part of black Africans pervades al-Jāhīz's work as well, where it becomes the subject of parody. When discussing the fecundity of Zanjī women, the author's exaggerations veer headlong into the absurd, with the Zanjī woman,

[Delivering] about fifty times in fifty years, with two children in each delivery. The total is more than ninety, because it is claimed that women cease to deliver when they reach the age of sixty [...]¹⁷¹

Al-Jāhīz goes on to note that the Zanj identify themselves as being particularly solicitous of their women, and vice versa. The astonishing fertility described here has a bilateral implication, reinforced by this subsequent mention of mutual affection: Zanjī women are able to healthfully and easily bear men children, and Zanjī men are likewise able to help furnish them with this number of offspring. According to the text, this sexuality is kept in check purely by xenophobia, for the Zanj rarely marry outside their people, “white” Arab men rarely desire to reproduce with

¹⁷¹ Khalidi, “The Boasts of the Blacks,” 20.

Zanjī women, and Zanjī men find it virtually impossible to muster interest in a woman who is not Zanjī. In the same breath, al-Jāḥiẓ’s treatise conjures and neutralizes the dangerous stereotypes mentioned above, for while the black Zanj are represented as being hypersexual and highly fecund, there is little risk of this having ramifications for Arab populations. That is, rather than challenging a popular perception outright, al-Jāḥiẓ chooses to add a further detail that will transform the perception from negative to positive. This re-appropriative strategy occurs elsewhere in *Fakhr al-Sūdān*, as when the Zanj vaunt their superiority as soldiers and manual laborers—positions into which they are often conscripted by force and for which they are favored under the very logic that such stereotypes propagate. The reclaiming of these features is double-edged, in that it may be interpreted as giving credence to the mechanisms put in place for the social control of imagined black strength, virility, and militancy. Al-Jāḥiẓ’s treatise thus, in affirming the power of the black body, also underscores its precarity in the context of a social system in which that bodily power is often harnessed by others.

In meditating extensively on perceptions of the black body as such, al-Jāḥiẓ also recalls positive manifestations of chromatic blackness, demonstrating that racial and ontological blackness intersect in his view much as they did for the early Qur’ānic exegetes discussed above. Black livestock (which are held to be better producers of milk, in the case of sheep, or of higher monetary value in the case of donkeys), black-hued perfumes like musk and amber, and black-stemmed dates are among the objects whose blackness is laudable here. The sacred Black Stone of the Ka‘ba, of course, merits mention as well. All of this argumentation has the aim not only of naturalizing blackness, but of subsuming it under the climatological theory that blackness arises from hot, dry environmental conditions, rather than due to a “disfigurement” (*maskh*) doled out by God as punishment (*‘uqūba*). To this end, al-Jāḥiẓ cites the land of Ḥarra, the weather of

which is so extreme that all its creatures, from ostriches to flies, are black, and even the fair Byzantine women its residents take for wives only undergo three gestation periods (*thalātha abṭān*) before their children start emerging black from the womb. Rebuking the idea that blackness is the result of a divinely-willed, punitive tincturing may not only repudiate the folk narrative of Ḥām’s curse or the above-mentioned literalist readings of the Qur’ān’s statement that the faces of the condemned shall blacken, but also other popular accounts of the etiology of blackness that echo similar sentiments. For example, of the Black Stone of the Ka‘aba, said by the Zanjī narrators to have been sent as it was from Paradise, al-Ṭabarī offers a different account in his widely read history, *Ta’rīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*,

Al-Ḥārith related to me that Ibn Sa‘d related that Hishām b. Muḥammad informed us, saying, ‘my father informed us via Abī Šāliḥ, via Ibn ‘Abbās, that the Black Stone was sent down along with Adam when he fell from the Garden, yet it was whiter than snow, and Adam and Eve wept over what had disappeared from them [...]

The purportedly white stone of the Ka‘ba is then turned black over time through contact with ritually impure pagan women,

Abū Humām related to us that, ‘my father related to me that Ziyād b. Khaythama told me that Abī Yahyā the cucumber seller said, ‘Mujāhid said to me, while we were sitting in the mosque, ‘what do you make of this?’ I said, ‘O Abū-l-Ḥajjāj, [you mean] the stone?’ He said, ‘Is that what you call it?’ I said, ‘Is it not a stone?’ He replied, ‘Truly, ‘Abdallah b. ‘Abbās told me that it was a white precious stone which Adam took from the Garden. He wiped his tears on it, and Adam ceased weeping from the time that he exited the Garden until he returned to it after two thousand years, such is the power of Iblīs over a matter.’ So I said to him, ‘O Abū-l-Ḥajjāj, then from what is it black?’ He said, ‘It was from the menstruating women who touched it in the *jāhiliyya*.’¹⁷²

As we shall later see, the popular conception that blackness may emerge suddenly—not from benign and predictable influences in nature but from an accidental, alchemical infusion of fluids

¹⁷² Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk* vol. 1, ed. Muḥammad Abū-l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Dār al-Ma‘ārif bi-Miṣr, 1967), 133.

such as black bile or menstrual blood into the affected object—is one that haunts a range of medieval Arabic literature, and is particularly prominent in the *sīras*. Al-Jāhiz’s characters resist this folk wisdom, and thus elevate chromatic blackness not necessarily into a lofty position over other colors (the contemporary slogan, “black is beautiful,” *pace* Bernard Lewis, appears as at most a heavily prevaricated aside in al-Jāhiz’s treatise), but at least to an equal footing with the other colors found in nature.¹⁷³

Thus, at its etiological point of origin—quite literally as far into the past of a thing as one can reach—the blackness of certain humans is simply environmentally innate to the lands from which they hail. The body itself preserves the imprint of these places on its surface, and thus becomes a locus for memory as well an object onto which anecdote and “knowledge” about those places can be projected. This is an inevitable aspect of the multiple consciousnesses of black people, described by Franz Fanon as a set of super-imposed bodily schemas through which their blackness in a white society entails a simultaneous responsibility for and consciousness of one’s own body, one’s race, and one’s ancestors. As noted in the introduction, for Fanon the black body acts as the inadvertent *aide-mémoire* for multifarious facets of a black “history” as interpreted by non-black actors (“cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders”), and these significances—to Fanon’s dismay—cleave to every articulation of the contemporary black self; white history, meanwhile, gets universalized and intellectualized.¹⁷⁴ Al-Jāhiz exploits the body’s capacity to elicit these associations as well. A variety of temporalities, allegories, and anecdotes are summoned and addressed in his work primarily through reference to the physical forms of the black people he purports to vaunt, be it through the composition of a poem in response to a still-smarting insult to one’s appearance, an unabashedly prurient

¹⁷³ Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, 54.

¹⁷⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 92-94.

contemplation of sexuality, or in the analogizing of epidermal blackness to a dizzying array of furs, oils, plumage, and stones.

Conclusion: Black Physicality and the Paradox of Reclamation

In sum, while we may puzzle, along with many other scholars, over the exact aims of his prose, in my view Al-Jāhiz's writing compels us to question not so much whether or not he speaks in jest, but rather whether the implications of his historiographical approach are “reappropriating or reinscribing” damaging stereotypes about his subjects. These are the very terms in which film scholar Harry M. Benshoff queries the function of “Blaxploitation” horror movies, or films prominent in the 1970s which courted a black audience by marketing genre pieces with all or nearly-all black casts and portraying black (anti-)heroes vanquishing white foes.¹⁷⁵ Due to strictures of genre, the protagonists of Blaxploitation horror films were monstrous or demonic almost by necessity, and often these productions were criticized for reinforcing the trope of sub-human and ultra-violent black (typically male) figures. However, Benshoff extolls Blaxploitation horror flicks’ “[embrace] of the racialized monster,” and his transformation into “an agent of black pride and power,” as subversive, saying,

[The] films created sympathetic monsters who helped shift audience identification away from the status quo ‘normality’ of bourgeois white society. In some cases, they exposed white ‘normality,’ and especially white patriarchy, as productive of monsters.¹⁷⁶

In other words, by complicating their audiences’ understanding of the motivations and struggles of monsters, Benshoff claims that certain racialized cinematic tropes were called into question even as they were superficially reenacted. In having aspects of black masculinity that are both feared and prized in Arab society rephrased as points of pride by a set of black narrators, al-Jāhiz

¹⁷⁵ Harry M. Benshoff, “Blaxploitation Horror Films: Generic Reappropriation or Reinscription?” *Cinema Journal* 39 (2000): 33.

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.* 45.

generates ambiguity and polyphony around these features. Furthermore, the very aspects of blackness which al-Jāhiz's characters aim to vindicate serve to expose the societal conditions necessitating the characters' discussion. In placing the black body at a central position in the text, be it for its aesthetics or its utility, al-Jāhiz's treatise expresses awareness of a reality in which this focus on the black body already exists, and this same bodily fixation is reflected uncritically in the works of al-Mutanabbī and Ibn a-Rūmī. *Fakhr al-Sūdān* acknowledges—or perhaps simply cannot think past the fact—that a highly corporeal and often utilitarian mode of interaction between Arab and black subjects is part of the 'normality' of al-Jāhiz's milieu, and that these societal norms also privilege only a narrow range of representations of black individuals, such as the reproductively promising and solicitous woman or the fierce, soldierly man. As such, in the treatise the instrumental thing becomes tying these physical virtues to cerebral ones: ferocity on the battlefield becomes a byword for honor, and sexual disposal a byword for generosity. Even the intellectual faculties of eloquence and rationality had among black people are often used in service of physical representations or else discussed simultaneously with them; like Ḥayquṭān, the silver-tongued 'Ukaym al-Ḥabashī is quoted as listing battles in which the Abyssinian men comported themselves like lions and stallions.¹⁷⁷ When discussing the refined speech of the Zanj, al-Jāhiz notes that they can speak for a full day without digressing or ceasing, following this with a nod to their bodily strength and stamina.¹⁷⁸

Overall, rather than completely disrupt the archetypes with which his readers are familiar, al-Jāhiz instead reframes them as praiseworthy and emphasizes that they are qualities of a people that are innate and preexistent rather than inorganically constructed; the reason black men are valorous and strong is not because they are groomed as slave-soldiers, but because they are the

¹⁷⁷ Khalidi, "Boasts of the Blacks," 14.

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.* 12.

inheritors of an indigenous kingly legacy, and the reason black women are hardy and fertile is not because they are kept as concubines (indeed, this allegedly diminishes their fertility), but because they are naturally so in their native environment. The reason black people are black, moreover, is not an adulteration of nature by divine fiat but rather nature itself at work. He then binds these innate physical features to other, subtler capacities, either by structurally incorporating examples of black physical self-praise in mannered poetry and syllogisms or else through explicitly connecting the one to the other, as with the relating of physical strength to the quality and length of oration.

Though it is fair to read this treatise, in our current context, as a fraught and even counterproductive treatment of symptoms rather than the underlying cause, *Fakhr al-Sūdān* ‘*alā-l-Bīdān* must at least be recognized as setting a precedent for prose-based critiques of the condition of blackness in Arabo-Muslim lands. Indeed, the boastful portrait of black martial prowess and virility that al-Jāhīz paints resonates with the *siyar sha’biyya*, which feature a constellation of black heroes that takes ‘Antar b. Shaddād (referenced also in *Fakhr al-Sūdān* among black warriors of note) as its polestar. We may venture that al-Jāhīz’s famed work is a member of the *sīras*’ literary genealogy, and that the ideas it sets forth would have been known to the *sīras*’ composers and audiences, as were the Qur’ānically- and apocryphally-derived notions of race that the text periodically resists. By its very nature, Al-Jāhīz’s vindication comes into popular consciousness after and against the grain of the stereotypes it discusses—stereotypes employed unironically in the other literature explored above. Naturally this obverse, defamatory vein of racial narrative also finds expression in popular literary sources. One of its most notorious articulations occurs in the final case study in our survey, the frame tale of *Alf Layla wa-Layla*, or the *1001 Nights*.

Alf Layla wa-Layla

To quote Muhsin al-Musawi, despite its global dissemination and the veritable trove of writings on its various aspects, efforts to closely read the texts of the *Arabian Nights* themselves are dwarfed by a gargantuan “scholarly corpus of *Arabian Nightism*,” examining either adaptations of the *Nights* or extra-textual implications of the text itself, in the form of “philological interests, motif indices, concordance[s] of tales and cycles, and readings of relevance to sociological and [...] anthropological research.”¹⁷⁹ Though the widely known frame tale of the *Nights*, sometimes dubbed the “Story of Shahriyār and Shahrazād,” is often discussed in works on the *Nights*, a relatively small number of studies have attended to the core dynamics of the narrative in ways that transcend a gender analysis (assessing what is perhaps the narrative’s most immediately striking feature), with but a few making reference to the matrix of power differentials that inhere in the tale’s exordium in the form not only of male versus female, but also of free and unfree, black and white, and royal and subject.

Accordingly, Daniel Beaumont attempts to read the entire frame narrative through Hegel’s master-slave parable, concluding that the black slave is but one of the slaves in the narrative, and that the label “slave” is a fluid construct that may be mapped onto anyone subordinated to another at pain of death for any period of time; as such, it applies not only to the enslaved black lovers within the queen’s retinue, but also to Shahriyār himself when he is forced to have intercourse with the captive concubine of the *‘ifrīt*, lest she awaken him and doom the king to the *‘ifrīt*’s wrath.¹⁸⁰ For Beaumont, the blackness of the slaves with whom Shahriyār and Shāhzamān’s spouses commit their initial perfidy is mostly an instrument of parallelism or

¹⁷⁹ Muhsin J. al-Musawi, “The ‘Mansion’ and the ‘Rubbish Mounds’: ‘The Thousand and One Nights’ in Popular Arabic Tradition,” *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 35 (2004): 329.

¹⁸⁰ Daniel Beaumont, “King, Queen, Master, Slave: The Master/Slave Dialectic & The Thousand and One Nights,” *Neophilologus*, 82 (1998): 335-356.

accumulation: the black column of smoke in which the *'ifrīt* appears hearkens to the blackness of the slaves and thus lends a “biological” similitude to the two sections of the tale. Though he does not discount the factor of “racism” in shaping the text’s emotional valence—noting that clearly the blackness of the slaves heightens the stakes of the initial outrage—this consideration is a minor aside in a work that instead prioritizes the notion of slave as abstract, nonracial, and ungendered. As such, Shahriyār, in yielding to the woman who is kept captive by the *'ifrit*, “is a slave because he submits to his own fear of death,” as with the black slaves who obey the will of their queen.¹⁸¹

In contrast, Ferial Ghazoul asserts in her *Nocturnal Poetics: The Arabian Nights in Comparative Context*, that the text plays liberally with “the semantic fields and associations of blackness,” noting that the color crops up all around Shāhzamān in various ways rather than being embodied solely in his cuckold: he repairs to his abode at midnight (the darkest hour), and when he discovers the scene, the world “[becomes] black before his eyes.”¹⁸² Blackness, for Ghazoul, both sets the emotional tone of much of the frame tale and allows for play within it, for even as the dark traumas of the brother kings predominate in the frame narrative, an erotic undercurrent runs throughout for which blackness, as the signifier of night (a “time of passion”) but also of blindness (to the wayward passions of the kings’ wives), serves as a byword. Whereas for Beaumont, it is the concept of slavery that transcends the bodies of the black slaves, for Ghazoul it is the notion of blackness that achieves a similar narrative diffusion.

I propose, in this brief reading, to offer a supplement to both of the above scholars’ works on the frame tale of *Alf Layla wa-Layla* by underscoring the fact that it is not simply the

¹⁸¹ *ibid.* 343.

¹⁸² Ferial J. Ghazoul, *Nocturnal Poetics: The Arabian Nights in Comparative Context* (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 1996), 26.

blackness and the slave that become salient, recurrent themes, but rather color more broadly—blackness and whiteness of skin both matter in discrete ways, and the anxiety over their potential mixing produces much of the tension in the frame tale. Paying attention to blackness to the neglect of whiteness’ signifying ability, as readings focused on racism in the *Nights* have often done, can obscure the text’s valuation of its white subjects. Reading the text through the symbolism of color and not only of blackness reveals the links between descriptions of different subjects, rather than constructing the black slave as a symbolic outlier within the textual world. My reading also emphasizes the rich fantasy into which the *Nights* aims to transport the reader, a fantasy which is achieved through priming the reader with thick descriptions of the material world, in all of its hue and texture.¹⁸³ Humans are often themselves rendered material within the text: bodies are signified by color and garb or complicated by shadow and shape, and they are used as implements of sex and loci of desire.

I posit that the reason blackness stands out as a feature in the text—in contrast to Ghazoul’s notion that it is a monolithic and uniquely potent signifier, with “one pigment [...] sufficient to describe the timing, the adulterer, and the reaction”—is because references to color and light have been built up in the text in subtler ways prior to the culminating appearance of the black slaves who turn the kings’ world upside down; the stark blackness of the men who cuckold Shahriyār is introduced only after other more amorphous types of darkness have been encountered in the form of night and shadow in the narrative of Shāhzamān.¹⁸⁴ Where Ghazoul reads these blacknesses as identical and equally suggestive, I read them as forming a progression

¹⁸³ Beaumont dubs these thick descriptions “hyperreal,” noting that they are a means of actually signifying the text’s fictiveness rather than an attempt at granularly capturing “reality.” See: Daniel Beaumont, “*Min Jumlat al-Jamādāt*. The Inanimate in Fictional and *Adab* Narrative,” in *On Fiction and Adab in Medieval Arabic Literature*, ed. Philip F. Kennedy (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 55-69.

¹⁸⁴ Ghazoul, *Nocturnal Poetics*, 26.

towards the vignette's climax. Likewise, the reason that the condition of the slave is prominent lies not merely in the fact of the condition being analogous with other characters' experiences, per Beaumont. Rather, this occurs because there is a thematic precedent for bodily objectification and rapaciousness throughout the text beyond the especially tangible cases of the orgies and the affairs themselves. The bodies of various subjects within the text operate much as they do for Geraldine Heng with respect to European romances, in that, "crises in the register of the social are played out and explored in the register of the corporeal," with the bodies of individual characters in a text standing for "corporate," political or politicized identities.¹⁸⁵ In view of this, Beaumont's analysis stops short of a key consideration: the bodily regulation of a "slave" is enforced not merely at pain of death, but with the aim of regulating the production of new life, and the crisis that Shahriyar's cuckolding introduces is repressed not only through executions, but also through implementing absolute reproductive control to the end of preventing adulterous acts and the miscegenation they may produce.¹⁸⁶

Alf Layla wa-Layla's World of Color

The world into which we are inducted at the beginning of *Nights* is one at which we are instructed to look closely in the text's exordium, in order that we may learn perspicacity (*firāsa*) and not be hoodwinked by schemes (*ḥattā lā yadkhul 'alayhi ḥīla*).¹⁸⁷ The resonance of *firāsa* as perceptiveness particularly with respect to the physical and psycho-emotional nature of human beings is undergirded by the fact that *firāsa* also denotes physiognomy in the sciences, or the

¹⁸⁵ Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 129.

¹⁸⁶ In the interest of concision, I have dealt mainly with the first portion of the frame tale, wherein Shahzaman and Shahriyar discover their respective spouses' adultery, and have left aside the narrative of their subsequent travel and interaction with the *'ifrīt*. I have used Muhsin Mahdi's critical edition of the text, based primarily off of its 14th-century Syrian manuscript. Muhsin Mahdi, ed., *Kitāb Alf Layla wa-Layla: Min Uṣūlihi al-'Arabiyya al-Ulā* (Leiden: Brill, 1984). For exposition on Mahdi's edition and a translation of the text, see: Husain Haddawy, *The Arabian Nights* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990). All translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

¹⁸⁷ Mahdi, *Kitāb Alf Layla*, 56

practice of reading physical features to access knowledge about an individual’s internal state.¹⁸⁸ In this fashion, the *Nights*’ initial overture to its hearers draws the mind immediately to the human body as a cryptograph containing more esoteric truths. We are then introduced first to the two brothers, Shahriyār and Shāhzamān, who reign over territories in India and China. Shahriyār is described as a colossus of a horseman (*fāris jabbār*) with swift feet (*mighwār*), who has used his uncanny physical abilities to conquer remote lands and acquire “adoring” subjects (*‘ubbād*) by seizing hold of their forelocks (*nawāṣī*). Even before he arrives at the practice of bedding and slaughtering a virgin a night, Shahriyār puts his body to use in exerting coercive control over the bodies of others.¹⁸⁹

Shahriyār sends for his brother out of longing for his company, and Shāhzamān provisions himself and prepares to set out. He is compelled to repair to the palace, however, where he finds his wife in bed with a man from among the kitchen servants (*rajul min ṣibyān al-maṭbakh*), locked in an embrace (*muta ‘āniqa hiya wa-iyyāhu*). Seeing this, Shāhzamān’s world goes dark (*iswaddat al-dunya fī ‘aynayhi*), and he becomes afire with rage (*nāra ra ‘suhu*) and he exacts his wrath by killing both his wife and her paramour.¹⁹⁰ Color eddies around the edges of Shāhzamān’s story whereas it is front-and-center in the subsequent narrative of Shahriyār’s wife and her perfidies. The color of the man whom Shāhzamān’s wife embraces is not mentioned here. Instead, as Ghazoul asserts, it is folded into the darkness surrounding the story—Shāhzamān arrives home at the blackest hour, midnight, and his world blackens upon seeing the couple in the act, resulting in Shāhzamān—with his “head afire” from rage—being the singular,

¹⁸⁸ On the significance of the terminological disparity between *qiyāfa* and *firāsa* in denoting different aspects of physiognomic deduction (with the latter being generally linked more closely with the Greek physiognomists such as Polemon), see: R. Hoyland, “Physiognomy in Islam,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 30 (2005): 361-402.

¹⁸⁹ Mahdi, *Kitāb Alf Layla*, 56

¹⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 57

blazing object in the blackness. By contrast, as shall be seen below, when Shahriyār's wife conducts herself in the same way in broad daylight the scene comes into vivid color.

The action in Shāhzamān's vignette is enacted by groping one's way through various kinds of shadow: after witnessing the nocturnal lovemaking of his wife and her lover, Shāhzamān draws his sword and smites the two, then drags them by their legs (*jarra bi-rijlayhimā*) from the palace, throwing the corpses into the depths of a trench (*ramāhumā min al-qaṣr ilā asfal al-khandaq*) where they are enveloped by a doubled darkness, obscured by both the night and the ditch. The unraveling of Shāhzamān's world shares much with the Qur'ānic vision of hell as darkness upon darkness. Shāhzamān murdering his spouse results in a form of reflexive bodily mortification on his part. Deprived of the ability to fulfill one appetite, he loses all others, and is unable to eat or drink when he arrives at his brother's home. As a result, his body wastes away and his complexion pales (*iṣfarra lawnuhu*).¹⁹¹ The shadow and palor that characterize Shāhzamān's section of the tale may be read as an attenuated foreshadowing of the high-contrast, black-white play of color that pervades the vignette with Shahriyār's wife and her retinue. As the narrative builds, bodies and objects come into sharper focus and attain more vibrancy.

While Shāhzamān is visiting, Shahriyār notices the physical changes that have overcome him and assumes that they are due to separation from his kingdom, and offers to take him hunting for gazelles in order to distract him. Too disconsolate to move, Shāhzamān refuses, and so Shahriyār rides off alone in the literal pursuit of flesh, at which point Shāhzamān witnesses Shahriyār's queen and her retinue having sex with black slaves in the palace garden. Shahriyār's deer hunt foreshadows his impending slaughter of his wife. True to the trope of likening beautiful women to gazelles, Shahriyār's spouse is described as emerging into the garden under

¹⁹¹ *ibid.* 58

Shāhzamān’s watchful gaze for an orgy, “striding like a black-eyed gazelle” (*tatakhattaru ka ‘annahā ghazāl aḥwar*), with this language evoking both the statuesque form of the gazelle and the pale, black-eyed *ḥūr* who minister to men in the garden of heaven. We may recall that the ideal beauty of these women finds its absolute negation in the figure of the black, rheumy-eyed man in Qur’ānic discourse. Though the facial features of the dark-skinned figures with whom the women of the queen’s retinue are engaged are not described, the opposed nature of the black slaves and their white female counterparts is evoked in other ways besides their contrast in color: the black men initially are cross-dressed as maids (*jawārin*) along with the other slave women, but when they remove their clothes they become male slaves (*‘abīd*). The men are consistently cast as descending upon the women from above, and thus taking the dominant role in sexual intercourse. In a common euphemism for sex, the black slaves “alight” upon the women (*waqa‘at al-‘ashra ‘alā ‘ashra jawārin*) and the slave Mas‘ūd (the queen’s chosen lover) is described as lying atop (*fawq*) his mistress. This choreography of above and below at once reinforces and disturbs hierarchies of gender and race, for while the black people are positioned above the white, the men lie, normatively, atop the women. In the case of the queen, dynamics of class are also destabilized in that, though she has mastery over her lover, he nonetheless literally descends to her level from the tree in which he was concealed and assumes physical control, lifting her legs and entering her (*shāla sayqānihā wa-dakhala bayna awrākihā*). The group continues having sex until noon (*niṣf al-nahār*), as opposed to the midnight romp of Shāhzamān’s wife.¹⁹²

After seeing what transpires, Shāhzamān’s appetites return with a violence, and he eats and drinks for ten days straight. When supping with his brother, his face becomes ruddy

¹⁹² *ibid.* 59

(*iḥmarra wajhuhu*) and his color returns (*rudda lawnuhu*), he puts on weight and blood courses anew through his veins.¹⁹³ His restoration of color—representing his improvement in health—is observed by his brother with scrutiny (*tamayyaz al-malik Shāhriyār ḥālat akhīhi*), with the text likewise directing its audience’s collective gaze to these developments. In following Shahriyār’s cues, we are being told amid all of the intrigue and sensory titillations displayed thus far which person’s color to prioritize, worry over, and value most—that of the white king.

Shāhzamān’s narrative thus demonstrates a particular narrative strategy of using a black other to launch an actualization of the self, and fittingly his narrative follows an almost gnostic arc of initial distress, travel and seeking a mentor, isolation, bodily mortification, crossing a psychological threshold, and a “return” to his initial nature. In a similar fashion, in her work *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison asserts that if one combs through American literature, one finds many articulations of an “Africanist presence:” a blackness representative of desire, taboo, otherness, and fear that is consolidated in the image of an African character in the text, with blackness offering a potent signifier for these elements of the author’s consciousness,

The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity.¹⁹⁴

Moreover, Morrison notes that a black presence in a text need not be embodied. Rather, other presences in the form of a specter, a darkness, a depth, or a shadow, in her view, can function as Africanist allusions because the signs and signifieds are, in effect, reversible. The pervasive symbolism of night and shadow in Shāhzamān’s vignette constitutes one such Africanist presence, and at the moment in the text in which this presence is conjured, Shāhzamān

¹⁹³ *ibid.* 60

¹⁹⁴ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 17.

is on the precipice of a new level of cognition. The psychological fugue into which Shāhzamān is pitched by his traumas only dissipates after he witnesses the cuckolding of his own brother in a similar fashion to himself. The reason given in the text for this resolution is that Shāhzamān realizes he is not alone in his misery, but we may also note that this realization is attended by the crystallization of the “disrupting darkness before [his] eyes” into a specific set of people that he can blame for his and his brother’s collective agonies, namely women and black slaves.¹⁹⁵ Despite his brother’s imminent emotional pain, Shāhzamān can once again savor acts of consumption, and Beaumont attributes this to the fact that Shāhzamān finds palliation for his hate-sickness (as opposed to the lovesickness so typical of medieval Arabic literature) through the sadism of watching another marriage die for similar reasons to his own. However, it seems that the cure lies not so much in his hatred finding “sadistic expression,” as Beaumont argues, as in his hatred finding a more concrete object.¹⁹⁶ When Shāhzamān begins again to consume things, he does so as a newly discerning and conscious consumer; the bodies of women and slaves, already proprietary consumables, are no longer shadow forms but are now objects gaudily displayed for him, and he finds clarity in his act of midday voyeurism.

The problem of the unfocused or misleading dark image that haunts Shāhzamān’s vignette resurfaces again when Shāhzamān attempts to explain the garden scene to Shahriyār, who inquires into the reason behind his brother’s return to good health,

[Shāhzamān] told him what he had seen from the palace window, and the calamity in his castle—that there were ten male slaves in the guise of ten maidens sleeping with his concubines and kept women night and day. This he told him from beginning to end, for there is no benefit in repeating [oneself], ‘And when I saw the calamity that had befallen you I was consoled and said to myself: even with my brother being king of this land, this misery still happened to him in his own house! So, my worries were assuaged and that which was [afflicting] me ended and I became cheered and ate and drank. This is the cause of my joy and

¹⁹⁵ I borrow this phrase from Morrison. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 91.

¹⁹⁶ Beaumont, “King, Queen, Master, Slave,” 339.

the return of my color. When the king Shahriyār heard his brother's words, there came upon him an intense fury, to the point that his blood almost spewed out. Then he said, 'O my brother, I shall not believe what you have said unless I see it with my own eyes.'¹⁹⁷

The core issue that Shāhzamān identifies is the dissimulation of the black slaves, who have disguised themselves as women and embedded themselves in his brother's harem, with the result that they are then able to copulate with the women housed there. In a world so taken up with the study of skin color, obscuring these identifiers is a particularly egregious form of manipulation. The fact that the black slaves had been passing themselves off as slave women by shrouding themselves in a costume (*zī*) harkens to the indistinctness and illegibility of the shadowy forms that had beleaguered Shāhzamān earlier. Here, blackness, when part of a masquerade by the men as some ordinary harem-maids, enables one not to be concealed, but rather to hide in plain sight.

The blackness of the dissimulating slaves exerts a tincturing effect when, later, Shāhzamān takes his brother to witness his wife's deeds for himself. The bodies of the black men cast a double shadow that echoes and intensifies the images from Shāhzamān's vignette; when the slaves fall upon the maidens, though verb used for their action (*sakhhkamūhum*) slangily refers to having sex, it also has the connotation of blackening something either by sullyng it or by literally dyeing it darker.¹⁹⁸ Through this allusion to the "blackening" effect of the slaves' bodies, the "whiteness" of the women both in terms of their skin color and their sexual purity is made obscure to the viewer. Shahriyār, who had demanded visual confirmation of Shahzaman's account, "loses his reason" (*kharaja min 'aqlihi*) when he sees the spectacle of their intercourse, suggesting not only his profound anger but also the overturning of his episteme: what he had known to be real proves not to have been so. Slaves here become representative not so much of

¹⁹⁷ Mahdi, *Kitāb Alf Layla*, 61-62.

¹⁹⁸ *ibid.* 62

dominance in and of itself, but rather stand as testaments of the flux and subversion of dynamics of domination; in embedding themselves with the women of the harem, Shahriyār's slaves govern his world in ways that he cannot detect. The fact that the black slaves can hide so thoroughly and yet, once exposed, exert such a totalizing blackening on the humans in their midst may be read as a metaphor for miscegenation and the alteration of one's ancestral line through the introduction of a foreign element that, though somatically muted, can exert a socially immutable effect. In the United States, this principle of even very distant genealogical blackness carrying an immutable social connotation has historically been indicated by the "one-drop rule," as Adrian Piper explains in her essay, "Passing for White, Passing for Black:"

[A]ccording to this longstanding convention of racial classification, a white who acknowledges any African ancestry implicitly acknowledges being black—a social condition, more than an identity, that no white person would voluntarily assume, even in imagination. This is one reason that whites, educated and uneducated alike, are so resistant to considering the probable extent of racial miscegenation. [...] The primary issue for them is not what they might have to give away by admitting that they are in fact black, but rather what they have to lose. What they have to lose, of course, is social status [...]¹⁹⁹

Passing—the concept around which Piper's essay revolves—is, in short, a way of gaming the system of racial classification. One who is able to "pass" moves through society being perceived as a member of a race other than one's own, thus flouting society's conventional habits around race, such as the expectation that an outsider can determine another's racial status through interpreting visible, somatic qualities. According to Piper, contemplating the possible extent of miscegenation forces white people to in turn confront the possibility of being black themselves under the heuristic of the "one-drop rule." In this fashion, Piper implies that most whites may unknowingly be passing themselves, and she contends that this is a reality whites

¹⁹⁹ Adrian Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black (1991)," in *Adrian Piper, Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I: Selected Essays in Meta-Art 1968-1992* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 15.

resist and reject in ways that manifest as “hatred of the self as identified with the other.” One finds a similar sentiment about the permanent imprint of lowly heritage expressed in the poem by al-Mutanabbī examined above, when he declares, “The slave cannot be brother to the free and upright man, even if he’s born to freeman’s clothes (*law annahu fī thiyāb al-ḥurr mawlūd*).”²⁰⁰ For al-Mutanabbī, freedom is defined as never having had a single instance of enslavement in one’s ancestry, and anyone living as a freeman despite such a past is an imposter. Perhaps the kings in the *Nights* would concur.²⁰¹

Shāh zamān and Shahriyār experience a twofold revulsion at the divulged passing of the black slaves, first on the level of gender and then on the level of their race’s gendered implications: the seemingly sexually available and docile black women of Shahriyār’s harem are revealed as men who, in exerting sexual dominance over the white women therein, are “blackening” them. That is, the inversion of the black slaves’ gender carries with it new implications for the signing potency of their race, particularly with respect to the reproductive output of Shahriyār’s harem. When Shahriyār, to stymie this, decides to bed and kill a virgin per night, this is not only a reaction against the guile of women but also a means of distancing himself from the potential for his partners to have been “blackened” as have his prior concubines. Beaumont is right in noting that the helpmate of dominance is the threat of death,

²⁰⁰ The translation of this line is from Suzanne Stetkevych’s rendering of the poem. See: Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender, and Ceremony in Classical Arabic Ode* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 227. Cf. al-Mutanabbī, *Dīwān*, 486.

²⁰¹ In the Islamic target-culture into which the *Nights* are initially introduced as the *Hazar Afsāneh* and in which its tales circulate, the prospect of a legitimate child of an *umm walad* taking the throne from his half-siblings (as with, say, the caliph Ma’mūn, the son through concubinage of Hārūn al-Rashīd, who is oft-featured in the *Nights*) was a common political phenomenon. The basic feature of the child’s entitlement as heir was a combination of legitimacy and the free status conferred by his father’s line. If the king is unable to ensure the exclusivity of the women in his harem’s relations with him, though, the former condition could not be verified. This is less a racial point than a genealogical one, but race is nonetheless tangled with genealogy, both figuratively and in actuality. We see also, in the case of al-Mutanabbī, that even when legally free and legitimate, one may have been unable to escape certain genealogically- and racially-grounded stigmas.

but this is compounded by the analogous truth that dominance is exerted to the effect of controlling the production of life. In murdering them immediately after consummation, he forecloses on the potential for further generation or miscegenation. In so doing, Shahriyār proscribes a vague or indistinct expression of blackness not unlike those shadowy forms that beleaguer his younger sibling. A similar set of anxieties around errant or hidden blackness manifesting through miscegenation, illegitimate birth, somatic atavism, or inexplicable happenstance plagues *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*'s 'Abd al-Wahhāb from his earliest days.

Conclusion: Popular Texts, Common Concerns

The *Nights* are a fitting text with which to close this section because, with respect to form and reception, they most closely mirror the *siyar sha'biyya* themselves. Their peripatetic trajectory across both oral and written modes of transmission and several centuries' worth of widely geographically distributed popular audiences is paralleled by the *siyar*, with a signal difference being that the *Nights* have captivated global imagination while the *siyar* remain more provincialized in their readership. At times, their content is so related as to overlap, albeit due to apparent interpolation; the adventures of 'Umar b. al-Nu'mān appear both in the *1001 Nights* and in the Melitenian cycle of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*.²⁰² These popular literatures share *dramatis personae* in a more abstract sense as well, with each set of texts featuring many more underclass and peripheral persons than most: Armenians, Kurds, Christian preachers, black slaves, impoverished dervishes, and so on inhabit a social space that is simultaneously divergent from and conjoined with that of al-Jāhiz's flush misers or al-Tanūkhī's elite *nudamā'*, and their stories are more visible in popular literature than in mannered, courtly works. The two genres share a thematic similarity in their representations of blackness as well, for although the troubling

²⁰² Marius Canard, "Dhū'l-Himma," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

depiction of black slaves in the frame tale of the *Nights* ostensibly runs counter to the laudatory representations of black heroics exhibited in *sīra* literature the two are ineluctably linked: the detested dalliances between Arab women and black men that catalyze the *Nights* are chased, inevitably, by the anxieties attending such unions' reproductive repercussions. Likewise, in the *siyar*, much narrative tumult ensues from the birth of black progeny to unsuspecting white parents.

As shown above, the main source of turmoil embedded in the frame tale is that of the desirability of black men operating in tandem with the prospect of (white) Arab female sexual autonomy, and these fears merge with an attenuated but nonetheless present fear of the genealogically and racially ambiguous progeny of such relationships. While it is often asserted that the *Nights* serve to render explicit taboos, fears, or narratives of factions of medieval Islamic societies that are otherwise suppressed in literature, the frame tale balances the explicit with the implicit, or the attenuated with the exaggerated. Thus, we see that not only does Shahriyār fail to declaratively carry the fear of his harem's reproductive capacity to its logical conclusion—electing instead to deal with the problem through silence and hasty action under cloak of his absolute authority—but the narrative of Shāh zamān discovering his wife in her adulterous state is couched in a blackness that is at once enveloping and ill-defined. I have related the shadow-world of Shāh zamān's vignette to the Africanist presence in Toni Morrison's conception because I, along with Ferial Ghazoul, believe it is possible to read a fear of black people into the fearsome black presences that haunt Shāh zamān. This may be read as a direct inversion of the *tafsīr* tradition of reading the denizens of hell as black-bodied, in that this fear of black bodies is metonymically linked with a fear of the all-encompassing blackness of hell itself. Both cases, though, demonstrate a literary precedent for forging a conceptual link between epidermal/racial

blackness and chromatic or metaphoric blackness writ large. This semiotic transposition of abstract and concrete, human blackness is evidenced also in the *siyar*, particularly in the birth of Abū Zayd al-Hilālī in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, the symbolic harbinger of which is a crow, as shall be explored in chapter two. Likewise, the black blood of Fāṭima’s menses transmutes to form the black exterior of her son, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, as shall be seen in chapter three. However, as I shall argue throughout this dissertation, the racialized phobias and extremes of racist rendering present in the *Nights* are quite unlike the uses to which racial language and representations are put in the *sīras*, and especially in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*.

Summary

Using close readings of a set of emblematic and much-discussed texts, I have endeavored above to provide a broad view of certain tropes and themes that coalesce around both chromatic blackness and black persons in early Arabic literature, identifying the points of origin or exemplary manifestations thereof. I found that there is a precedent, though heavily limned and limited, for reading epidermal blackness as negative based on Qur’ānic eschatological discourse. Chromatic blackness is also more generally encoded into images of hell, which is portrayed as a place where “blackened” people are enrobed in black clothing and shrouded in a darkness in which there is no comfort. However, when later sources adduce blackness as a divinely-ordained deformity (*maskh*), they tend to do so with reference not to a Qur’ānic principle but to an apocryphal one—namely, the curse of Ḥām that alleges that Noah’s son and his issue were turned black due to his misdeeds. It is against this notion of blackness as accursed and unnatural that the rationalistic climatological theory of racial etiology—evinced by the likes of al-Jāḥiẓ—militates; it is worth noting that despite this theory’s sinister elaboration by later figures such as Ibn Khaldūn, who reads climate as affecting both physiognomy and intellectual faculties and

thus engendering “natural slaves,” the climatological theory of racial determination may have originally been perceived as a sober rationalist’s corrective to the folkloric accounts of Ḥam’s curse.²⁰³

Based on my reading of the Qur’ān, I also advocate interpreting the chromatically-grounded means of discussing races in terms of blackness, redness, and whiteness that is common to Arabic-language materials in terms of a continuum, which I have dubbed a “brown-scale,” with the “red” races positioned between the black and the white. Furthermore, I find that exegetes—as with Muqātil b. Sulaymān’s discussion of Bilāl—expound the Qur’ān’s passages advocating trans-racial and trans-tribal tolerance in ways that may strategically benefit certain communities that were particularly disenfranchised or with whom Arab Muslims were in tension at their time of writing.

Though his intentions are difficult to pin down, I assert that al-Jāhīz points towards certain attitudes about black people in his treatise *Fakhr al-Sūdān ‘alā-l-Bīdān* that were likely common to his era, the most obvious being an overarching focus on the black body as a locus of anxiety and desire, an instrument of labor, militarism, and reproduction, and a useful commodity. Moreover, al-Jāhīz’s work, when read in conjunction with the works of other *udabā’*, discloses a gendering of the racial stereotypes and prejudices that affected black people in his *milieu*: though black people are seemingly categorically hypersexualized, black female sexual excesses are positively connoted, while those of males are negatively represented. This, I argue, is a logical corollary to Islamic practices of slavery, wherein women were available to men as concubines while the reverse was untrue. Stereotypes that suggest black male sexuality is dangerous and

²⁰³ Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott, eds., *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), xiv.

must be externally controlled serve to legitimate the social mechanisms of that control and to render desire for black men taboo.

I close with an exploration of what this taboo looks like when taken to its literary extreme in the form of the frame tale of the *1001 Nights*. Here, we see a few major developments: where in the other sources a literal blackness may represent a sinister, symbolic “darkness”—as with the darkness of the souls of the damned in the Qur’ān being indicated through their black faces—blackness in the abstract is used in the *Nights* to represent actual black-skinned people. This is particularly clear in the symbolism of the shadow-world of Shahzaman, from which the reader may infer that his wife committed adultery with a black slave. Moreover, in the *Nights* the reproductive concerns raised by errant black sexuality are brought to the fore, with Shahriyar’s solution to his wife’s perfidy being not only death but also foreclosure on the production of new life. I read this section of the *Nights* as expressing anxiety over the potential for miscegenation.

Above, black figures in Arabic literature are symbolically linked with a panoply of other phenomena: damnation, commodification, slavery, labor, violence, martial prowess, sex, consumption, and so on. Though hardly monolithic, there are clearly identifiable substantive nodes amidst the various literary renderings of blackness, in which certain literary tropes correspond with or capture social realities, scientific and philosophical notions, and historical events in such a way as to deepen their signifying power and further enmesh them with their referent. These motifs are the fundamentals of an economy of archetypes and stereotypes through which race may be literarily constructed. As the following chapters shall demonstrate, though the *sīras* at times typify these forms of intertextuality and literary conventionalism around blackness and race, they also take great creative liberties and predicate their representations of black people on a great diversity of social assumptions and aims.

Origin Stories of the Black-Arab Hero

Every universe, our own included, begins in conversation. Every golem in the history of the world [...] was summoned into existence through language, through murmuring, recital, and kabbalistic chitchat—was, literally, talked into life. —Michael Chabon²⁰⁴

*If she gives birth to a son and he is dark-skinned,
Think it not an evil act, O good one,
You see, her grandmother was black of color,
And her grandfather black like slaves —Sīrat Banī Hilāl²⁰⁵*

A storied triad of heroes in the early *siyar sha‘biyya* are either black-skinned or of Afro-Arab heritage—‘Antar, Abū Zayd al-Hilālī, and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. The latter two figures exhibit the phenomenon of “spontaneous,” non-hereditary blackness, being born black to Arab parents who explicitly self-designate as being white-skinned (*abyad*); in both cases, a tangle of questions and theories is spawned around the child’s mysteriously derived features: did his mother commit adultery? Did his father fantasize about a black woman during conception? Is there a distant, forgotten black ancestor whose traits were dormant until now? Is his parents’ skin really as fair and blemish-free as it seems—or does it carry some transferrable, amplifiable impurity? In this fashion, our heroes are made to experience literal and figurative trials of identity from birth, and moreover—because of the negative, slavish associations that accrue to black people in their *milieu*—they are racialized from early infancy as socially inferior despite being born into elite tribal families, or, in the case of Abū Zayd, even being born to a *sharīfa*, a female descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad. This chapter will offer an analysis of these heroes’ conception narratives, with an overarching comparative focus on the tales of Abū Zayd and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. I argue that these two non-hereditarily black characters cannot be read as mere avatars of ‘Antar, a hereditarily black *sīra* protagonist with pre-Islamic roots. Rather, having come into existence through an obscure process that is puzzled out before the readers’ eyes, these heroes’

²⁰⁴ Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (New York: Random House, 2012), 119.

²⁰⁵ *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-Thaqāfiyya, 1980), 38.

initial moments of “construction” as protagonists become useful points of reference for parsing how race—or more specifically, blackness—is made to “happen” in pre-modern Arabic literature.

Unlike *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, which has lived much of its life since the 20th century as a text rather than a performed narrative—a major print version having seemingly only been produced in the early 20th century in Cairo (and subsequently edited for reprint in the 1980s in Lebanon)—*Sīrat Banī Hilāl* has enjoyed a longer trajectory as a semi-extemporized, oral composition, engendering a comparatively large body of extant versions. Therefore, while I exclusively use the Cairo edition of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* in this chapter, I pull together a variety of iterations of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, allowing us to see in microcosm the way that Abū Zayd’s birth narrative, and thus his racialization, morphs and flexes in different compositional and cultural contexts. Among the several versions of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* surveyed below are a number of transcribed recitations from the Egyptian cities of Luxor and Bakātūsh, some of which have been made into chapbooks and others of which have been incorporated into academic archives or monographs, and a printed edition from Beirut produced in the late 20th century. As shall be discussed below, the birth of the hero constitutes a major plot point across the *sīras*; often, the hero’s birth is foreshadowed by dreams and visions had by his parents. According to Nabīla Ibrāhīm, this prognosis serves to “make the significant role that the son will play apparent to the father or mother. And in answer to this prophecy, the child is alienated from the very moment of his birth.”²⁰⁶ In the cases of Abū Zayd and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, the abnormality signaled by such premonitions is either compounded or supplanted by the color-based alterity that the heroes experience from their first moments of life.

²⁰⁶ Nabīla Ibrāhīm, *Ashkāl al-Ta‘bīr fī-l-Adab al-Sha‘bī* (Cairo: Dār Nahḍat Miṣr, 1966), 129.

Amid the various editions of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, two patterns emerge in expounding on the ostensible racial difference between Abū Zayd and his Arab family; the majority of texts depict his mother, Khaḍrāʾ, desperately supplicating God after years of being unable to conceive a male child when, after seeing a fearsome black crow, she prays that her son might likewise grow to be black and strong. Sometimes, this wish takes on the air of prophecy, while in other cases it is represented as part of a formulaic fertility ritual performed among the women of her village. Some versions of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, though, further embellish the range of prospects behind Abū Zayd's blackness through reference to the possible reemergence of traits imparted by Khaḍrāʾs black ancestry, two or more generations removed, as in the epigram above. Meanwhile, in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, after a lengthy paternity suit adjudicating his legitimacy, it is ultimately determined that 'Abd al-Wahhāb's coloration is the result of his father, al-Ḥārith, having copulated with his mother, Fāṭima, during her menses: the "black" color of her menstrual discharge mixed with the embryogenic *nutfā* (sperm-drop), darkening it.

Non- or quasi-hereditary black births such as these are attested not only in the *sīras* but also across a variety of earlier belletristic (*adab*) sources spanning anthological, medical-scientific, and exegetical genres. Examining this network of companion texts with the *siyar* at the center, I argue that representations of these aberrant birth scenarios indicate the concurrent development of a set of racist theories—that is, theories that seek to itemize and hierarchize types of racial diversity—in Arabic scholarship and literature of the early medieval period. These theories evolved in addition to the prevalent climatological explanation of race, which adduced humoristic factors such as heat and wetness in a given location as giving rise to racial differentiation (sub-Saharan Africa, being hot and dry, blackens its inhabitants and curls their hair). These theories also diverge in their epistemic preoccupations from occult explanations for

racial differentiation found in popular prophetology, which in the Islamic tradition typically traces the etiology of race to a curse on Noah's son, Ham. Instead, the atavistic justification for Abū Zayd's appearance and the variety of racialist theories applied to 'Abd al-Wahhāb's condition suggest an array of thoughts on the nature of racial difference that persisted at the time of these texts' compositions. In the *sīras*, this plurality of notions of racial construction coexists in the same *milieu*, and even in the same text, free of any implied dissonance. That is, the multiple, scientific theories of race-making found in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* coincide with frequent allusions to the unpredictability of divine intervention, and in some editions of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, the more mystical and oft-occurring explanation of the hero's non-hereditary blackness is buttressed—rather than contravened—by a reference to the possibility of racial atavism. As such, instead of presenting the audience with a fixed idea of what makes racial differences occur, these texts offer a conversation around the topic—a discourse through which our black heroes are “talked into life” like Chabon's golems. In examining the parameters of this discourse, I assess the quality and limits of racial imagination within the texts themselves as well as trace the authoritative intertexts on which the *sīras* relied for racial knowledge.

Two main assumptions are common throughout this discourse: first, that whiteness or fairness—inasmuch as they regarded themselves, and therefore the default skin-tone, as white or fair—is unadulterated and ideal, whereas blackness is a product of miscegenation, contamination, or acclimatization; and second, that female reproductive biology and sexuality forms the domain in which racially determining events occur. To briefly expand on the Arab self-conception of whiteness as it appears in the *sīra* and the other texts explored below, it bears remarking that according to Bernard Lewis, in the pre- and early-Islamic context, Arabs viewed certain neighboring ethnic groups, such as the Persians, as being different gradations of “red,”

though on a single spectrum, on which the Arabs themselves fell.²⁰⁷ Over time, this “redness” becomes “whiteness,” and some argue that this shift is due to interpolations of the rhetoric of the sublime, which comes to liken all that is light and glowing to goodness, while others argue that it is because of a shifting emphasis away from complexion and towards more politicized categories of “race” that encouraged description through distinct criteria rather than continua.²⁰⁸

By the time of the compilation of the *sīras*, Arabs were seemingly secure in their self-identification using terms related to “whiteness,” such as the moniker *bīdān* (as used in al-Jāḥiẓ’s treatise, discussed in the prior chapter), and expressing the quality of whiteness in prized, reverential terms in genres such as love lyric; in *Sīrat ‘Antar*, for example, ‘Abla, ‘Antar’s beloved, is immediately elegized as “the white one” (*bayḍā’*) when ‘Antar first catches sight of her.²⁰⁹ Moreover, Arab identity in the *sīra* is typically presented as a category that, by virtue of Arab hegemony in the region and its narratives, begins to assume all of the qualities that are, in post-colonial critique, said to inhere in “whiteness,” most notably its status as the default identity, it’s “worldliness,²¹⁰” and the systematic aesthetic abnegation of other physical differences in favor of seeking normalization and affinity on what Frantz Fanon termed the racial-epidermal plane.²¹¹ This last aspect emerges strikingly in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, wherein ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s resemblance to his father in build and features does nothing to sway his father to see himself in his son, for he cannot get past the dissimilitude of his blackness.

²⁰⁷ Lewis, Bernard. *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. *passim*

²⁰⁸ *ibid.* 35-36, see also: Bartlett, Robert. “Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race.” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*. Vol 31, No. 1, Winter 2001. 39-56

²⁰⁹ *Sīrat ‘Antara b. Shaddād* vol. 1 (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Būlāq, 1886), 148.

²¹⁰ Here, I am invoking Sarah Ahmed’s characterization of whiteness as “worldly.” She writes, “Whiteness is the very ‘what’ that coheres as a world,” meaning that whiteness is, like any ubiquitous feature of the world, is an invisible and constant presence. As such, it is not made the object of a gaze, but rather constitutes the blinders that train the gaze towards the non-white, the other, and by Ahmed’s definition, the unworldly. Sara Ahmed. “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* 8 (2007): 150.

²¹¹ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), *passim*.

I therefore conclude that the racialist theories applied in affirming Abū Zayd’s and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s legitimacy all express a common anxiety less about the black body proper than about the female body as a locus in which blackness can be—often unknowingly or against one’s will—implanted and incubated. The violability of a woman’s body, be it through penetration by a man, chemical contamination, or divine determination, is central to how racial boundaries and their trespass are represented in these texts. Although these multifarious methods of implantation are largely scientifically rationalized, they bolster an irrational premise—namely, the possibility of offspring that is neither illegitimate nor, ostensibly, hereditarily related to its parents; one precarious body produces another. We might read these concerns about the maternal body’s liability in editing, undermining, or producing race as paradoxically supportive of and disruptive to “racial naturalism,” defined by Adam Hochman as, “the view that humans can be divided into subspecies, and that ‘race’ is therefore a valid scientific category,” in that while race is interpreted as dependent on maternal biology and therefore as a quality subject to rigorous, scientific inquiry, this biology operates not necessarily to create cleanly divided subspecies, but rather to at times jarringly interpenetrate them with one another, often to the effect of generating anxiety, surprise, and confusion.²¹²

Race and Its Significance to the Current Study

With respect to studies of race in the pre-modern era, Geraldine Heng states that research has focused overmuch on representing race as a set of “biological or somatic features [...] selectively moralized” to effect social control, rather than envisioning race as itself a “structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences.”²¹³ In view of this

²¹² Adam Hochman, “Against the New Racial Naturalism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 110 (2013): 3.

²¹³ Geraldine Heng, “The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages I: Race Studies, Modernity, and the Middle Ages,” *Literature Compass* 8/5 (2011), 262.

critique, I present two correctives for reading race in pre-modern Arabic texts. First, I analyze a kinetic moment of *racing*, wherein the *sīra* heroes' blackness is being created and actively incorporated into the power structures of the text. Second, I aim to widen the scope of our understanding of the biological features and processes that were of utility to medieval Arab thinkers and popular narrators alike with respect to constructing race, thus displacing the scientific aspect of racial thought from its perceived high cultural purview.

Not only does the racialization of the black heroes in the *siyar* complicate prevailing notions about how race was understood in the pre-modern Arabo-Muslim world, but it also contributes insights about how concepts of race traverse broader periods and regions. In Western scholarship, perhaps the most common litmus test for determining whether racial logic is “modern” in character is the question of whether a scientific apparatus has been mobilized to classify and justify its operations; by contrast, other, earlier “racisms,” by dint of being less robustly supported by a secular, intellectual regime, are often viewed as less systemic and systematic. Some, such as Paul Gilroy in his book, *The Black Atlantic*, caution that the term “race” did not acquire conceptual distinctness from “culture” until “the consolidation of scientific racism in the nineteenth century,” though he adds that it is nonetheless important to appreciate that even then, “scientists did not monopolise either the image of the black or the emergent concept of biologically based racial difference.”²¹⁴ Philip D. Curtin, in his work on British-African relations from the 18th through 19th centuries, puts the difference between scientific and what we might call “pre-scientific” racisms in stark terms:

Some people, perhaps most people, have been conscious of their own racial type. Some have assumed that they were a ‘chosen people,’ especially favored by God. Some have assumed that they, and they alone, were human. Most have preferred their own type as the esthetic standard of human beauty. Most have assumed that

²¹⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 8.

people of their own type were physically or mentally or culturally superior to other races. Any of these views may be labelled 'racism' of some variety, but they need to be kept separate from the full-blown pseudo-scientific racism which dominated so much of European thought between the 1840's and the 1940's. The difference lay in the fact that 'science,' the body of knowledge rationally derived from empirical observation, then supported the proposition that race was one of the principal determinants of attitudes, endowments, capabilities, and inherent tendencies among human beings. Race thus seemed to determine the course of human history.²¹⁵

Michel Foucault likewise places a particularly fine, temporal point on when and in what way scientific, biologically-based racism begins, regarding its deployment as an intrinsic part of modern statecraft,

Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, the thematic of blood was sometimes called on to lend its entire historical weight toward revitalizing the type of political power that was exercised through the devices of sexuality. Racism took shape at this point (racism in its modern, "biologizing," statist form): it was then that a whole politics of settlement, family, marriage, education, social hierarchization, and property, accompanied by a long series of permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, health, and everyday life, received their color and their justification [...]²¹⁶

In Curtin's view, as a scientific consensus grows around the behaviorally determinant nature of biological race, so too grows the conceptual centrality of race in social consciousness, to the point where it becomes a totalizing ideology explaining the "course of human history." In pre-modern societies, meanwhile, scholars have tended to adduce other social factors as being having greater significance than race in our ancestors' figuration of human history's trajectory, with religion prominent among them. And yet, much recent scholarship shows that like early-modern "races," pre-modern religious groups' essential differences were often reified not only through a theological idiom but also through a biological one. As such, though Heng asserts that religion is

²¹⁵ Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), 29.

²¹⁶ Michel Foucault, "Right of Death and Power Over Life," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 270.

“the paramount source of authority in the Middle Ages,” she notes that often this authority was politically projected to racializing effect, such that it “function[ed] both socioculturally *and* biopolitically.”²¹⁷ In view of discourses on Jewish blood and its peculiarities in medieval Spanish Christian writings, David Nirenberg cautions that “we pre-modernists too often rely on the questionable axiom that modern racial theories depend upon evolutionary biology and genetics, in order to leap to the demonstrably false conclusion that there exists a truly biological modern racism against which earlier forms of discrimination can be measured and judged innocent.”²¹⁸ Nirenberg’s characterization of medievalists’ interpretation of modern racism as stemming from a “questionable axiom” is undergirded, in his view, by a misreading of the racial logic present in the writings of nominally Enlightenment-era thinkers such as Kant, which hinged not on the novel and secular sciences for which that era is famed, but rather on a set of scientific principles inherited from antiquity; in actuality, Kant’s depiction of racial difference is grounded in considerations of the climate and humors that date back to Aristotle and not, say, phylogeny or genetics.

Overall, it seems that if modern interpretations of race and racial difference have been formulated and justified as “scientific” constructs of any stripe in order to underwrite these constructs’ use as tools of social control, this should be understood as a discursive technique that is continuous with rather than distinct from trends in pre-modernity. This means that we can speak of “race” as a conceptually discrete and putatively rigorous method of describing human difference even in the pre-modern period that, as is the case now, often acquired salience through

²¹⁷ Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 27.

²¹⁸ David Nirenberg, “Was there race before modernity? The example of ‘Jewish’ blood in late medieval Spain,” in *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 236.

other types of difference to which a racial hermeneutic was applied as a means of sharpening, magnifying, or institutionalizing social divisions. The Islamic world shared in antiquity's intellectual inheritance no less than Europe, and though certain nuances of interpretation vary across time and place, the scientific rationalization of phenotypic difference offered in the likes of Aristotle's works of natural history or Polemon's physiognomic treatises is quite present in much medieval Arabo-Islamic literature.²¹⁹ Moreover, the precedent set by these works of employing biological rhetoric when discussing race extends even into popular works such as the *siyar*, implying that at the very least such structures of argumentation were widely known; in the case of 'Abd al-Wahhāb's birth narrative, they are put to particularly creative use. In outlining a set of racial-scientific theories and speculative discourses that are present in Arabic popular literature, I lend support not only to the growing number of accounts of biological racialization's pre-modern roots, but also provide a view of one of its many non-European manifestations.²²⁰ In displacing biological racialization from a modern, European context, this chapter also opens up a conversation on the mutable ethical implications of scientific approaches to racial difference,

²¹⁹ Robert Hoyland argues that, aside from translations of treatises from Greek into Arabic (with Polemon's being the among the first and most widely disseminated), the closest "indigenous" analogue to physiognomic sciences in the Arab world was *qifāya*, or the study of traces of animal tracks in hunting, as well as the scrutiny of human physical traits to adjudicate paternity. See: Robert Hoyland, "Physiognomy in Islam," *JSAI* 30 (2005): 361-402.

²²⁰ I use the term "biological racialization" in the fashion elaborated in Brett St. Louis' essay, "Racialization in the 'Zone of Ambiguity,'" in which it is used in contrast both to a biologically "real" concept of race and socio-political processes of "racial formation" that elect to accept or reject the biological delimitations of a "race" as part of a larger social goal. St. Louis states, "If race is non-existent in any real biological sense then, for many commentators, it follows that racist ideas and practices must be prefaced by a productive process in which the imaginary racial category is made real." In many scenarios, the core of these constitutive processes is the classification and ascription of race to scientific, biological facts, that is, it is a "biological constitutive process." The climate-based theory of racial difference, used to explain differences in skin color in much of the ancient and medieval world, would therefore be one form of biological racialization in that it sets up a taxonomy and hierarchy of humankind using groupings established using a scientific precept that is widely accepted as a natural fact—that the world is divisible into various climes, each of which work differently upon the humors and thus produce different types of people. Brett St. Louis, "Racialization in the 'Zone of Ambiguity,'" in *Racialization: Studies in Theory and Practice*, eds. Karim Murji and John Solomos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 29-50.

which in contemporary discourse are—due largely to their application in Europe and the Americas in the 19th and 20th centuries—typically discussed in categorically negative terms.

As suggested in Nirenberg’s urging to disabuse ourselves of our sense of pre-modernity’s comparative racial “innocence,” the nefarious deployment of modern scientific racism at times conduces to the interpretation of all attempts to scientifically account for racial difference as inherently and even equally sinister. It is now generally accepted that there is no salient link between biology and race (variations amongst humans are far greater on an individual level than across a “racially” aggregated scheme), meaning that any but the most trivial biological explanations for groups’ racial qualities are, simply, incorrect and misleading. However, it does not follow that all wrong information is necessarily evil, and all scientific interrogations of ethno-racial differences do not inevitably produce or shore up “scientific racism.” Rather, some scholars have noted the ambivalence of scientific data that has become used over time to reify race and racism, finding that it is not so much the science itself but its uptake where the sinister implications are generated. In some cases, even early, flawed, “pseudo”-science has the potential to vindicate as much as to vilify, as with al-Jāhiz’s strategic deployment of the climatological theory of racial difference to contest the curse of Ham discussed in the previous chapter. A testament to the pluri-potentiality of such theories may be found in the work of Ibn Khaldūn some five centuries later, when he extends the logic of the climatological theory of race, concluding that not only are dark-skinned people altered externally by the high heat of their territories, but that these harsh conditions also unbalance their humors and warp their minds.²²¹

The ambivalence of scientific theories around race and race-making can persist even under highly racially exploitative conditions; Rana Hogarth has argued that though the medical

²²¹ Paul Hardy, “Medieval Muslim Philosophers on Race,” in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, ed. Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Scott (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 50.

establishment in the western Atlantic world in the era of plantation slavery often drew incorrect and specious conclusions about the medical particularities of black bodies, the development of this corpus of knowledge was “facilitated by slavery,” but not necessarily “created to sustain it.”²²² As such, the entrenched medical fiction of black immunity to yellow fever can be seen operating ambivalently in a like fashion to the climatological theory, with abolitionists using it to assert that immune blacks are well-positioned to aid ailing whites and thus affirm their own dignity and social value, and anti-abolitionists averring that immunity makes blacks fitter laborers and therefore justifies their ongoing enslavement. As shall be examined in the third chapter, in the patriarchal world of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, though ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s dark complexion is ultimately explained as resulting from the taboo act of sex with a menstruant—which viscerally associates his epidermal blackness with a feminine-gendered, ritually impure bodily substance—this conclusion actually exonerates his mother of adultery and affirms the hero’s legitimate birth. In the hierarchical realm of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* in which the appearance of being freeborn and legitimate looms large, Abū Zayd’s seemingly incriminating blackness is literally the answer to a prayer, and the scientific explanation furnished by his mother’s possible black ancestry corroborates not only Abū Zayd’s blackness but also the fact that there are black people who are *sharīfs*, or in the bloodline of the Prophet Muḥammad. Biological racialization can thus be said to be subject to multiple, context-dependent social and political currents rather than feeding directly into a single, unequivocally racist *telos*. In view of this, I read the racialization of the *sīra* heroes as also exhibiting the ambivalence of the racial etiologies adduced in their birth narratives, and analyze the variant potential trajectories set in motion by each of them.

²²² Rana Hogarth, *Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Difference in the Atlantic World, 1780-1840* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2017): 45.

Despite appearances, this section of the dissertation is perhaps best conceived of as one “chapter” in two “parts.” I begin this part with a sort of “control” study that opens with a discussion of various birth tropes in the *siyar* and then offers a reading of the birth story of ‘Antar, the prototypical and hereditarily half-black, half-Arab hero. I argue that despite ‘Antar’s biologically normative origins, one can already discern a number of tropes about the miraculous and mysterious constitution of heroic figures in the narration of his birth. I then present the birth story of Abū Zayd al-Hilālī, which culls from the several versions of the text mentioned above and from the recent work of Dwight Reynolds and Susan Slyomovics on the topic.²²³ In part two, I will pick up where I left off, offering an analysis of the most theoretically complex and lengthy of these birth narratives, that of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. In each case, I raise comparative materials from the aforementioned network of *adab* and popular works to the reader’s attention where their themes coincide with the itinerary of the *sīra* narratives, which I follow chronologically rather than thematically. As I do with *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* here, I will address variants on ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s birth narratives in manuscript and print in the second part.

Birth Tropes in the *Sīras*

Typologizing birth tropes that frequently occur in the popular *sīras* has been the subject of a few studies, mostly in Arabic. Among the most thorough of these, to my knowledge, is Nabīla Ibrāhīm’s *Ashkāl al-Ta‘bīr fī-l-Adab al-Sha‘bī (Modes of Expression in Popular Literature)*, which, in addition to devoting a large portion of its contents to the *sīras*, incorporates comparative material from the Homeric epics, classical romances, and German folktales and is theoretically framed by the work of Freud and Otto Rank on literary archetypes.²²⁴ Aḥmad

²²³ Dwight Reynolds, “Abū Zayd al-Hilālī: Trickster, Womanizer, Warrior, Shaykh,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 49 (2018): 78-103; Susan Slyomovics, “Praise of the Prophet and Praise of the Self: *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* and Epic Narrative in Performance,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 49 (2018): 50-77.

²²⁴ Nabīla Ibrāhīm, *Ashkāl al-Ta‘bīr fī-l-Adab al-Sha‘bī* (Cairo: Dār Nahḍat Miṣr, 1966), *passim*.

Shams al-Dīn al-Ḥajjājī has devoted an entire monograph to the topic of heroes' births in the form of his book, *Mawlid al-Baṭal fī-l-Sīra al-Sha'biyya* (*The Birth of the Hero in the Popular Sīra*).²²⁵

Ibrāhīm notes that the birth narratives of popular heroes across most literatures are amongst the most striking and recurrent text elements that one comes across, and that a hero is invariably one who is “born strangely, as though life in its entirety is rejecting him.”²²⁶ The preponderance of Ibrāhīm's examples in her text attest to the estrangement, either through death or through parental rejection, of the hero from his or her biological family, at times due to a violent or forceful repelling. Often, the relationship between a hero's father and the hero is far more complicated and corrosive than between the hero and his or her mother, and this dynamic sometimes bleeds over into a hero's relationship with a stepfather. Such is the case of Junduba in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, whose father dies before he is born and who is integrated into another tribe, only for his stepfather to grow worried that he will become a usurper and drive him away.²²⁷ These periods of estrangement later occasion a disclosure of identity and a return of the hero to his or her roots. The hero's destiny is often foreordained, either by a dream or prophecy, and as a testament to this Ibrāhīm adduces the case of Rabāb, Junduba's mother, in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*; she dreams of flames coming out of her womb, or vagina (*farj*) and consuming a whole village before birthing her heroic, conquest-bound child.²²⁸ All of these moments of isolation and premonitions of strangeness ultimately place the hero on an itinerary of introspection and self-discovery. Though Ibrāhīm finds that one can have multiple interpretations of the psychology

²²⁵ Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn al-Ḥajjājī, *Mawlid al-Baṭal fī-l-Sīra al-Sha'biyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1991).

²²⁶ Nabīla Ibrāhīm, *Ashkāl al-Ta'bīr al-Adab al-Sha'bī* (Cairo: al-Dār Naḥḍat Miṣr, 1966), 125.

²²⁷ *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, I:21-22.

²²⁸ Ibrāhīm, *Ashkāl al-Ta'bīr*, 128; Cf. *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* I:5.

behind a hero's birth story, the narratives nonetheless all have a common origin in what she terms *al-shu'ūr al-jam'ī* (collective conscious).²²⁹

Al-Ḥajjājī takes a more clinical approach, dividing the heroes' experiences of birth and early childhood into a set of major themes including prophecy or preternatural ability (*al-nubū'aw qadar al-baṭal*), exile and emigration (*al-ghurba wa-l-ightirāb*), and identification and recognition (*al-ta'arruf wa-l-i'tirāf*).²³⁰ For each, al-Ḥajjājī adduces pertinent examples from a number of *siyar* such as *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, *Sīrat al-Muhalhil*, and *Sīrat al-Amīr Ḥamza*. Though his study is too extensive to fully summarize here, it is worth noting the overlap in his and Nabīla Ibrāhīm's overviews of *sīra* birth tropes; the two concur on the importance of a hero's foreordination as such, his or her estrangement and travel away from a homeland or people, and the recognition and rediscovery this subsequently brokers. Though the birth narratives of the black heroes of the *sīra* are hardly anomalous—they follow all of these patterns quite closely—they differ from the rest in that each of these stages of the hero's lifetime is in some way conditioned upon his blackness or perceived slave-born status; the hero must not only prove his heroic identity once over to his parents, but multiple times over to society. According to Dwight Reynolds, these moments of proof contribute handily to audiences' delight in recitations of the tales,

Wherever Abū Zayd travels, he is often mistaken for a slave and treated disparagingly and even with contempt. His skin color is the subject of insults and jeers. Eventually, of course, the lowly black 'slave' is revealed to be in fact the famous hero, Abū Zayd, to cheers and laughter from audience members.²³¹

To use al-Ḥajjājī's typology, we might say that such figures carry their *ghurba* (sense of foreignness or exile) with them always from the moment of birth, rather than having to

²²⁹ *Ibid.* 137.

²³⁰ Al-Ḥajjājī, *Mawlid al-Baṭal*, *passim*.

²³¹ Reynolds, "Abū Zayd al-Hilālī," 89.

experience it through geographic remove, making them part of a subset of heroes who are different and estranged on multiple registers.

Strange Attractions: The Birth of ‘Antar

Though ‘Antar’s birth is not presaged by dreams or visions, it is nonetheless foreshadowed in a number of 19th- and 20th-century print versions by a series of linked, priming prefaces that are drawn from events of either genealogical or geopolitical significance: the early life of the Prophet Ibrāhīm and his contest against the pagan king Nimrūd, the proliferation throughout the Yemen of Ibrāhīm’s son Isma‘īl’s distant offspring, the sons of Nizār b. Ma‘add, and the war of Basūs, all of which culminate with the rise to prominence of the tribe of ‘Abs, into which ‘Antar is born.²³² Early in the course of this series of stories, the audience encounters a set of births whose circumstances defy the workings of the natural world: Ibrāhīm is born into a world tyrannized by the hulking, black-skinned king Nimrūd (directly descended from Ḥam’s son, Canaan), who fancies himself a god. After receiving revelation from God warning him that a prophet shall arise amongst those close to him to undermine his rule unless he changes his ways, Nimrūd slaughters his only son, Kūsh, and forbids anyone in his kingdom to have sexual intercourse with their wives except during their menses, on the idea that this will prevent any pregnancies. Meanwhile, the menopausal wife of Nimrūd’s favored advisor, Āzar, suddenly begins to menstruate again for the first time in years, and Āzar returns home one day to find that “her beauty and splendor and youth had returned to her, even better than it had been in the first place.”²³³ Following God’s will, Āzar impregnates his wife—at which moment all the idols in

²³² These linked stories occupy approximately the first 100 pages of the Būlāq edition of *Sīrat ‘Antar*, which is the edition used throughout this chapter. For a summary of the prefacing stories in *Sīrat ‘Antar* (as they appear in a 1961 Cairo edition of the text), see: Peter Heath, *The Thirsty Sword: Sīrat ‘Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996), 168-172. Cf. *Sīrat ‘Antara b. Shaddād*, 1-100.

²³³ *Sīrat ‘Antara b. Shaddād*, 26.

the land prostrate themselves and the birds and beasts erupt into uproarious merrymaking, much to the consternation of Nimrūd’s soothsayers and astrologers—and the prophet Ibrāhīm is born, secreted away from Nimrūd by an angel who spirits his mother off during labor.²³⁴ From an unusually young age, Ibrāhīm is able to speak in a way that bears no trace of childishness, and he uses this power to dispense both divine revelation and pieces of his own, inborn wisdom. For the sake of Ibrāhīm’s safety, his existence is kept secret from Āzar for a time, and in early infancy he is raised by the angel Jibrīl. That is, not only is Ibrāhīm born under supernatural conditions and thus rendered distinct from other human beings in his origins, but he is also physically separated from his kin at birth, mirroring the duplicate alienation that Nabīla Ibrāhīm considers innate to the folk hero’s birth narrative, wherein his difference is preordained and then reified through lived experience after parturition.

The pattern of father-child separation discussed above also reappears after Ibrāhīm has conceived Ismā‘īl with Hājar, a “Coptic slave-woman [...] of beauty and humility, stature and good proportions, and abounding intellect,” who had been gifted to Sarah by the king of Egypt. When Ibrāhīm takes her as a concubine and she conceives, Ibrāhīm implores Sarah to let Hājar into their home, whereupon,

فقال لسيدينا إبراهيم عليه السلام اني لا أحب أن تكون معي هاجر في هذه الدار فحولها عنى حيث شئت
فأوحى الله سبحانه وتعالى له بأن يحولها الى البيت العتيق وجرى له باليراق فحمل هاجر وسيدينا إسماعيل
عليه السلام ووضعهما بجانب البيت

[Sarah] said to our master Ibrāhīm, peace be upon him, ‘I do not want Hājar to be with me in this household, so turn her away from me as I’ve willed.’ Then God, may He be praised and exalted, revealed to [Ibrāhīm] that He would send her to the Bayt al-‘Atīq²³⁵ and brought forth Burāq. He carried Hājar and our master, Ismā‘īl, peace be upon him, and placed them next to the house [...] ²³⁶

²³⁴ *Ibid.* 29.

²³⁵ The Bayt al-‘Atīq, or Ancient House, is another name for the Ka‘ba. Cf. Q 22:29, Q 22:33.

²³⁶ *Ibid.* 81

Here, Ibrāhīm knows the whereabouts of his son, but he is nonetheless kept at a great physical remove. Until the birth of our hero, ‘Antar, the subsequent generations proceed in a conventional fashion. ‘Antar’s birth and early life emulates several elements of his prophetic forefathers’ narratives: he is the product of an unconventional or improbable match, he is separated from his father (though this time by the vicissitudes of social station rather than geography), and in early childhood he exhibits a range of unique abilities.

Parallels between the biographies of prophets and those of heroes is evident throughout the *siyar*, and in her work on *Sīrat Sayf b. Dhī Yazan*, Helen Blatherwick has formulated a threefold typology under which references to the prophets in popular lore may be classified: cameos in intra-diegetic, moral tales told amongst the protagonists of the text, attribution as the former owners of heirlooms or relics acquired by the protagonists (which Blatherwick reads as a form of *waṣīyya*, or prophetic inheritance), and finally, oblique reference through “a variety of tale patterns, themes, and motifs which, however common, have their most universally recognised Semitic incarnation in the legends of the prophets.”²³⁷ While Blatherwick reads the influence of the prophets on the characterization of popular heroes as operating unilaterally, Khalid Sindawi demonstrates the co-extensiveness between the images of classical heroes and those of prophetic or saintly figures in his study of *maqātil* (martyrological) literature and depictions of Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī, identifying the work of hagiographers as “shap[ing] and embellishing their heroes and impart[ing] to them superior qualities,” and sectioning off “heroic deeds and working of miracles” as a common feature with which saintly characters are imbued.²³⁸ He argues that the ideal saint or prophet is, in much Islamic hagiographical literature,

²³⁷ Helen Blatherwick, *Prophets, Gods, and Kings in Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan: An Intertextual Reading of an Egyptian Epic* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 67.

²³⁸ Khalid Sindawi, “The Image of Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī in ‘Maqātil’ Literature,” *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 20 (2002/3): 80.

also a warrior for the faith. We may perhaps understand ‘Antar’s narrative as also being bound up with Ibrāhīm’s and Isma‘īl’s in a mutually reinforcing fashion: in having these prophets open a piece of heroic literature, they acquire significance not only as carriers of God’s message but as the progenitors of earthly, heroic legacies, while the qualities of the hero himself are elevated through proximity to his prophetic predecessors. This association between ‘Antar and the pre-Islamic prophets is unique among the three figures we examine below, and is perhaps a maneuver designed to legitimate ‘Antar’s association with moral rectitude despite his being a pre-Islamic figure, as is the case with the pre-Islamic Yemeni *sīra* hero Sayf b. Dhī Yazan’s association with Noahic tradition. That is, if a “prophetic intertext” forms part of Abū Zayd’s and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s makeup as characters, it is a far subtler feature than for ‘Antar, though there are certain events surrounding these heroes’ conceptions and early childhoods that echo features of stories of the prophets, as I discuss below.

Above, I note that ‘Antar’s birth narrative begins with an unexpected tryst. After a raid against another tribe, the Banū ‘Abs, of which ‘Antar’s father, Shaddād, is a leader, is encamped and its men are gazing out upon the spoils they had captured. Suddenly, someone catches Shaddād’s eye amongst their new camels:

فعد ذلك قد لاحت من الأمير شداد التفاته الى تلك الامة التي كانت تسوق النياق فحلت في قلبه
واحتوت على سرائره ولبه والى وصلها قد اشتاق وذلك لاجل ما رأى من نعومة أطرافها ولين اعطافها
وحسن لونها وغنج عيونها وسحر جفونها وميل قدها وسماحة وجهها ولميع خديتها وحلاوة لفظها وحسن
شكلها لها عيون احد من المنايا وبرق ثناياها المع من المرايا ومبسمها عذب وقوامها معتدل كما قال بعضهم
في وصفها حيث انه قال صلوا على سيدنا محمد ضامن الغزال

| | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| وما نظرت عيناك بيضا ولا حمرا | وفي السمر معنى لو عرفت بيانه |
| يعلمن هاروت الكهانة والسحرا | لياقة اعطاف وغنج لواظ |
| لما عرف العشاق يوما له قدرا | ولولا سواد الخال في خد ابيض |
| غاليا ولولا سواد الليل ما اطلع الفجرا | ولولا سواد المسك ما انباع غاليا |

في عين عاشقها عندما نظرا

ولولا سواد العين لما زها

Then, as he turned, the slave girl who had been driving the camels emerged into the prince Shaddād's view. She took hold in his heart, and bewitched his mind, and he longed to have her. He was betaken with the sight of the fullness of her limbs, the softness of her form, the beauty of her coloring, the coquettishness of her eyes, the enchantment of her eyelids, the curve of her shape, the kindness in her face, the splendor of her cheeks, the sweetness of her speech, and the comeliness of her figure. She had eyes sharper than fate, and the flash of her smile was more dazzling than a mirror. Her mouth was sweet and her posture straight. Some have said she looks like what has been spoken of [in other poetry].²³⁹ Praise upon our master Muḥammad, guarantor of the gazelle,
In darkness lies meaning, if you only knew its elucidation,
Surely you would pay no regard to either white or red
The shapeliness of [her] body and charm of [her] gazes
Could surely teach Hārūt divination and enchantment
For were it not for the blackness of a mole on a white cheek,
A lover would not know fate
And were it not for the blackness of musk, it would not sell at such expense
And were it not for the blackness of night, the dawn would not burst forth
And were it not for the blackness of [a beloved's] eye, it would not infatuate
The eye of her lover when he gazes into it²⁴⁰

The atypical nature of Shaddād's attraction to this dark-skinned slave girl (who, we are told initially, has beautiful coloring) is made apparent through the immediate leap to defense taken by the text; before even being explicitly told that his lover, whose name is Zabība, is black-skinned, the audience is confronted with a poem extolling blackness that takes aim in its first lines at those who might find it unappealing, in much the way that many lovesick poets in Classical Arabic often repel the criticism of an unnamed *lā'im* (blamer or censurer) who finds the public expression of their love indecorous. The provenance of these first verses further deepens this impression of them as a mechanism of deflection; though the poem found in 'Antar's birth story diverges in its final lines, perhaps the most popular appearance of first two hemistiches occurs in the *1001 Nights*, during an episode in which courtly slave women of

²³⁹ This statement indicates that the narrator is borrowing at least part of the following poem from a previous work.

²⁴⁰ *Sīrat 'Antar*, 123-124.

various colors and shapes (one fair and one dark, one fat, one skinny, one blond, and one swarthy) are satirizing one another on the grounds of their appearance. After a white-skinned slave girl has taken aim at her darker-skinned counterpart, the black woman starts in by saying the above words, then continues extolling her virtues along similar lines to the plaudits given to ‘Antar’s mother,

My form is beautiful, my curves are ample, and my color is desired by kings and lusted after by the wealthy and wastrel alike. I am lovely and witty and supple of body, high of price, and I am studied in witticisms, literature, and eloquence. My gestures and tongue are articulate, my temperament is lighthearted, and my play is a delight. As for you, you’re pale like the *mulūkhiyya* stew served in Bāb al-Lūq, and all of it’s just shoots (‘*urūq*). Wretchedness upon you, o impurity of the scalps, o coppersmith’s rust, o guise of the owl and food of the *zaqqūm* tree [...]²⁴¹

The black woman then goes on to recite satirizing poetry of her own deriding whiteness as an indicator of disease. Thus, those acquainted with the other scenarios in which this type of poetry has been used may, when encountering it in ‘Antar’s narrative, be reminded not only of blackness’ beauty but also of whiteness’ blemishes. The last two images applied to the white woman in particular—the owl’s face and the fruits of the *zaqqūm* tree that, according to the Qur’ān, grows in hell and bears food that scalds the insides of one’s body—relate pallor directly to death. By contrast, in the poem above blackness affirms life: an evening with a lover, the passage of night into day, or the healthy twinkle of an eye. These images suggest not only Zabība’s comeliness, but also bespeak its fecund implications. And, in case one needed further assurance of her quality as a sexual prospect, the text also quickly and recurrently assures us of her sense of personal honor, conferred through her noble pedigree and freeborn status,

²⁴¹ “*Hikāyat al-Jawārī al-Mukhtalifa al-Alwān wa-mā waqa ‘a baynahun min al-Muḥawira*,” in *Alf Layla wa-Layla, al-Juz’ al-Thānī* (Calcutta II, 1839), 280-281. On this tale, see also: Robert Irwin, “The Dark Side of ‘The Arabian Nights,’ Critical Muslim, <https://www.criticalmuslim.io/the-dark-side-of-the-arabian-nights/>, accessed 18 September 2018.

فلما نظر الأمير شداد بن قراد الى ما في هذه الامة من الاوصاف زهت في عينيه كما شاء خفى الاطراف ليظهر منها مكنون سره ويبين ما يريد من أمره فهنالك أوماً لها شداد وسار فتبعته الى مكان بعيد ولم تعلم ما يريد فهنالك طلب أن يغشاها فمانعته عن نفسها ولم ترض بذلك الامر النكير لانه كما يأتي أنها من بيت كبير فقال لها ويلك أنت بقيت زوجتي وأولادك عندي وأنا أكرمك طاقتي وجهدي (قال الراوي) فهنالك طاوعته على مراده فخلا بها لما رأى من حسن طباعها وقضى غرضه وبرد فؤاده وذلك لعلم أهل تلك الزمان وجهل فرسان جاهلية العربان من اعتقادهم أن كل من اكتسب شيئاً فهو له حلال لكثرة الجهل والضلال قال المصنف لانه ما كان لهم رسول يمنعهم عن ركوب الأثام ولا شريعة تعرفهم الحلال من الحرام بل كانت العقلاء منهم ينتظرون ليلاً ونهار طلوع شمس رسالة صاحب الانوار سيدنا محمد النبي المختار عليه أفضل الصلاة والسلام ونرجع الى ما كنا فيه من سياق الحديث الاوّل فلما قضى الأمير شداد من الامة مراده بأصله عاد الى أصحابه وقد عرفوا منه ذلك فأرادوا أن يفعلوا مثل فعله ويتبعوه في أمره فلم ترض تلك الامة لهؤلاء الرجال ولم تطعهم على ذلك الفعل والاعمال بل هربت من بيت أيديهم في الرمال وقد أنكرت منهم ذلك الأحوال لانها من نسل قوم كرام غير لئام وسوف نذكرها كل شيء في مكانه بعون الله وسلطانه اذا وصلنا اليه النبي يتبسم في وجهه من يصلى عليه صلى الله عليه قال الاصمعي فلما ان أبعدت عنهم تلك الامة وفعلت فعل الحرة المكرمه ولم ترض بهذا الامر النكير لانها كما قدمنا من بيت كبير ثم ان الأمير شداد قد ردهم عنها وقال لهم جعلتها في عصمتي ورضيت أن أخذها من قسمتي فرضوا بذلك الحال ثم عادوا عنها راجعين ومما أملوه خائبين ولم ينالوا منها أرب سوى الأمير شداد المنتخب ولذلك حكم له بها قاضى العرب وقال يا شداد ان هذا المولود يعدلك من جملة الأولاد

[W]hen the prince Shaddād b. Qurād saw such qualities in this slave girl, she shone in his eyes, for God had willed that beautiful things disclose their hidden secrets, and make clear what he wishes at his command. At that point, Shaddād beckoned to her and went off, so she followed him to a far-off place, not knowing what he wanted. Then he asked to sleep with her, so she rejected him and was repulsed with the sordid matter, for, as shall emerge, *she was from a prominent family*. [Shaddād] then said to her, ‘Woe upon you! Remain as my wife, and keep your children with me, and I will devote my efforts to honoring you.’

The narrator said: Then, she conceded to his wish, so he secluded himself with her, and he saw the beauty of her nature and he reached his aim, then his heart cooled. According to the conventional wisdom of the people of that time and due to the ignorance of the Bedouin knights of the *jāhiliyya*, it was their belief that any time someone acquired something, it was licit (*halāl*) for him [because of], for they were very ignorant and wayward. Indeed, the storyteller relates that this was because they had no prophet to prevent them from committing sins and no revealed law (*sharī‘a*) to teach them the right from the wrong. Instead, the wise ones among them were waiting day and night, for the dawn of the [message of] the possessor of lights, our master Muḥammad, the chosen prophet, the most favorable blessings and peace upon him. Let us return to where we were in our main story: when the prince Shaddād had his way with the slave girl as he had originally intended, he returned to his companions, and when they learned of [his deed] from him, they wanted to do as he had done and follow in his footsteps. The slave girl was not pleased by these men and would not submit to them. Rather, she fled from their presence into the desert and repudiated their attempts, for *she was from an honorable family line*, not a blameworthy one. And we shall mention the origins of her kin and shall recall the cause of her estrangement and separation [from them], but we shall tell everything in its [proper] place, with God’s help and

his power, to which we were brought by the prophet, and He smiles upon he who praises him, God's blessings upon him.

Al-Aṣma'ī said: *When the slave woman had withdrawn from them and behaved like a free, honorable woman, and did not assent to this hateful matter because she was—as we have said—from a great household*, then the prince Shaddād drove off [his companions] from her and said to them, 'I have placed her in my protection and I shall be happy to take her as part of my share [of the raiding spoils].' [The other men] were pleased with this arrangement, so they retreated from her and whoever had hoped [to proposition her] was disappointed, and no one received [what he desired] from her save the designated prince Shaddād, for the judge of the Arabs ruled that she was his and said, 'O Shaddād, indeed [her] newborn shall be deemed yours, out of all the children [i.e. Shaddād's siblings].'²⁴²

It will later emerge that Zabība is from an African royal family. In her characterization, we see a direct inversion of Mutanabbī's derisive attitude towards the slave-turned-king, Kāfūr; a freeborn person will always carry the bearing of a free person, even after being captured and enslaved.²⁴³ In the fashion of an honorable woman, Zabība initially resists jumping into bed with the lustful Shaddād, and must first be given an offer of marriage in order to validate their relationship. Once pledged to him, she proves her merit further by rebuffing the advances of other men, who in turn earn criticism in the narrative for their ungodly ways. When Zabība and her two sons are officially apportioned to Shaddād by the judge of the 'Abs tribe as part of the war spoils, the echoes of this exchange with sale into bondage are quickly undermined with an aside from the narrator, "and among the free-born, she had esteem and respect." In this fashion, the text demonstrates that despite appearances, 'Antar will be of thoroughly noble birth—though he is racially mixed, he is pure of class, or we might say, of *nasab* (lineage or pedigree).²⁴⁴ Moreover, echoing the tales of the prophets above, 'Antar's birth is afforded protections that border on the miraculous; although he is not shepherded into the world by angels or heavenly

²⁴² *Sīrat 'Antar*, 124-125.

²⁴³ See chapter 1.

²⁴⁴ On the link between *nasab* and the function of black heroes in the *sīras*, see the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

winged horses, his mother is granted to his father by decree, despite the stated *jāhili* tendency for men to take what they want of women and property at will and declare it licit for themselves; in the case of Zabība, reasoned negotiation and respect prevail over lust.

Unlike with our later, unexpectedly black heroes, whose mothers must refute aspersions of acts of class- and race-depreciating adultery cast upon them after birth, in the case of ‘Antar, such concerns are headed off at the pass. Even so, ‘Antar’s appearance as a newborn is rendered as jarring in the narrative. After a difficult birth, Zabība is met with a son who seems to have inherited none of her softness and beauty. Instead, he embodies a host of stereotypically African, masculine characteristics:

أخذها الطلق كما يشاء خالق الخلق فما زالت من أول الليل تصرخ الى وقت السحر فولدت مولود
اذكر وهو أسود أدغم مثل الفيل أفطس المنخر واسع المناكب واسع المحاجر صنعة الملك الجليل معبس
الوجه مفقل الشعر كبير الاشداق مكدر المنافس متسع الظهر صلب الدعائم والعظام كبير الرأس والاقدام
كأنه قطعة غمام بأذان كبار وأحداق يتطاير منها شرار النار كما قال فيه الشاعر هذه الابيات صلوا على سيد
السادات
وأسود يحاكي ظلام الدجا كأنه قطعة من الجلمد
له ذراعات بعيدا المدا قوامه يحاكي الى المرود
ولقد تراه أعبس أدبس مزعجا للابيض والأسود

(قال الراوي) إلا أن أعطافه ومناكبه شداد وأعضائه وخلفته تشبه خلقة أبيه شداد ففرح به الأمير
شداد لما ان رآه وقال سبحان من خلقه وسواه ويعنتر سماه وأوصى أمه زبيبة عليه

[T]hat night [Zabība] went into labor, as the Creator of creation willed, and she did not stop screaming from the earliest portion of the night until daybreak, then she gave birth to a son, and he was black and swarthy like an elephant, flat-nosed and broad-shouldered, with wide eyes. The creation of the Glorious King was frown-faced, peppercorn-haired, large-mouthed, with mud-colored nostrils, broad-backed, solid of limb and bone, and had a large head and legs like chunks of cloud, with big ears and pupils that emitted sparks of fire, as the poet has said of him in these verses, praise upon the Lord of lords,
[This] black man resembles the shadows of night,
As though he were a cut of stone
He has arms with wide span,
His stature is like a giant
And surely you would think him glowering and brown,
Disquieting to the white and the black alike

(The narrator said) indeed he had the flanks and shoulders of Shaddād, and his limbs and shape resembled the build of his father Shaddād [as well], so the prince Shaddād rejoiced in him when he saw him and said, “praise upon He who created him and perfected him,” and he named him ‘Antar and entrusted his mother Zabība with him [...]”²⁴⁵

Also divergent from the tales of Abū Zayd and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is the fact that ‘Antar’s father is satisfied with his child’s appearance. Shaddād immediately sees traces of himself in ‘Antar, whose physique already resembles his father’s robust build. Not only does ‘Antar display a premature strength, but he also is prone to fits of violence,

وكانت أمه زبيبة إذا منعتة من الرضاع همهم وصرخ ودمدم ويذوم كما تذوم السباع وتحمر عيناه حتى
تصير كأنها الجمر إذا أضرم وكل يوم يريد له قماطا جديد لانه يقطعه ولو كان من حديد ولما ان صار له
من العمر عامان تمام صار يدرج ويلعب بين الخيام ويمسك الاوتاد ويقلعها فتقع البيوت على أصحابها
مرارا كان يفعلها ويعافر الكلاب ومن أذنانها يمسكها ويخنق صغارها ويقتلها ويضرب الصبيان والاولاد
وإذا رأى ولد صغير اهبشه في وجهه ورماه على ظهره وبلغ منه المراد وان كان ولدا كبيرا يعاقوه حتى
يفتت منه الاكباد ولم يزل على ذلك الحال حتى خرج عن حد الرضاع وصار له من العمر ثلاث سنين وكبر
وانتشى وترعرع ومشى وذكره قد شاع

[If] his mother Zabība ever prevented him from nursing, [the child] would grumble and wail and growl and reproach [her] like the grouching of beasts of prey, and his eyes would redden until they became like embers when set ablaze. Every day he required a new swaddle because he would tear it apart, even if it were made of iron. When he had reached two full years of age, he began to move and play amongst the tents, and would grab the tent-pegs and uproot them so that the tents would collapse upon their occupants. Many times over he did this, and he would wrestle with dogs and would take hold of their tails and strangle their young and kill them, and he would assail young men and children. If he saw a small child, he would snatch at his face, throw him down on his back, and take what he wanted from him, and if it were a big child he would wrestle him until his limbs were exhausted, and he did not cease doing this until he was weaned and turned three years old, and grew bigger and developed and matured and went off, and mention of him began to spread.²⁴⁶

In the account of ‘Antar’s childhood there is a constellation of references and qualities that we have seen before, both in the above narratives of the prophets that foreground ‘Antar’s tale and in the texts discussed in the previous chapter. Like the Prophet Ibrāhīm, from a young

²⁴⁵ *Sīrat ‘Antar*, 126.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 127.

age, ‘Antar possesses a number of abilities beyond his years. Almost all of these exemplify sheer physical strength (and a streak of mischief). Not only is he strong, but he is also pugnacious, with little self control when dissatisfied and a penchant for terrorizing other children. These qualities will prove useful when given direction, and ‘Antar will grow into a valiant warrior, but in infancy, his behavior harkens more to the sort of raw physicality that earns praise for blacks in the epistle of al-Jāhiz and that, in the view of al-Mutanabbī, must be disciplined and controlled through retaliatory force.

In her recent dissertation on women’s roles in the *siyar*, Amanda Hannoosh Steinberg reads several heroes’ mothers as having what she terms “heroic pregnancies,” noting that many of the women in the *siyar*—as with women in other epics such as the Malian Sunjata, in which gestation of the hero takes seven years(!)—must undergo extreme difficulties on the path to parturition.²⁴⁷ Among such heroic pregnancies, she counts that of Khaḍrā’, the mother of Abū Zayd, who takes seven years (or more, depending on the version) and much prayer and petition to conceive a son. She also counts Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma, whose pregnancy is a product of sexual assault. To this list, we might reasonably add the pregnancy of ‘Antar’s mother, Zabība, for though her conception of the hero does not occur under physical duress, she is held captive when her courtship begins, and must subsequently resist a number of would-be seducers in order to maintain her fidelity to ‘Antar’s father, Shaddād, which impels her to run off into the desert. Zabība’s experience may perhaps be read as a nascent expression of the motif of women’s bodily vulnerability as formative of the often strange biological events that produce heroes, in that her relationship with Shaddād communicates the adventitious nature of attraction and sexual

²⁴⁷ Amanda Hannoosh Steinberg, “Wives, Witches, and Warriors: Women in Arabic Popular Epic,” PhD diss. (University of Pennsylvania, 2018), 153.

selection. In other *siyar*, these already unpredictable elements become subject to much more extreme currents of fortune.

As has been seen, though ‘Antar—in contrast to Abū Zayd and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb—has a biologically conventional birth, in other ways it is hardly mundane. ‘Antar is conceived of as a high-born figure with preternatural abilities and a prophetic heritage, whose only clear disadvantage is his appearance. In the story of Abū Zayd, however, the surreal circumstances of his birth and the unexpected of his blackness compound into a more complex set of early childhood disadvantages, touching upon issues of paternity and class as well as race.

The Birth of Abū Zayd

A number of scholars have examined the birth of Abū Zayd al-Hilālī, which in many cases constitutes the starting point of the entire narrative of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*. As with the prefacing of ‘Antar’s illustrious career with tales of the lives of the prophets, the birth of Abū Zayd al-Hilālī is often read as being freighted with divinely-ordained significance. Susan Slyomovics accounts for the multi-layered way in which Abū Zayd’s miraculous origins are animated with prophetic reference in performance through reference to the “miraculous beginnings” of the epic recitation in and of itself, which is periphrastically related to divine revelation through the reciter’s “breathrough into performance instigated by poems of praise,” for God and Muḥammad.²⁴⁸ This is in addition to the embedded genealogical relationship between the Prophet Muḥammad and Abū Zayd, conferred through the bloodline of his mother Khaḍrā’, the daughter of a Meccan *sharīf* named Qirḍa (sometimes Qirḍāb). In some editions of the text, even the marriage of Khaḍrā’ to the Hilālī chieftain, Rizq, is providential. Both Dwight Reynolds, working on recitations recorded in the Egyptian village of Bakātūsh and Aḥmad

²⁴⁸ Slyomovics, “Praise of the Prophet, Praise of the Self,” 68.

Shams al-Dīn al-Ḥajjājī, studying recitations performed in Luxor, record that Rizq is apprised of Khaḍrāʾs eligibility by others—a Ṣūfī shaykh who foretells his future son’s greatness and the Hilālī elders who adduce the *sharīfa*’s relation to the Prophet as a sign of her immanent suitability, respectively—giving the match the imprimatur of spiritual and tribal authority.²⁴⁹ In their ensuing marriage, Khaḍrāʾ fails to conceive a male child for a significant period of time (in some recitations, it is five to seven years, in others, as many as eleven) and, growing increasingly despondent, she petitions God for a son. In some versions, the women of her tribe take it upon themselves to aid her in this endeavor, and they all go out to either a forest or a river together to watch birds gather, praying that their sons will mirror the qualities of those birds that each woman finds most appealing. In other versions, Khaḍrāʾ is walking in a forest or garden alone when she comes upon a number of birds that are either varicolored or all white. In both cases, a dark-colored bird emerges and begins to terrorize the other creatures. Khaḍrāʾ asks that her child be as fierce as this dark, aggressive bird, and in an instance of “cosmic literalness of interpretation,” her wish is answered and she conceives a black-skinned son.²⁵⁰ Afterward, Khaḍrāʾ is accused of adultery and divorced, and the child, Abū Zayd (whose given name is Barakāt, or blessings), spends no small portion of his life vying to be recognized by society not as a slave-born bastard but instead as a noble hero.

An interesting disparity arises among the textualized version of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* that is not found in recorded recitations with respect to how Abū Zayd’s blackness is explained.²⁵¹ All

²⁴⁹ Dwight Reynolds, “Episode 1: The Birth of Abu Zayd (Part 1),” *Sirat Bani Hilal Digital Archive*, <http://www.siratbanihilal.ucsb.edu/node/425>, accessed 18 September 2018; al-Ḥajjājī, *Mawlid al-Baṭal*, 203.

²⁵⁰ I borrow this turn of phrase from Susan Slyomovics. See: Slyomovics, “Praise of the Prophet, Praise of the Self,” 66.

²⁵¹ I have consulted several versions of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, namely those recorded by Dwight Reynolds, al-Ḥajjājī, a poetic version edited by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Abnūdī, and a version recorded in the Egyptian city of Qana by Khālīd Abū-l-Layl. Several other consulted versions only incorporated the *taghrība* (western migration) portion of the text, and as such the birth of Abū Zayd had already occurred “offstage” and was not incorporated into the text. I refer to the aforementioned versions of the *sīra* as “textualized,” as opposed to “written,” because they are transcribed either

of the versions that include the birth of the hero feature variations on the above scene with the multi-hued birds, and thus carry the implication that Khaḍrā's interest in the dark bird is relevant to her son's resulting complexion. However, at least one printed version of the *sīra* foregrounds this event with a warning dispensed from Khaḍrā's father to her future husband, Rizq, about the prospect that Khaḍrā might bear black offspring. Qirḍa cautions that Khaḍrā's grandparents were "black like slaves," adding that Rizq should not interpret the dark skin of his future children as a sign of anything untoward, but rather as a reemergence of her grandparents' traits.²⁵² Rizq—having been shamed and worked up into a lather over his child's possible illegitimacy by his fellow tribal chief, Sarḥān—does not heed this warning.

Most accounts and analyses of Abū Zayd's birth privilege the role of mystical or divine power in his creation rather than this passing reference to the heritability of his skin color. Moreover, because of how Abū Zayd is described by other characters within the text, most read Abū Zayd as being categorically and definitively black. However, across different editions, a range of color terms and metaphors are used to describe Abū Zayd's appearance, implying a range of skin tones or of contextually variable expressions for black skin. Below, I give context to the more "scientific" side of Abū Zayd's birth narrative and also attempt to account critically for the variety of descriptions of Abū Zayd's appearance across a number of versions of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*. In doing this, I gesture towards a lexicon of skin-color terms across a cross-section of related Arabic texts. These are two of the most changeable elements in Abū Zayd's birth stories,

from a performance context *in situ* or from recordings of performances, and thus preserve certain oral elements of the tale that are not present in versions written for a reading public, such as the 1980s Beirut version that will be discussed at some length below. Khālid Abū-l-Layl, *Riwayāt al-Sīra al-Hilāliyya fi Qana* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-‘Āmma li-l-Kitāb, 2012); ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Abnūdī, *al-Sīra al-Hilāliyya* (Cairo: Akhbār al-Yawm, Idārat al-Kutub wa-l-Maktabāt, 1980).

²⁵² *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-Thaqāfiyya, 1980), 38.

and so I assess them with a view toward addressing the ways in which Abū Zayd is racialized in different contexts.

Abū Zayd and Atavism

In the 1980s Beirut version of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, before the newlywed Khaḍrā' departs Mecca for the Banū Hilāl's territory, her father has some parting words for Rizq,

| | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| يقول الفتى قرضاب فيما قد جرى | بدمع سال فوق الخدود بديد |
| يامير رزق الخضر اصارت حليلتك | غريبة وراحت إلى بلاد بعيد |
| فأوصيك فيها يا أمير تعزها | لحتى يحببها يا أمير وليد |
| إذا جاهها ولد وكان اسمر | لا تظن في فعل الردا يا جيد |
| ترى ستها سودا كان لونها | وجدها كان أسود كالعبيد |
| تظن بالخضر القبح مع الردى | وتجعلها في سوء حال ونكيد |
| وتبقى حزينة ما لها مساعد | سوى دمعها عالخدود يزيد |
| يقولوا هذه بنت الشريف طامحة | وعشقت على الأمير رزق الجيد |
| فان صار لك شيء سيرها | لنا فتأتي الينا في بكا وتعيد |
| وتقتلها وتفضحنا بين الملا | وندعها بين السيوف بديد |
| ويوقع سفك الدما بيننا وبينكم | وهذا بياني والبيان مفيد |
| ولا تقطعوا الاخبار بيني وبينكم | أخبار مليحة تسر بالتأكيد |

The valliant Qirdāb says of what has happened,
With tears flowing, scattered over cheeks
O prince Rizq, Khaḍrā' has become your companion,
Estranged, she goes to a distant country
I entrust her to you, o prince, so honor her,
Until a son is born to her
If she bears a son and he is black,
Think it not an act of evil, o good one
For you see, her grandmother was black of color
And her grandfather black like slaves
Should you suspect that in Khaḍrā' there is ugliness and wickedness

And place her in a bad and desolate condition,
 She'll be inconsolable, without any solace
 Except for her tears, increasing upon her cheeks
 [Such that] others will say, 'This is the wayward daughter of the Sharīf,
 Who loved the good Prince Rizq.'
 If something should happen to you, her path will lead her back to us,
 She'll come to us crying and lamenting
 And we'll kill her and our faults will have been laid bare,
 And we'll invoke her among the swords in the desert,
 And bloodshed shall transpire between us,
 This is my pronouncement, and [such] proclamations are of use
 Do not cut off lines of communication between us,
 For good news is made more delightful by confirmation²⁵³

After the Sharīf's statement, Rizq responds with his own verses in affirmation that "your words, O king, have been registered," promising political fidelity and reiterating his interest in Khaḍrā' even if she "truly has meager grandparents" (*mankhūbat al-jaddayn bi-l-tawkīd*).²⁵⁴ Later, though, when the Sharīf's predictions are borne out and the fair-skinned Khaḍrā' gives birth to a black son, Rizq forgets this promise and instead repudiates Khaḍrā' and sends her off with Abū Zayd as well as the daughter she had given birth to some time earlier without incident.²⁵⁵

Whereas in the Beirut version, Khaḍrā's black ancestry is discussed just before the incident with the black bird that cements the yet unborn Abū Zayd's racial fate, this narrative element is absent from every recorded performance of the *sīra* that I have come across.²⁵⁶ In his analysis of heroic births in the *siyar*, Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn al-Ḥajjājī also picks up on this discrepancy between the textual version of the *sīra* and its orally performed counterparts, which, he claims, "interpret Abū Zayd's blackness of color with a cosmic reading, wherein he emerges

²⁵³ *Ibid.* 37-38

²⁵⁴ *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, 38.

²⁵⁵ The trope of the transferability of negative maternal qualities to one's children is evident not only in Rizq's repudiation of his black son, but also in his rejection of his daughter when he decides to eject Khaḍrā' from Hilālī territory. In al-Abnūdī's version of the *sīra*, Rizq condemns his daughter's reputation by saying, "a whore will give birth to whores," (*al-āhira tajīb al-awāhir/al-āhira tunjab al-āhirāt*). Al-Abnūdī, *al-Sīra al-Hilāliyya*, 126.

²⁵⁶ In a recent correspondence with Susan Slyomovics, she confirmed that she, too, has not otherwise come across the tradition of according Khaḍrā' black ancestry. S. Slyomovics, personal communication, July 23, 2018.

black because his mother's prayer was answered."²⁵⁷ Indeed, as if to put a fine point on the difference and distance between Khaḍrā' and black Africans, in some recitations a portion of her dowry is explicitly stated to have been "two hundred Abyssinian women from the highlands," and another hundred "mamlūk slaves."²⁵⁸ We might therefore question why this explanation of Abū Zayd's color is added in the written version and what its origin might be. The latter question is more readily answerable than the former; the adducing of ancestral traits as the cause of Khaḍrā's liability to bear black offspring conforms in a textbook fashion to an argument about racial atavism that dates back to Aristotle, who, in his work, *On the Generation of Animals*, discusses the case of a woman who had intercourse with a black person (an Aethiop), and did not bear a black child, but nonetheless had a black grandchild.²⁵⁹ Such resemblances with one's distant kin can, according to Aristotle, "recur at an interval of many generations."²⁶⁰ Devin Henry has argued that Aristotle's preoccupation with genetic atavism stems mainly from this phenomenon acting as a counterpoint to the prevailing theory of "material pangensis," wherein bodies transmit their form from one generation to the next through the use of composite reproductive tissue, constructed from bits of tissue "drawn from each part of the parent's body."²⁶¹ If this were the case, then people could only beget people who were racially analogous to themselves. Instead, Aristotle arrives at the conclusion that an organism's genetic material that is passed on in reproduction must contain all the potentials of the entire bloodline, certain among

²⁵⁷ Ḥajjājī, *Mawlid al-Baṭal*, 115.

²⁵⁸ Ḥajjājī, *Mawlid al-Baṭal*, 205; Cf. Elizabeth Wickett, *Seers, Saints, and Sinners: The Oral Tradition of Upper Egypt* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 63.

²⁵⁹ Aristotle, *Aristotle on the Generation of Animals: A Philosophical Study*, trans. Johannes Morsink (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982), Book I; Cf. Devin Henry, "Aristotle on the Mechanism of Inheritance," *Journal of the History of Biology* 39 (2006): 434.

²⁶⁰ Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals*, I:18.

²⁶¹ Henry, "Aristotle on the Mechanism of Inheritance," 433.

which are activated by “movements,” which enable such generational relapses as that which occurs with the black grandchild to transpire.

In the medieval Arabic-speaking world, three of Aristotle’s major works on biology, namely his *Historia Animalium*, *De Partibus Animalium*, and the *De Generatione Animalis* were all bundled together as one grand text—the *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*—during the heyday of ‘Abbasid courtly translation. Because the text appears to have been translated directly from the Greek to the Arabic without a Syriac intermediary—as was later to become *de rigueur*—Lou Filius speculates that the initial compilation and translation of the *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* must have been quite early, before a courtly translation methodology became more standardized.²⁶² In addition to this compendium of Aristotle’s works, there existed a large body of supplementary pseudo-Aristotelian zoological literature, much of which, according to Remke Kruk, expatiated the occult properties of parts of animals not addressed by Aristotle himself.²⁶³ The texts *De Partibus* and *De Generatione* are often regarded as the more theoretical portions of Aristotle’s zoological corpus, and thus earned the attention of a variety of Islamic philosophers.²⁶⁴ However, as the story of Khaḍrā’ attests, clearly certain ideas articulated in these more esoteric treatises had traction in the wider literary world as well, or else map onto ideas that were part of the common, preexisting *milieu*, though in the *sīra* they become unburdened of the fraught considerations of the minute forces that act upon a body’s reproductive organs and tissues that had so preoccupied Aristotle himself.

²⁶² Lou Filius, “The *Book of Animals* by Aristotle,” *Islamic Thought in the Middle Ages* 75 (2008): 267-273.

²⁶³ Remke Kruk, “Reception of Aristotle’s *Historia Animalium* in the Arabic tradition,” forthcoming in *Historia Animalium of Aristotle: The Arabic Version of Book I-X of the Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, ed. L.S. Filius and J. N. Mattock (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 2.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 5.

The Beirut edition's reference to Khadrā's black ancestry as the underlying cause of Abū Zayd's blackness is nonetheless freighted with a number of potential significances. Perhaps the most remarkable of them lies at the interstice between two facts that the story provides, namely that Khadrā' is a *sharīfa*, a term that simply means "honorable," but here also connotes a descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad, and that she had black grandparents. This leads to the inevitable conclusion that the prophet Muḥammad has at least one line of descent in which the people are of mixed, part-black heritage. Such a conclusion not only bolsters Abū Zayd's legitimacy as a black *sharīf*, but also historicizes black membership in the Muslim world by placing black people at the very core of its earliest ancestral community of believers, which seems yet a step further than the citation of such figures as Bilāl who, while close companions of the Prophet, were not agnatically related to him. As is discussed in the fourth chapter, 'Abd al-Wahhāb likewise is often represented in the *sīra* as an exemplary product of the hybridization of the pious, Arabo-Muslim tribal elite and black martial heroism, from whom other black Muslims may derive genealogical or para-genealogical clout, though even he does not trace his lineage directly to the Prophet Muḥammad himself.

The second and more enigmatic set of significances behind the sudden and exclusive appearance in the 1980 Beirut edition of the prospect of Abū Zayd's atavism arises from considering the context of the edition itself. This version of the *sīra* is one of the more recent printings of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, as well as one of the few I have encountered from outside of Egypt, where the *sīra* remains a living tradition. That a turn from the more occult or numinous explanations of Abū Zayd's birth to a more rationalistic one occurs here perhaps results from a late-coming skepticism about the original text, or perhaps its compilers felt more comfortable making an intervention into a narrative that they view as being a somewhat more culturally

remote artifact of Arabic literary heritage. And yet, even if Khaḍrāʾs black ancestry is a late interpolation into the *sīra*, it nonetheless draws on a quite ancient theory of reproduction that would accord with the story’s originary medieval context and has echoes among other, contemporary literary works; indeed, Aristotelian atavism will be alluded to again in casting about to explain the blackness of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. If such references occur in ongoing recitation traditions of the *sīra* throughout the Arabophone world, they seem to have eluded recording. Perhaps further exploration into the manuscript traditions of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* will unearth other, earlier accounts of Khaḍrāʾ that incorporate this feature, but for now this remains speculative.

Abū Zayd and Blackness

In the first chapter, I examined the ways in which connotations of blackness were elaborated and fixed in texts such as the Qurʾān. Often, as is seen above, this is done in part through the association of color terms with concepts both abstract and real, hence black becomes related frequently to naturally occurring phenomena such as darkness and shadow, and also then to the shadowy world of the infernal. Presentations of Abū Zayd in various recitations and print editions of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* attest a complementary process—the ways in which color-terms and their descriptors may vary with culture, time, and context. At times, the variability of color perception is played with through the use of multiple terms by different actors in a single text, as shall be seen in the Beirut edition below.

The way that Abū Zayd’s skin is most often described is as *asmar* (dark) or *aswad* (black), however, there are attestations even of *azraq* (blue, but here very dark-skinned) and of a variation on piebald in which Abū Zayd is black-limbed but has a white blaze on his chest. Objects and ideas to which Abū Zayd is related through color, in addition to the totemic entity of the crow, include raisins, night nearing the time of the new moon, and, of course, slaves. Taken

together, descriptions of Abū Zayd embody a lexicon of terms and referents by which darkness may be indicated; this lexicon is of use in reading other works as well, including *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, and so a survey of it will be of use.

In *Mawlid al-Baṭal fī-l-Sīra al-Sha‘biyya*, Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn al-Ḥajjājī includes as an appendix a transcribed recitation from the storyteller ‘Awaḍ Allāh ‘Abd al-Jalīl depicting the hero’s birth scene in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, recorded in Luxor. Susan Slyomovics appears to record the same version, by the same reciter, in her work *The Merchant of Art: An Egyptian Hilali Oral Epic Poet in Performance*, and more recently in article, “Praise of the Prophet and Praise of the Self: *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* and Epic Narrative in Performance.” I use her translations below, with minor emendation, placed in brackets. The association between Abū Zayd and blackness begins here, as is typical, with the crow over which his mother prays,

[The women of the village went along with Khaḍrā’ and arrived at the river,]
 They found translucent waters surrounded by birds.
 But among them a black bird [*tayr aswad*], [whose blackness was disturbing].
 He scattered all the kinds of birds, and cleared them away
 He scattered all the birds and kept them dispersed
 He was [dark] [*asmar*] and in his coloring were all the qualities
 [...] Khaḍrah says, ‘Give me a lad like this bird,
 black like this bird!
 I swear to make him possess Tunis and Wādī Ḥamā,
 I swear to make him possess Tunis by the blade of the sword [...]’²⁶⁵

Later, when the child is born, his blackness is literally uncovered for his father to see,

قربوا على لبطل ابوزيد وكشفوا القلوع
 لقيوا الهلالي اسمر ولا جه لباه
 لقيوا الهلالي ازرق بلون العبيد
 ولكن وجهه أحلى من العنب والزبوب
 قال الأمير سرحان أمر الله عجيب
 من رحمة الباري يستر على المذنبين
 أمه وابوه بيض وهو الولد جه لمين

They drew near to the hero Abū Zayd and lifted the blankets,
 They found the Hilālī dark [*asmar*], not from his father [*lā jā li-bāh*],

²⁶⁵ Slyomovics, “Praise of the Prophet, Praise of the Self,” 71.

They found the Hilālī blue-black [*azraq*], with the coloring of slaves
 But his face was sweeter than grapes and raisins,
 The prince Sarḥān said, ‘The working of God is strange,
 From veneration of the Creator, one is preserved from sinners.
 His mother and father are white [*bīd*], and so whose son is he?’²⁶⁶

Here, *asmar* and *aswad* seem to be used interchangeably to mean black-skinned, as opposed to *asmar* connoting dark skin that nonetheless still places the child within the normative range of complexions amongst Arabs in the text. Instead, his being *asmar* is represented as strange and signals his difference (and possible genetic separateness) from his mother and father. The black bird is described here as ‘*akkūr*, which Slyomovics translates as “disturbing,” but which also has resonances with turbidity, muddiness, and darkness; as discussed below, the word *mu‘takkar*, used to describe the darkness of night, is an adjective also used to describe the skin-tone of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb in his *sīra*. Variations on the ‘-k-r root in relation to the black bird are found in other editions of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* as well.²⁶⁷ In ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Abnūdī’s transcription of the *sīra*, the black bird is described as a *nūḥī* bird, literally meaning mournful, which is a colloquial way of describing crows (perhaps because of their infamously chilling, sob-like caw, for which the crow is also known as the *ghurāb al-bayn*, or crow of the wastelands [*lit.* the “in-between” spaces]) who is *aswad bi-‘akkār*, or a black bird on the attack.²⁶⁸

That *asmar* should frequently be used interchangeably with *aswad* is perhaps surprising. A variety of dictionaries compiled between the eighth and fourteenth centuries attest the evolution and flux of *asmar*’s specific connotations. Al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad’s (d. 791) *Kitāb al-Ayn*, the earliest known dictionary of the Arabic language, attests the use of *samrā*’ as a generic flesh-tone similar to the color of wheat (*fatāh samrā’ wa-ḥiṭa samrā’*), and says that the color is

²⁶⁶ Al-Ḥajjājī, *Mawlid al-Batal*, 210.

²⁶⁷ Likening the black skin of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* to the black or roiling night, or *al-layl al-mu‘takkar*, is also common. Cf. Schine, “Conceiving the Pre-Modern Black-Arab Hero,” 307.

²⁶⁸ Al-Abnūdī, *al-Sīra al-Hilālīyya*, 91.

dark or “blackish” (*lawn ilā sawād*), but that it is not actually a true black.²⁶⁹ And yet, associations between *samar* and the nighttime place the color’s connotations in more direct overlap with *aswad*. A common *muzāwaja*, or aphoristic pair of terms that are often rhymed and are conceptually related, is *al-samar wa-l-qamar*, meaning the dark night sky and the moon. The use of *asmar* to mean black also more closely reflects its meaning in the Qur’ān. In his concordance of Qur’ānic terms, *Mufradāt Alfāz al-Qur’ān*, Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1108) begins his entry on *samar* by claiming that the color is a composite of black and white (*aḥd al-alwān al-murakkaba min al-bayāḍ wa-l-sawād*), like the color of wheat or of thin milk whose color has turned (*al-laban al-raqīq al-mutaghayyir al-lawn*).²⁷⁰ Turning to the Qur’ānic text, though, the only verse in which a word derived from the root s-m-r is used alludes to a participant in nighttime conversations, or a *sāmir* (Q *al-Mu’minūn*:67), which is knowable because the same word can also mean an overcast or starless night (*al-layl al-muḍlim*). Ibn Manẓūr’s *Lisān al-‘Arab* also notes that *sumra* lies somewhere between white and black (*manzila bayn al-bayāḍ wa-l-sawād*), and is the color of humans, camels, and the like. It is a color that “shades into having a black cast” (*yaḍrib illā sawād khaḍī*), like the color of the skin of the prophet Muḥammad (*wa-ḥī ṣifatih ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam kān asmar al-lawn*).²⁷¹

The above definitions indicate that, at least for a time, *asmar* was understood as a term connoting the skin color thought to be typical of the Arabs themselves, and even archetypal, in that it was the color of the flesh of Muḥammad, who was thought to epitomize masculine ideals of beauty. However, in the case of narratives of Abū Zayd, it is clearly being used as a term to indicate darker and even very dark black skin (though, as shall be seen below, it is at times used

²⁶⁹ Al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad, *Kitāb al-‘Ayn al-Juz’ al-Sābi‘* (Baghdad: Dā’ira al-Shu’ūn al-Thaqāfiyya wa-l-Nashr, 1984), 255.

²⁷⁰ Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt Alfāz al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: al-Dār al-Shāmiyya, 1992), 425.

²⁷¹ Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1988), 2090.

playfully to indicate the blurred edge between looking like a dark-skinned Arab and a black African). Perhaps as Arabs began to increasingly identify as white—a phenomenon that Bernard Lewis claims evolved throughout the early period of Arab conquests—they sloughed off the adjective *asmar*, relegating it to darker-skinned peoples than themselves. Or perhaps, as with the use of *baṣīr* (perspicacious or clear-sighted) in reference to blind people, the term began as a euphemism designed to minimize the perceived insult of referring to black-skinned people as such, eventually becoming a more generic and commonplace descriptor. A third possibility is that the root *s-m-r*'s primordial associations with the darkness of night put the word *asmar* on an itinerary to, over time, go from meaning a color “between black and white” to something much closer to black. Despite such ambiguities, it is clear is that *asmar* does not carry the full negative force and severity of *aswad* when used to refer to skin tone, and it is perhaps for this reason that with the hero Abū Zayd, the term *asmar* is often the first word by which he is described, and thus by which the audience’s impressions of him are structured. Indeed quite the opposite is the case today, with the root *s-m-r* being used to construct many common Arabic names such as *Samīr* and *Samar*, which are often related to the root’s positive associations with nighttime activities such as storytelling, musical performances, and celebration.

What is perhaps most striking in ‘Awad Allah’s recitations, though, is the use of the word *azraq*, which, as previously shown, usually means blue, or even—when applied to eye color—rheumy, to describe the deep black color of slaves. In Egyptian and Sudanese dialects of Arabic, this term is still used to indicate people who are very dark-skinned.²⁷² Used as a verb, *zarraqa* may also be used to mean to bruise, which is to say, to purple or darken one’s flesh.²⁷³ The idea

²⁷² R. Idris, personal communication, October 8, 2018.

²⁷³ Martin Hinds and El-Said Badawi, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic: Arabic-English* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1986), 369.

that a very deep black can appear to be blue or have a bluish cast is found in myriad cultures and literatures. Much like in Arabic, in Hebrew, the root *k-kh-l* indicates painting or lining the eyes (as with kohl), and also gives rise to the word *kakhôl*, blue.²⁷⁴ *Kakhal* is often used in rabbinic literature in reference to eye makeup comprised of antimony sulfides, which would have appeared an iridescent, bluish-black.²⁷⁵ Ostensibly, dark hair is described in the Homeric epics as *kuaneos*, or “blue,” though not everyone understands this term to simply mean “dark” when applied to either the mortal or immortal realm. R. Drew Griffith has suggested that a deep, lapis-colored blue might actually be the intended meaning of this term in the Homeric context, with the possibility that the conception of the gods and demi-deities being blue-haired is derived from earlier Mesopotamian and Egyptian depictions; Egyptians tended to render their gods in human form as lapis-haired and gold-skinned.²⁷⁶ Although, these traits of Egyptian myth and art may themselves be stylized or exaggerated means of rendering such qualities as dark hair and a tan or burnished complexion, which the gods would have expressed in their purest form. Middle English geographical works and travelogues speak of Saracens who are “black and blue-black as lead,” with Indian and Ethiopian peoples often being portrayed in analogous terms. Such descriptions are likewise found in Old Irish and Welsh, with compound terms such as *blowmon* (blue person) designating black-skinned people.²⁷⁷ Kathleen Ann Kelly reads such associations between what we might call more tropical peoples and blue skin as derived from humoristic theories about how the climate affects one’s physiology, with blue emerging as a mark of melancholia due to overexposure to heat and moisture. The ultimate work of such depictions,

²⁷⁴ William Gesenius and Edward Robinson, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), 471.

²⁷⁵ Cf. BT Shabbat 95a, Shabbat 109a, Shabbat 151b, Yoma 9b, etc.

²⁷⁶ R. Drew Griffith, “Gods’ Blue Hair in Homer and Eighteenth-Dynasty Egypt,” *The Classical Quarterly* 55 (2005), 329-334.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 332.

though, was part of a “long literary tradition profoundly concerned with contrasting the known and the familiar with the strange, the exotic, the Other.”²⁷⁸ Thus, blue-hued hair and skin is reserved for the outlandish (dark-skinned peoples) and otherworldly (the gods), or else must be engineered through paint and cosmetics. Perhaps this connotative substrate inherited from a shared Mediterranean antiquity also gives rise to the Luxor *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*’s blue-skinned slaves and, periphrastically, the blue-skinned hero Abū Zayd.

The bluish description of Abū Zayd al-Hilālī is not the sole depiction that deviates somewhat from the more common descriptions of him as *asmar* or *aswad*. In her recordings of southern Tunisian recitations of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, Anita Baker finds that Abū Zayd’s mother is represented praying over not a thoroughly pitch-black crow but a black bird with a white blaze on its chest, only to have Abū Zayd be born with a bright white torso and black limbs. He is referred to as *adra’* (mottled).²⁷⁹ Abū Zayd is not history’s only piebald epic hero. In the medieval German romance, *Parzival*, the figure Feirefiz is born of a “Moorish” mother and a white, Christian father, and emerges with flesh that has black and white patches, like a magpie. Geraldine Heng has argued that the pied nature of Feirefiz’s skin may be read as a physicalization of his father’s “pied” ethics: while Feirefiz is a morally irreproachable hero, his father often has split loyalties in his military endeavors and is obsessed with acquiring personal lucre, such that his “interior is as piebald as the exterior of his miscegenated son.”²⁸⁰ There is perhaps a sense in which the striking interpenetration of black with white on Abū Zayd’s body is emblematic of the conflictual conditions under which he comes into the world; in many

²⁷⁸ Kathleen Ann Kelly, “‘Blue’ Indians, Ethiopians, and Saracens in Middle English narrative texts,” *Parergon* 11 (1993): 52.

²⁷⁹ Cathryn Anita Baker, “The Hilālī Saga in the Tunisian South,” PhD diss. (University of Indiana, 1978), 67-68, 652.

²⁸⁰ Heng, *The Invention of Race*, 198.

accounts, his father Rizq has grown impatient with Khaḍrā's infertility, sometimes even beating her. While Khaḍrā' is overjoyed to have a son even if he is black, his father rejects the child outright and in doing so reneges on his promises to Sharīf Qirda. Family structure and notions of honor are thus destabilized by this child whose racial and social irresoluteness is inscribed upon his skin.

For Fierefiz, this is a mark of his racially hybrid—perhaps imperfectly balanced or ill-mixed—heritage, while the piebald flesh of Abū Zayd visibly attests to his more symbolic origins. Among the *siyar*, another major hero born with an unusual birth mark is Sayf b. Dhī Yazan, whose cheek has a greenish mole that distinguishes him as a Yemeni king in his father's line. Here, the birthmark is a nod not to Sayf's hybridity of origin but rather a bulwark against it; his mother, Qamariyya, is of Abyssinian heritage (she is daughter of the king Ar'ad, who rules over the *ḥabashī* people), and yet the birthmark constitutes a telltale sign that Sayf's paternal, Arab nobility remains an immutable, unassailable part of his identity.²⁸¹ True to his physiognomy, Sayf's loyalties lie with preserving his father's line against the Abyssinian aggressor and bringing the curse of Ḥam to its ultimate realization by conquering East Africa. Abū Zayd, the black hero who will lead the Hilālī vanguard in conquering Tunisia from a coalition of Berber groups, inverts the aesthetic absolutes manifest in Sayf's narrative, in that his Africanized appearance—embellished with a telltale white mark as a sign of his true affinities with the tribal Arabs—is conferred as part of his birthright, which also includes territorial conquest in Africa.

Related to this, Dwight Reynolds explains that Abū Zayd's dark complexion may not be so foreign to the rural communities of southern Egypt that have preserved the tale and hold it

²⁸¹ Blatherwick, *Prophets, Gods, and Kings*, 31-32.

الدمع من عيني لخدي تبديدا
تكون خضرا طالقة ترحل غدا
لو كان جسمي في هواها مقيدا
والقلب قد عاد مكودا أسودا

قال الفتى رزق الأمير بما جرى
يا قوم كونوا كلكم علي شهود
وحياة راسي ما بقيت شوفها
ما عاد لي رأسا بقا يرتفع

When she finished her prayers, she returned to the abodes and, at the fullness of her term of pregnancy, she went into labor and gave birth to a boy of dark color [ghulām asmar al-lawn]. The messenger went to the prince Rizq and apprised him of the [news of the] child, so he rejoiced and slaughtered sacrifices. The people congratulated him and asked him about [the child's] name. He said, "Barakāt," and they gave him to Bint 'Asjam to be nursed, and after seven days the princes Ḥazim and Sarḥān, along with the rest of the princes, came to Rizq to lavish gifts of money upon him. They arrived at [his home], and when Sarḥān saw [the boy], he bit down on his fingers and said to Rizq, 'this boy is black like a slave,' then he said in verse,

O prince Rizq, this is not your child, this one's father was a black slave
You named him "blessings," [but] through him our joy is lost,
Happiness has departed from us and pain has come
O Rizq, your offspring from the Prophet has been squandered,
And happiness has fled, and your ill luck prevails

Only after this accusation does Rizq respond to his child not with joy, but with distress, saying,

The valiant Rizq says of what's occurred, the tears flow
Spreading from my eye upon my cheek
O people, bear witness all of you,
Khaḍrā' shall be divorced, she leaves tomorrow!
By my life, I'll see no more of her.
Even if my body remains bound to her by passion,
I no longer have a head to hold high,
While the heart still abides, brimming with black²⁸³

As seen here, Rizq seems comfortable, even pleased, with his son and his dark coloring until the suggestion is made that he might be a bastard, born of an affair between Khaḍrā' and a black slave.²⁸⁴ This accusation ostensibly pushes Rizq's perceptions of his child through a

²⁸³ *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, 39.

²⁸⁴ In his essay on representations of black people in medieval Arabic narrative, Nādir Kāzīm notes that it is kept ambiguous (*tarak hādha al-mawḍū' ghāmiḍā wa-mubhamā*) whether Rizq even sees Barakāt before Sarḥān and the elders' arrival or not, leaving it to the reader to infer that he had seen the child. A week passes before the caravan

threshold; where before he had found the child dark but not to the point of ethnic difference, now he sees his son anew as a (partly) African child. The recognition of his child's blackness as such results in Rizq developing a sort of darkness of spirit, a melancholia through which his heart is made to brim with blackness. Unlike the versions above, where *asmar* and *aswad* were used virtually interchangeably, here one detects a subtle difference between the two. Here, *asmar* must be understood either to signal blackness euphemistically, diminishing its force, or must be understood as darkness that may register in certain contexts as not being ethnically "black," yet still within the realm of skin tones deemed natural to the Arabs. Indeed, in his reading of blackness' significance in the Beirut version of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, Nādir Kāzīm claims that Abū Zayd's blackness is intentionally made to seem lighter and more ethnically ambiguous, sitting indeterminately between self and other, and between Arab and black.²⁸⁵ Overall, *asmar* seems to be used in a relativistic fashion (one can be darker than the norm, but not black), while *aswad* appears to be absolute and connotative of racialized blackness. The use of *sūdān* as a racially-charged moniker for indigenously Sub-Saharan African peoples, as opposed to those who arrived there as part of the Arab conquests or coming of Islam who were dark-skinned but nonetheless could eschew the characterization of "blacks" is found in historical writings as well. In his study of the Kunta people, who typically are identified as an Arab or Arabo-Berber ethnic group in West Africa, Bruce Hall discusses the way in which ostensibly black-skinned people racialized each other based on perceived directness of Arab lineage,

The term used to describe 'Black' members of the Kunta is *kuhl*, and not the term *sūdān*, which is reserved for the non-Arabo-Berber 'Blacks' of sub-Saharan Africa. It is the label *sūdān* that carried the set of assumptions connected to ideas

arrives to hail Barakāt's birth, and so either interpretation is plausible, however it seems more likely in my view that Rizq would have had a chance to see his child in the intervening week, and would have been particularly avid to do so after praying so long for a son. Nādir Kāzīm, *Tamthīlāt al-Akhar: Šūrat al-Sūd fī-l-Mutakhayyal al-'Arabī al-Wasīlī* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 2004), 316-317.

²⁸⁵ *ibid.* 328

of racial difference. At root, the ubiquity of this term highlights the process whereby ethnic differences between peoples who identified themselves with the desert of the Southern Sahara, and those populations indigenous to sub-Saharan Africa, were racialized. The idea of ‘race’ that appears in the pre-colonial literature of the Southern Saharan is therefore closely correlated with the idea of lineage. The absence of genealogical connections to Arab Muslim ancestors was what rendered one ‘Black.’²⁸⁶

Hall adds that this disparity in lineal connections was then used to justify Kunta superiority over their peers through formal institutions of “permanent tutelage and clientage,” or *walā’*, which places non-Arab Muslims in relationships of dependency that mirror an agnatic, parent-child tie.²⁸⁷ I discuss the implications of lineage and racialization for community organization in the *siyar* at length in the fourth chapter, but for now suffice it to say that it is possible that the Abū Zayd who was *asmar* could plausibly be read as Arab, while the Abū Zayd who is *aswad* is apparently being raced as black and freighted with all the associations that this implies: that he is slavish, illegitimate, and socially inferior. His father, at first certain of his thoroughly Arab pedigree, reads Abū Zayd in the former way at first, only to have his perceptions upturned by the reactions of others. The ambiguity of his racial identity will follow Abū Zayd throughout his life, as people consistently assume he is a black slave and are then proven wrong through his noble deeds.

This play with the color line in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* is entirely absent from *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, in which the term *sūdān* is *de rigueur* for black-skinned people (the term *asmar* and its relatives are rarely used) and all of the Arabs are rendered as light-skinned in contrast. The reasons for this relative complexity of physical characterization may relate to *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*’s relatively wide dispersal throughout not only North Africa but also Sub-Saharan Africa, meaning

²⁸⁶ Bruce S. Hall, “The question of ‘Race’ in the pre-colonial southern Sahara,” *Journal of North African Studies* 10 (2005): 361.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 360.

that many of its audiences would have had exposure to a wide range of darker-skinned peoples. Although, according to al-Hajjājī, in recitations of the *sīra* in certain parts of Sub-Saharan Africa (the *sīra* is an attested tradition in the Sudan, Niger, Mali, and Chad), Abū Zayd’s epidermal difference is not discussed and his birth story is not as formative a feature of the narrative,

The Shuwā [Sub-Saharan] Arabs disregard Abū Zayd’s blackness, so it is not among the main points of the *sīra*. This is in harmony with the storytellers [themselves], because in this case Abū Zayd is of course Arab, but he is from the African Arabs [*al-‘arab al-afāriqa*], and African Arabs from region south of the Great Sahara have taken on blackness [*qad iktasabū al-sawād*], so it is difficult to differentiate their colorings from those of other Africans. The drama from the problem of the child’s blackness has thus been transformed into a problem with the child’s excessive strength, [which is so great] that his father fears him, and worries that his son might be from the *si’lā* demon species, that is, a *ghūl* who eats human flesh [...]²⁸⁸

In addition to this considered elision of a main character’s skin-color in spaces where the audience is less likely to relate to the racialized conflicts it engenders, H.T. Norris has suggested—based on his reading of a Tunisian version of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*—that in more ethnographically heterogeneous spheres, the *sīra*’s moral emphasis shifts away from the imperatives of conquest and toward those of productive coexistence,

Unlike the constant warfare between ‘Arab’ and ‘Berber’ which is so marked a feature of some oriental versions of the *taghrība*, this Maghribī version from Bou Thadi exemplifies the culturally wedded view of the Tunisian *sīra* in particular [...] the Tunisian, and indeed, Maghribī versions stress the final resolution of conflict, a division of the resources of the Maghrib between two kindred peoples.²⁸⁹

Sīrat Sayf b. Dhī Yazan, which likewise has gained a degree of popularity in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, has also been shown to admit a greater amount of fluidity with respect to the racialized aspects of character development that feature in the texts; Andrea Crudu finds that

²⁸⁸ Al-Hajjājī, *Mawlid al-Batal*, 114.

²⁸⁹ H.T. Norris, “The Rediscovery of the Ancient Sagas of the Banū Hilāl,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51 (1988): 465.

among Sudanese Arab elites such as the eponymous Sayfuwa dynasty, the “Whites-Blacks, Semites-Hamites” opposition embedded in the *sīra* becomes part of their personal identity myth, enabling them to trace their heritage to northern Arabia and narratively explicate their presence in Sub-Saharan Africa.²⁹⁰ We may note that in both cases, the content of these *siyar* deals with topics relating to the Arab conquest of portions of the African continent, and so their race and color play may be designed to reflect aspects of the history on which they are putatively based.

As shall be examined in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, the Black-Arab hybridity of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* likewise offers a platform for negotiations and reconciliations between racial groups. However, as with the birth of Abū Zayd, the point of emphasis in ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s birth narrative is not the prospects of his political future, but rather the initial trauma and process of justifying his stark epidermal difference from his parents. Unlike with Abū Zayd (notwithstanding the exceptional case of the 1980 Beirut edition), the explanation given for ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s coloring is dispensed through a protracted subplot that draws on fonts of scientific and legal discourse—the child ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is taken to physiognomists, a judge, and an imam, and speculations are made about his chemical constitution, his ancestry, and even what his father was thinking about at the moment of conception. His birth narrative thus presents an exhaustive account of the many mechanisms of racial construction and the constitution of physical difference at the composers’ narrative disposal, before finally resolving the hero’s case, making it among the most elaborate and at times bewildering of heroic origin stories to occur in a *sīra*.

Conclusion

²⁹⁰ Andrea Crudu, “The Sudanese Elements in *Sīrat Sayf b. Ḍī Yazan*,” *Arabica* 61 (2014): 313.

The birth narratives of ‘Antar(a) b. Shaddād and Abū Zayd al-Hilālī demonstrate that the black hero is not only racialized from birth in the ways we might expect—he is slavish and regarded as a socially inferior and often illegitimate figure—but also that this racialization can take a variety of forms within these few parameters, and that these forms shift with context and cultural resonances. Thus, we find that ‘Antar is not only born black-skinned, but also embodies an exaggerated pastiche of African traits, with his frowning face and peppercorn hair and his violent propensities. Simultaneously, he is said to resemble his father “in his form,” implying his father Shaddād, who is himself a tribal warrior, shares aspects of ‘Antar’s superhuman strength and size. This resemblance is also the grounds for his father’s joy at his otherwise alarming son, who is “disquieting to the white and to the black.” And so, we find that ‘Antar is not merely a racial other, but he is made to seem physically different in an even more extreme way than his black peers. And yet, in order to legitimate him as a heroic figure, the text takes pains to insist that despite appearances, neither ‘Antara nor his mother are slaves, rather, they are royal-born and royal-blooded, carrying themselves like free people.

The variety of modes of racialization and explanations for racial variability proliferate in the several narrations of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* examined above, and diverge from one another in two major ways: the explanation for Abū Zayd’s blackness itself, and the way in which this blackness is semantically conveyed. Abū Zayd’s blackness often is explained by the mystical, prayerful consort between his mother and a crow, which subtly suggests a form of “maternal impression,” whereby looking upon a dark object during conception can result in a dark-skinned child, and which is, in the words of David Goldenberg, “a literary topos [...] commonly found across cultures and times,” and is “meant to show the possibility of the implausible [...] and thus to

absolve the mother of suspicions of adultery.”²⁹¹ However, at least one edition of the text adduces Abū Zayd’s mother’s black ancestry as the underlying cause for his phenotypic deviation from his parents. In either case, the stakes of this question are raised by Khaḍrā’s status as a *sharīfa*, an “honorable woman” descended from the Prophet Muḥammad, because her exoneration from adultery takes on the added significance of defending the honor of family of the Prophet in a way that perhaps resonates with analogous historical scenarios as the accusations of *zinā*’ against ‘Ā’isha or the dishonorable treatment of the women of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib’s family in the aftermath of the battle of Karbala. If a form of genetic atavism is indeed the cause, then this also implies that the Prophet has had a number of black descendants whose race has wrought an effect upon his descendants’ bodily potentialities, or what we might contemporarily call the “gene pool.”

Even more variable is the physical description of blackness across different *Hilāliyya* recitations. In most, Abū Zayd (and his crow) are described as either *aswad* (black) or *asmar* (dark), with the two terms used seemingly interchangeably. However, in one version, we find that Abū Zayd is not “black” like slaves, but rather “blue” or “blue-black” (*azraq*)—a term that perhaps strikes an odd cord with Classical Arabic’s aforementioned use of the term for items that are blue, milky-colored, or clouded, but which remains in common use in Egyptian and Sudanese dialects and moreover strikes resonances with medieval European descriptions of black bodies as being so dark that they take on an iridescent, bluish cast, like lead or antimony. Descriptions such as this, to recall Kathryn Ann Kelly’s assessment, imply an absolute alienness and otherness that mere blackness may not convey in full force. Elsewhere, Abū Zayd transforms before his

²⁹¹ For a more thorough exposition on maternal impression and its use as a *topos* in Arabic sources, see the following chapter. See also: Schine, “Conceiving the Pre-Modern Black-Arab Hero,” 318. David Goldenberg, “Review: The Image of the Black in Jewish Culture,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 93 (2003): 569.

father's very eyes when the possibility of his wife's perfidy is raised, going from a dark-skinned (*asmar*) Arab to a black (*aswad*) slave, which is reminiscent of the term *aswad*'s use as an imprecation or a designation of inferiority among various Arab and African cultures, a usage which is deployed in several instances in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* as well, and which shall be discussed in the ensuing chapters. Ultimately, all of these variations reinforce a historical point that is patent enough, namely that "races" and their designations are fluid and change across time and space. It is remarkable though, in light of this, that despite the sheer ethnic multifariousness of slaves in the Arabo-Islamic world the associations between these various terms for blackness and the social class of *'abīd* (slaves), should prove so resilient and stable across all of the *sīra* texts in their many versions, lending credence to the adultery charges leveled against the mothers in the text and setting the proving ground for their heroes.

Conceiving ‘Abd al-Wahhāb

‘How awful to be black, cousinji, to wake every morning and see it staring at you, in the mirror to be shown proof of your inferiority! Of course they know; even blackies know white is nicer, don’t you think so?’ –Salman Rushdie²⁹²

[I]f a man has intercourse with his wife while she is menstruating, the child will be either black [aswad] or defective [nāqiṣ] or insane [ma‘tūh] because of the corruption of the menstrual blood. –Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma²⁹³

I heard Asmā’ say that she asked the Prophet—peace and blessings upon him—about menstrual blood staining clothing. He said, ‘Rub it off, then scrape [across the surface] with water and moisten it, and pray over it.’ [...] al-Shāfi‘ī said, ‘In this lies evidence that while menstrual blood is an impurity, this is just like every other [type of] blood (wa-fi hādha dalīl ‘alā anna dam al-ḥayḍ najas wa-kadhā kull dam ghayruh).’ –al-Shāfi‘ī²⁹⁴

The birth story of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb offers the lengthiest and most theoretically dense account of non-hereditary black birth that appears in the literature of the *siyar*, and arguably in medieval Arabic literature in general. To again sketch the narrative in brief, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is conceived through rape: his father, al-Ḥārith, has his mother Fāṭima drugged and consummates their new marriage.²⁹⁵ When ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is born, he is—to the shock and dismay of all—black-skinned, leading to Fāṭima being accused of committing adultery with a black slave. After several rounds of litigation, the Kilābī tribesmen go to Mecca with Fāṭima and the child, where the imam Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (d. 765), whose authority is universally respected and trusted, pronounces a final verdict: ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is black because he was conceived at the time of his mother’s menses, about which al-Ḥārith was heedless in his lust. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is not the only

²⁹² Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* (London: Vintage Books, 2006), 89-90.

²⁹³ Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS Arabe 3855, ff. 173

²⁹⁴ al-Shāfi‘ī, “Bāb Dam al-Ḥayḍ,” in *Kitāb al-Umm* (al-Maktaba al-Shāmīla), <http://shamela.ws/browse.php/book-1655#page-70>.

²⁹⁵ The language of rape and sexual violence is fraught with respect to pre-modern sources. Hina Azam deals with the issue of “translating” sexual violation across language, space, and time in her book *Sexual Violation in Islamic Law: Substance, Evidence, and Procedure*. Azam rightly states that due to the incommensurability between modern presumptions of female volition and autonomy and pre-modern conceptions of women as property, we must “seek out disparate discursive and legal categories” for classifying sexual violation in late Antique and medieval texts. With this in mind, I have elected to refer to Fāṭima’s sexual encounter with al-Ḥārith as rape for two reasons. First, Fāṭima was wed unwillingly, a contract that is contestable according to multiple Islamic legal paradigms. Second, within a modern reading practice, I affirm that not calling Fāṭima’s sexual violation a rape perpetuates rhetoric that has historically precluded the recognition of women as agentive and autonomous, even if we use the term on the understanding that the legal ramifications for rape have changed over time. I discuss this further below. See Hina Azam, *Sexual Violation in Islamic Law: Substance, Evidence, and Procedure* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 17.

character in a *sīra* to be born black due to being conceived during his mother's menses; a villain in *Sīrat 'Antar* shares a similar origin story.²⁹⁶ All of this leads us to wonder how such a theme became entrenched in popular lore, and what the particular catalyst of sexual deviance might reveal about the dimensions and meanings of blackness within these texts. Such an origin story seems particularly paradoxical when inscribed upon a heroic figure.

As was seen in the prior chapter, the origin stories of black heroes often reveal as much about the condition of the hero's mother as they do about the hero himself. Moreover, the coloring and constitution of a child is often contingent on the vulnerabilities and porosities of the female body. The conception and birth narrative of 'Abd al-Wahhāb, in particular, demonstrates that the medical aberration that constructs 'Abd al-Wahhāb's blackness transcends folkloric typologies. Instead, I argue that it indicates the development of a multifarious set of racialist theories—that is, theories that seek to itemize and hierarchize types of racial diversity—in Arabic scholarship and literature of the early medieval period that had evolved in addition to the previously mentioned, predominant climatological explanation of race, which adduced humoristic factors such as heat and wetness in a given location as giving rise to racial differentiation (sub-Saharan Africa, being hot and dry, blackens its inhabitants and curls their hair). Such theories also diverge in their epistemic preoccupations from the occult explanations given for racial differentiation in popular prophetology, which in the Islamic tradition typically traces the etiology of race to a curse on Noah's son, Ham.²⁹⁷ These scientific and speculative formulations filtered into popular literature and, transitively, into popular discourse, becoming

²⁹⁶ Lyons, *Arabian Epic*, volume 3, 60.

²⁹⁷ The Hamitic curse was addressed in the first chapter of this dissertation. Chouki El Hamel goes so far as to declare that the curse of Ham, contrary to any evidence in the Qur'ān or *ḥadīth* literature, foregrounded the association between racial blackness and slavery. For his discussion of role of the Hamitic curse in anti-black discourses in the Muslim world, see: Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 62-86.

widespread and well entrenched by the mid-eleventh century across a vast geography—the belletrists cited below span al-Andalus to Baghdad—at least half a century before the earliest *sīras* come into evidence in their first attestation in Samaw’al al-Maghribī’s semi-autobiographical polemical treatise, *Ifhām al-Yahūd*.²⁹⁸

In view of this multifarious discourse on racial ontology, it is remarkable that the theory that gains ultimate credence in ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s case—that a child can be born black due to menstrual sex—is largely absent from other *adab* sources. This is further surprising due to the general truism, expressed by Pierre Cachia and others, that the social mores of popular literature are often structured by the attitudes and writings circulating in “high culture,” due in part to its “carriers [being] respectful of the elite, sharing with it its basic religious tenets and mostly yielding to it the regulation of the social order;” though penetrative menstrual sex is itself universally taboo in Muslim cultures, the writings of the elite do not cite harm to progeny in the form of disease, deformity, or racial transformation as a justification for its prohibition.²⁹⁹

Below, I argue tentatively that the reason for the disparity between popular and high sources with respect to the attribution of epidermal blackness to menstrual blood contaminating the embryo may be due to this idea being inherited from elements of pre-Islamic popular culture that remained mainly in oral circulation and that appear in a vestigial fashion in certain texts. This possibility is lent support by the fact that the prospect of menstrual blood exerting a disfiguring or reconfiguring effect on other substances is cited only in some universal histories and certain

²⁹⁸ What is particularly striking in Samaw’al’s autobiographical excursus is the fact that he claims to have read versions of the *siyar* rather than hearing the tales through recitations or another secondhand medium; he encountered them amongst what Moshe Perlmann refers to as “the Arabic fiction literature of his day—stories, anecdotes, popular romances of knighthood.” The “romances” listed in his treatise are those of *‘Antar*, *Dhū-l-Himma wa-l-Baṭṭāl*, and *Iskandar dhū-l-Qarnayn*. Perlmann identifies the *dīwān* of *Dhū-l-Himma* as being a distinct text from that of *al-Baṭṭāl*, but this is likely in error. See: Moshe Perlmann, “Samaw’al al-Maghribī *Ifhām al-Yahūd*: Silencing the Jews,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 32 (1964): 15, 100.

²⁹⁹ Pierre Cachia, “Arabic Literatures, ‘Elite’ and ‘Folk,’ Junctions and Disjunctions,” *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 3 (2008): 148.

prophetic lore, and finds some of its most elaborate pre-Islamic articulations in rabbinic and patristic literature, suggesting that such superstitions predate Islam and were incorporated into Muslim consciousness in much the way of the remainder of the body of *isrā'īliyyāt* narrations, transmitted during Islam's formative period through converts or circulated amongst collocated, religiously plural groups populating the Arabian Peninsula on the eve of Islam and subsequently enshrined in text.³⁰⁰

Across editions of the *sīra* itself, the purported ramifications of menstrual sex are also diverse, and two, somewhat divergent strains of discourse emerge in the manuscripts considered here. In what we might call the syllogistically-minded versions, the dark menstrual blood is said to in turn tincture the embryo, darkening the skin and rendering the child black. In the more generalist articulations of the problem of menstrual sex, exemplified by the above epigraph, a range of horrifying prospects is adduced: the child may be black, physically defective, or mentally infirm. In both cases, the blemish that results in the *sīra* in the form of 'Abd al-Wahhab's complexion is adamantly skin deep and not an incrimination of the child's character, only of his parents' poor judgment. In this fashion, the text superficially toes the line between demonizing a sexual taboo and protecting the innocent child that results from its transgression, but disturbingly, the text's admonitory posture nonetheless discloses the cultural assumptions underpinning a mother's gravest anxieties—that her child might have some kind of physical or mental defect, of which ostensible racial blackness was clearly considered one. I argue that through reading the narrative of 'Abd al-Wahhāb and comparing across a number of manuscript and print variants of the *sīra*, a portrait takes shape of popular notions about processes of racial construction and the generation of human difference. Moreover, through the metaphor of 'Abd

³⁰⁰ G. Vajda, "Isrā'īliyyāt," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

al-Wahhāb's blackness, these tales vividly illustrate the symbiotic nature of ritual/sexual deviance and social othering, making the vignette a rich platform for considering the domains in which racialized fear-mongering was used as a technique of didacticism, discipline, and social control in a medieval Arabo-Muslim context.

In his discussion of racial ontologies, Adam Hochman advises that, “we need to abandon the idea that individuals and groups simply belong to races and start thinking in terms of *processes*,” and speaks of “racialization,” in particular, as a process through which groups of humans come to be understood as “major biological entities,” in which membership is constituted through (putatively traceable) chains of biological descent.³⁰¹ Thus, though the ontology of race is described as occurring *within* society for Hochman, it is articulated and apprehended *by* society as a biological concept. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb—whose black body is biologically constituted as a result of social transgression—both enacts this process in real time and indicates the inevitably gendered anxiety raised at the prospect of participating in a process of racial becoming or unbecoming through social and reproductive change (here constituted by a rupture rather than a gradual shift). Simultaneously, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s centrality to the *sīra* and the urgency of the question of his origins places the racial plurality of his *milieu* at “center stage,” performing similar work to that which Emily Bartels describes concerning the “Moor” in English drama, in that they became theatrically embedded “centrally within Europe’s past and present, as one crux of an open, evolving, and heterogeneous world picture.”³⁰² ‘Abd al-Wahhāb likewise acts as a central black presence within the late-Umayyad and early-‘Abbasid, Arabo-Muslim setting of the text, around which discourses of both inclusion and exclusion occur.

³⁰¹ Adam Hochman, “Racialization: A Defense of a Concept,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2018): 2-3.

³⁰² Emily C. Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor: From Alcazar to Othello* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 16.

Below I begin with a discussion of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s birth story as it appears in the 1909 Cairo edition of the *sīra*. Particularly essential to his birth story is the mixing of specific bodily fluids with ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s embryological tissue, and as such, a section will be devoted to how black bodily fluids such as bile and menstrual discharge are employed to similar ends in other Arabo-Islamic texts. Then—as was done in the previous chapter—I discuss the variations on this narrative as they appear in three manuscripts of the text as well as one additional print edition.³⁰³ The most instrumental difference to arise amongst the various versions relates to the consequences of menstrual sex listed in a given text, and so a final section will be devoted to the law and lore around menstrual blood in Islamic traditions and their forerunners in Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Hindu representations of menstruation and impurity, by way of laying out the logical pathways travelled in the *sīra* that ultimately forge a relationship between exposure to menstrual blood and black skin. I argue that through a complex set of translations and evolutions from its prior rabbinic context, the consequences of conceiving a child during menstrual sex—originally believed to have been the affliction of the offspring with leprosy—instead broaden into a range of defects with which leprosy was linked either metaphorically or epidemiologically in the Islamic world. As a social outcast reviled for his physical form, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s character may be read as a metaphorical leper. Moreover, he serves as a symbol of another, related type of social alterity whose stigmatization was more trenchant and more useful for the purposes of the *sīra* and its *milieu*, namely that of racial blackness.

Dangerous Conception: Fāṭima’s Pregnancy

³⁰³ Another scholar who has worked extensively on the manuscript tradition of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* is Claudia Ott, whose book, *Metamorphosen des Epos: Sīrat al-Muğāhidīn (Sīrat al-Amīra Dāt al-Himma) zwischen Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit*, addresses the texts’ production, dissemination, and preservation of certain oral elements. Below, I reference the stemma she created from manuscripts housed in various British, French, and German libraries to contextualize the manuscripts under study. See: Claudia Ott, *Metamorphosen des Epos: Sīrat al-Muğāhidīn (Sīrat al-Amīra Dāt al-Himma) zwischen Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit* (Leiden: Research School CNWS, Leiden University, 2003).

Unlike Khaḍrā', the mother of Abū Zayd, whose struggles with fertility impel her to pray at the sight of a black crow in order to conceive her son, Fāṭima's journey to motherhood begins not with pining for a child, but with vigorously resisting marriage and pregnancy. Rejecting a more conventional woman's role, Fāṭima favors the ascetic pursuits of a warrior which, as Remke Kruk notes, are often connected implicitly to virginal chastity.³⁰⁴ Due to family politics, Fāṭima is forcibly wed to her cousin al-Ḥārith through the machinations of her father, Maḥlūm, and her uncle, Zālim. Even after being wed, it becomes clear that Fāṭima has no intention of willingly consummating the relationship, and al-Ḥārith fears approaching her because of her anger and strength. With the counsel of the villainous *qāḍī* and Byzantine turncoat, 'Uqba, al-Ḥārith conspires to have Fāṭima's milk sibling and riding companion, Marzūq, drug her so that al-Ḥārith can rape her in her sleep. 'Uqba, also a druggist, gives al-Ḥārith a potent soporific. The elaborately pharmacological description of the drug—delivered in a winking, pseudo-scientific register—prefigures the scientific scrutiny to which 'Abd al-Wahhāb's conception will later be subjected:

هذا الدواء الذي أعطاه له عقبة بنج طيار اقر بطشي مصحون بالكبريت الأزرق لو طعم منه حبة لجمل
لغاب عن الوجود جمعة وكان عقبة يعلمه ويخيبه معه لأنه فاسق يهوي النسوان وكان إذا مرت به امرأة
جميلة لزيارته لما تسمع عنه من الديانة والصلاح فيبئنها ويفسق بها.

This was the drug which 'Uqba gave to him: a volatile, overpowering soporific, ground up with a blue-hued sulfur. Should a camel taste even a grain of it, it would lose consciousness through Friday. And 'Uqba kept it concealed on his person because he was a libertine, impassioned by women, and if a woman came to call on him, in order to hear him [speak of] piety and righteousness, he would instead drug her and take advantage of her.³⁰⁵

³⁰⁴ Remke Kruk, *Warrior Women of Islam: Female Empowerment in Arabic Popular Literature* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 45.

³⁰⁵ *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* VII:9.

After returning from a hunt, Marzūq slips this drug into a parched Fāṭima's goblet. Upon imbibing it, she falls unconscious and inert as a "plank of wood," at which point al-Ḥārith assaults her:

حل سرويلها ثم لقي تحته سروال من الحلال الأديم الطائفي محبوبك الساق لأنها كانت عليها صيغتها فتحير الحارث وهو يتعجب من تحرزها على نفسها ولم يدر ما يفعل فأخذ سكين وقور مكان الحاجة من سرويلها وواقعها إلى أن نزل دمها وبعد فراغه من قضاء حاجته تركها على حالها وخرج.

He undid her trousers, then he found drawers beneath them made of well-worked, paneled leather, with tight-fitting legs, for they were sculpted to her form. Al-Ḥārith was bewildered and astonished by [the measures she had taken] to safeguard herself and did not know what to do. Then, he took a knife and gouged out a place in her trousers as needed, and he penetrated her until her blood poured out. After he finished satisfying his urges, he left her as she was and took off.³⁰⁶

The language used here adumbrates a causal relationship between the rape and Fāṭima's bloodshed. The use of the third form of *w-q-* ' , which can mean, depending on the gender of the subject and the context, either "to attack" or simply "to have intercourse with," here seems to carry both meanings simultaneously, particularly in light of Fāṭima's predominant identity as a warrior, which often is set over and against her femininity. We may therefore read this as a double entendre; al-Ḥārith is attacking Fāṭima by means of coition.³⁰⁷

The description of this instance does not explicitly indicate the fact of Fāṭima's menstruation that later surfaces, nor does it indicate that al-Ḥārith takes notice of the blood or cares. Rather, the audience is left believing that, because this is Fāṭima's first sexual encounter, the blood is a natural result of her hymen tearing. Nonetheless, the violent language used foments discomfort for the reader. This is not a consummation, but rather a violation, and one that is ambiguous in terms of the degree of physical injury inflicted upon the victim because the source of the ensuing emission of blood is left unnamed. Al-Ḥārith departs, unrepentant, and is

³⁰⁶ *ibid.*, VII:10.

³⁰⁷ Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1981), 4896.

subsequently compelled to flee from a remorseful Marzūq’s wrath. He does not see Fāṭima again until after ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is born and his paternity is cast into doubt.

As with the mundane birth circumstances of ‘Antar examined in the previous chapter, the description of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s birth bears further analysis not because of its exceptional nature, but rather because of its normalcy. It is couched in references to divine will and creative power, which serve to reinforce the notion that bearing a child, regardless of its nature, is a divinely sanctioned experience:

وجاءها الطلق بإذن خالق الخلق وقد آن ظهور الولد كما يشاء الفرد الصمد وسبقت الشئنة والإرادة في علم غيبه المكنون الذي يقول للشيء كن فيكون بان يكون هذا المولود سيف الله المسلول وترس قبر النبي محمد بن عبد الله صلى الله عليه وسلم فعندها أخفت ذات الهمة الوجع وتجلدت وأعانها على الولادة صاحب الإرادة فولدت غلام عند السحر ولونه مثل الليل المعتكر اسود اغبر مقتول الزراعين اسود العينين ازج الحاجبين.

She went into labor, through the permission of the Creator of Creation, and so there appeared a son, as the singular Eternal One wills, and volition and will is preceded by his hidden, esoteric knowledge, with which he says “be,” and so it is. Thus he did bring about this birth of the unsheathed sword of God and shield of the grave of the Prophet Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh, peace be upon him. Though at the time the pain frightened Dhāt al-Himma, she held fast, and the Master of Will helped her. She gave birth to a boy at the approach of dawn, and his color was like the thick, turbid night, dun-colored, taut of limbs, black of eyes, and with beautifully arched brows.³⁰⁸

Particularly striking in the above passage—all of which is done in rhymed prose, or *saj‘*, which bolsters the beauty of its praise—is the use of the title “eternal one,” or *ṣamad*, for God. This epithet occurs once in the Qur’ān, in the *sūra* of “The Sincerity” (*al-Ikhlās*), which also features a monotheistic catechism refuting the existence of divine ancestors or descendants by affirming that God “neither begets nor is born” (Q 112:3). It is interesting that this reference should figure in a birth narrative—a seeming reminder to the audience that although God has no descendants, which is to say, he does not reproduce, he nonetheless retains supreme *creative* power. This, coupled with the reference to God as the “Creator of Creation,” effectively

³⁰⁸ *ibid.*, VII:11.

distinguishes the process of creation from that of reproduction and obviates Fāṭima's responsibility for the nature of her child. Indeed, when her attendants beg Fāṭima to confide her secret in them and confirm their suspicions that she has committed adultery, Fāṭima herself says simply, "seek refuge in God [...] this child is a craft or piece of handiwork [*ṣinā'a*] of the all-powerful king [*al-malik al-qādir*]," who alone can raise the dead among the living and draw black beings from white ones. That is, Fāṭima herself elevates the trope of woman as mere vessel into a sublime alibi for her child's condition, which is represented as a testament to God's unique ability to not only create, but to embellish and transform, reanimating inert, dead flesh and rendering black into white. This is further supported by her referring to her son not simply as a "creation," but instead uses a term that connotes a fabricated object (*ṣinā'a*) made by a master craftsman. In keeping with this division between birthing and bringing into being, the passage also features a recurrent Qur'ānic formulation for God's capacity for creation through speech. He merely says, "be," and it is (*kun fa-yakūn*);³⁰⁹ several of these refrains about God's creative capacities will be repeated when Ja'far al-Ṣādiq adjudicates 'Abd al-Wahhāb's paternity by way of substantiating the possibility of non-hereditary blackness as an act of God. In this fashion, 'Abd al-Wahhāb's birth is represented as being both as common and as miraculous as any other act of creation.

'Abd al-Wahhāb emerges from the womb not only with his permanent complexion but also with other mature physiognomic markers, perhaps in keeping with the tradition in the *siyar* of heroes being born unnaturally large and already exhibiting some of their innate uniqueness from birth.³¹⁰ In the above passage, the child's eyes and brows are described as, respectively,

³⁰⁹ Cf. Q 2:117, Q 3:47, Q 3:59, Q 6:73, Q 16:40, Q 19:35, Q 36:82, Q 40:68.

³¹⁰ In his masterful study of *Sīrat 'Antar*, Peter Heath characterizes the tendency among infant heroes to mature quickly and demonstrate adult qualities from a young age as a mark of the hero's future greatness, bolstered by a period of "preparatory youth," which would involve putting the hero's premature strength to work in mastering

black and beautifully arched; each of these qualities is indicative of quintessentially Arab handsomeness. Indeed, a description exactly identical to that of the newborn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s brows appears in Bayhaqī’s (d. 1066) *Dalā’il al-nubūwa* describing the brow line of the Prophet.³¹¹ This is an initial intimation of what is later confirmed by the first panel of judges to which the child is brought—although his skin is black, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb shares his father’s physiognomy.

From the outset, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s skin color puts him in harm’s way, compelling Fāṭima to hide him with one of her servants until, at the age of four, he is brought under her tutelage in Qur’ān study and martial skills. On the day of his birth, one of the women in Fāṭima’s retinue notes his complexion and suggests severing his umbilical cord and killing him immediately to “hide the affair, in order that you not remain dishonored until the Day of Reckoning,” and advising, lest Fāṭima be accused of adultery, that “the proper thing to do is to kill him, and not to perish because of him.” The other women agree, and are bemused and aggrieved, having thought Fāṭima incapable of such a flagrant transgression. It takes a poetic overture from Fāṭima to convince the women to abandon their murder plot:

| | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| خواطر عقلي مع رشيد مذهبى | أوقعني بالبنج حتى تغيرت |
| وإن قضاء الله غير مغالب | وكان الذي قد خط في اللوح كائن |
| يحاكي الدجا في لونه والغياهب | ليأت لنا هذا الذي قد رزقته |
| تفوق على أفاقها بالمصائب | لقد عظمت هذى لرزية إذ غدت |

[al-Hārith] dosed me with a drug
Such that my mind’s thoughts were altered,
Along with my rightly-guided precepts
And that which was inscribed upon the Tablet shall come into being,

martial arts and—if the hero is Muslim—putting his acumen to work through Qur’ān study. See: Peter Heath, *The Thirsty Sword: Sīrat ‘Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996), 72-74.

³¹¹ Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā’il al-Nubūwa*, vol. 1, ed. ‘Abd al-Mu‘īn Qal‘ajī, ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub, 1985), 214–215.

Indeed the judgment of God is immutable
For he visited upon us that which I now possess
He resembles the starless night in his color, and the jet-black darkness
And indeed my bitterness would only be made greater in this misfortune
If I were angry, surpassing the horizons with misery³¹²

Fāṭima emphasizes not only that God has granted her this child according to His will but that she is a woman of superior intellect and morality. She uses three terms to describe her rational faculties—*khawāṭir*, desires or opinions; *‘aql*, reason or logic; and *madhāhib*, modes of thought (most commonly used to refer to Islam’s legal schools)—along with the weighty modifier “rightly-guided” (*rashīd*). When deprived of these faculties, she was placed entirely at the mercy of God and her assailant. Here, though, Fāṭima upholds a narrative of submission to divine will rather than one of victimhood. Moreover, she semiotically repositions her child’s blackness using a poetic medium and the elegiac convention of comparing the poem’s celebrated subject with natural imagery. Fāṭima represents ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s blackness as a quality so innate to a constellation of other cosmic phenomena as to be semantically inextricable from their identities. Both the words used for “starless night” and for “jet-black darkness” are derived from roots that signify blackness itself, and that also have earthlier resonances with creatures designated by their dark color through homophony or homography, with the night (*dujā*) calling to mind a dark-feathered thrush (*dujjā*) and the word for a jet-blackness (*ghayāhib*) a deep black stallion (also *ghayāhib*).

The double resonance of this line is made all the more distinct through its response to common poetic tropes. Fāṭima evokes a thrush over the most common avian analogue for black-skinned people—the crow. The specter of the stallion in the poem draws Fāṭima herself into association with the archetypal warrior-poet persona that many heroes in the *sīras* channel, as

³¹² *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* VII:12.

well as offering a premonitory indication of her son’s future exploits. Elsewhere, Fāṭima refers to her son’s blackness as lustrous (*baṣṣāṣ*) and even likens it to the Ka‘aba’s Black Stone, a trope also found in al-Jāḥiẓ’s epistle in defense of blackness, *Fakhr al-Sūdān ‘alā-l-Bīḍān*. Al-Jāḥiẓ offers such trivia as the fact that the Black Stone is from the heavenly garden and that copper burnished to blackness is the most expensive and prized kind, thus pairing images of superficial luster with ones of holiness or of intrinsic value, much as Fāṭima tries to suggest.³¹³

It does not take long before, as a youth, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb perceives that his color causes his mother social anguish. Tearfully, the boy recites a few lines of poetry, beginning with the declaration “Although I am black, my heart has white upon it, from the shining light of day,” and concluding that one’s color does not matter, but rather one’s deeds.³¹⁴ If there were indeed a case to be made for conceptualizing each black hero in the *sīras* as a fresh embodiment of ‘Antar, this passage would offer singular support. The racially apologetic content of this line typifies sentiments expressed by a collection of black Arab poets from the Classical period, the “Crows of the Arabs” (*aghribat al-‘arab*). More specifically, its wording and meter (*wāfir*) overtly mimic a brief poem that is typically attributed to ‘Antara b. Shaddād (d. 608):³¹⁵

| | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| وما لسواد جلدي من دواء | لئن أك أسودا فالمسك لوني |
| كبعد الأرض عن جو السماء | ولكن تبعد الفحشاء عني |

Although I am black, my color is that of musk
And there is no cure for the blackness of my skin

³¹³ Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Rasā’il al-Jāḥiẓ*, vol. 1, ed. Muḥammad Bāsil ‘Uyūn al-Sūd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2000), 157.

³¹⁴ *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, VII:20.

³¹⁵ Though I, like numerous editors of his *dīwān*, claimed in the piece “Conceiving the Pre-Modern Black-Arab Hero” that this poem was by ‘Antara b. Shaddād, the recent excellent work of James Montgomery to create a critical edition of the *dīwān* and personal correspondence with him have shown this poem to most likely itself have been lifted from *Sīrat ‘Antar* and placed into ‘Antara b. Shaddād’s poetry collections retroactively; it was, in Montgomery’s words, the practice of many editors to have “included [the *sīra* poems] willy nilly” based largely on taste. It becomes, then, an interesting piece of insight into intertextuality among the *sīras* that this poem was a piece riffed off of in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* as well! James Montgomery, personal correspondence, 26 June 2019. See also: James E. Montgomery, *Dīwān ‘Antarah ibn Shaddād: A Literary-Historical Study* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

And yet, boorishness distances itself from me,
Like the land is distanced from the air of the sky³¹⁶

‘Antar conveys his goodness in a rather different fashion than ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. He likens himself and his black color to musk perfume, the fragrance of which is far more important than its coloration, and which is borne skyward, held aloft from the earthly and profane. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, meanwhile, actively encourages an interpersonal engagement in his poem, seeking to set a performative script that others may imitate by encouraging them to look beyond his surface. Unlike ‘Antar, he does not associate his color with any benign natural image, choosing instead to dismiss it as utterly irrelevant vis-à-vis the valor of his illumined heart, which has the light of day cast upon it, lending it the verisimilitude of whiteness. Whereas it was a common trope among the Crows of the Arabs to claim that although their skin was black, their souls were white, the daylight shining upon ‘Abd al-Wahhāb performs a different function.³¹⁷ Rather than suggesting that he is intrinsically white in spite of his black skin, the white light of day penetrates through ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s exterior and reaches his heart.

By the time his son makes this poetic declamation, al-Ḥārith has been informed about the child and his coloring. He convenes elders from the tribe to wrest a confession of adultery from Fāṭima. In advance of their arrival, al-Ḥārith’s first encounter with ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is prefigured by a perspectival reorientation. The narrator of the *sīra* thrusts the reader back into the oral framework of the tale by interrupting with a moralizing aside. In it, he reminds the audience that though ‘Abd al-Wahhāb looks like a “Nubian” child, he has a good heart, and such goodness renders a “black heart” (*qalb aswad*)—which is sometimes also used to mean cruel-hearted—

³¹⁶ ‘Antara b. Shaddād, *Dīwān ‘Antara* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1958), 88.

³¹⁷ On stock tropes in the poetry of the Crows of the Arabs, see: Bernard Lewis, “The Crows of the Arabs,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 88-97.

white (i.e. good) and immaculate (*abyaḍ naqī*).³¹⁸ Then, after the repetition of “the narrator said” (*qāl al-rāwī*), doubly jolting the reader back into the role of “listener,” the narrator adds, “thus there would be unto this black boy [*ghulām*] wondrous events and strange affairs, which we shall mention in due time, if God Almighty wills.”³¹⁹ ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s heroic cycle thereby begins with a reminder that a hero is presented from birth with challenges that test his innate virtue.

The word *ghulām* here is ambivalent, complicating the narrator’s statement: it can indicate a slave-boy, as it almost assuredly does in al-Kisā’ī’s description of Ham’s progeny, or it may simply mean “boy.” Moreover, *ghulām* is favored over synonyms such as *ibn* or *walad* (son) to describe the miraculous children John and Jesus in the Qur’ānic *Sūrat Maryam*.³²⁰ Fāṭima is associated with Marian symbolism in a few instances, and their stories share several features. Both women were impregnated unwittingly by forces beyond their control, and both gave birth to miraculous children who would become defenders of God despite aspersions cast on each woman’s chastity and virulent campaigns against their offspring. In light of this relationship and its overall laudatory context in the *sīra*, *ghulām* could connote positive, scripturally inflected associations as easily as negative, racialized ones evoked through the term’s association with servility.

That this testament to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s future glory is displaced from the characters within the text and voiced instead by the narrator gives it a more generalized, and perhaps apologetic, force in that it interrupts the narrative with the views of a temporally and socially

³¹⁸ Given ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s Arab physiognomy, it is unlikely that analogizing him with Nubians (*ka’annahu min awlād al-nūba*) is meant to suggest seeming ethnic affinity. Rather, the narrator likely uses “Nubian” as a byword signifying ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s darkness, as opposed to selecting a term connoting a connection to Ethiopians (who were only sometimes grouped in with *sūdān* in the formative period) or other North/East Africans such as the Berbers or Egyptians, who were seemingly thought to have fairer skin and were not typically incorporated under the term *sūdān*. See Lewis, 50–51.

³¹⁹ *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* VII:15.

³²⁰ Cf. Q 19:7–8, Q 19:19–20. The term is also used for the prophet Yūsuf in his youth in Q 12:19.

external figure, who speaks up to redeem the black child. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s struggles as a black person are thus framed conspicuously as a retrospective. Though the role of the narrator in textualized *sīras* is beyond the scope of this paper, it bears remembering that these texts have experienced centuries of redaction and re-narration.³²¹ While the narrator’s voiceover may be a nod to the *sīra*’s first-hand, recorded quality, its position in the text also renders the figure of the narrator himself as a mediating character who intervenes to instruct the reader in accepting the black hero.

Finding the Father: ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s Paternity Trial

Once al-Ḥārith and the elders have confirmed ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s rumored coloration, legal proceedings ensue to determine the identity of his father. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb cycles through several appellate “courts,” represented by a provincial judge, a set of Meccan physiognomists (*qā’if*, pl. *qāfa*), and finally Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq himself. The literary function of the physiognomists—the second tier of judges—is essentially to present narratively an otherwise disconnected *mélange* of *ḥadīths*, theories, and anecdotes that bear common associations with the adjudication of paternity in an Arabo-Muslim context.

The primary physiognomist begins by citing the words of the Prophet, stating, “the son is for the [marriage] bed [*firāsh*].” This may be interpreted as meaning “that any child born to the mother (from any intercourse) should be considered the offspring of her husband or master,” whether she is free or enslaved.³²² The second half of this *ḥadīth*, unmentioned in the *sīra*, is recorded in Bukhārī’s *Saḥīḥ* as “and for the fornicator, stoning (*wa-li-l-‘āhir rajm*).”³²³ Joseph

³²¹ On the oral-textual hybridity of the written *siyar*, see: Claudia Ott, “From the Coffeehouse into the Manuscript: The Storyteller and His Audience in the Manuscripts of an Arabian Epic,” *Oriente Moderno* 83 (2003): 443-451. See also: Thomas Herzog, “Orality and the Tradition of Arabic Epic Storytelling,” in *Medieval Oral Literature*, ed. Karl Reichl (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2012), 629-652.

³²² Uri Rubin, “‘Al-Walad li-l-Firāsh’ on the Islamic Campaign against ‘Zinā,’” *Studia Islamica* 78 (1993), 5.

³²³ Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī and al-Bukhārī, “Bāb al-walad li-l-firāsh ḥurrah kānat āw amah,” in *Faṭḥ al-Bārī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (al-Maktaba al-Islāmiyya, 1996),

Schacht has noted that this *ḥadīth*, were it taken seriously, would have decisively nullified the role of physiognomists in paternity disputes, although this seems not to have been the case in actuality.³²⁴ Although Bukhārī critiques the use of physiognomists as inciting violence and being useful only in disputes involving harlots and rapists, physiognomists were nonetheless employed in prominent positions well into the Ottoman period, occupying varying roles over time as legal and political advisors. The content of this particular *ḥadīth* developed into an actionable legal citation; according to Uri Rubin, claims of *firāsh* were indeed believed by some jurists to abrogate the role of physiognomists when used to formally contest a *di' wa*, or extra-marital paternity claim.³²⁵

As such, in opening with this *ḥadīth*, the physiognomists acknowledge an apposite legal method to their own. A final possibility is that this *ḥadīth* recitation evokes a theme that recurs throughout the *sīra*: the text acknowledges that the sciences are superficially useful tools, yet maintains that they cannot ultimately contravene what was believed to be the word of God or his messenger.

The head physiognomist proceeds with his work after this ambivalent introduction, saying,

وانه دخل عليه الأفكار لأجل سواده وتغير لونه واضطراب كونه وبالله العظيم ان هذا الصبي ولد الحارث لان عيناه كمثل عيناه وكذلك المعاصم والشمائل والكفوف والأطراف والانامل وإني أقول مقالة صادق غير جاهل.

Though thoughts came upon [al-Ḥārith], for he is black, different in color, and blemished in form, yet by God the Great, indeed this boy is the son of al-Ḥārith, for [the child's] eyes are like his eyes, and likewise with the bone structure and the [other] traits, and the palms of the hands, and the extremities, and the fingertips. Indeed I deliver a truthful report, not an ignorant one [...].³²⁶

http://library.islamweb.net/newlibrary/display_book.php?idfrom=12367&idto=12370&bk_no=52&ID=3723.

³²⁴ Joseph Schacht, "Foreign Elements in Ancient Islamic Law," *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law* 32 (1950), 5.

³²⁵ Rubin, "Al-Walad li-l-Firāsh," 11–12.

³²⁶ *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* VII:34.

In alluding to the thoughts (*afkār*) that al-Ḥārith has failed to keep at bay, the physiognomist asserts that al-Ḥārith is surely the father of the child. Though the above may simply mean that this is so despite al-Ḥārith's ideas to the contrary, read in light of another landmark case of confused paternity on the basis of color, the physiognomist may be implying that al-Ḥārith is responsible for the alteration to his son's color due to some kind of conscious or unconscious ideation, with the thoughts exerting an ambiguous amount of causality in relation to 'Abd al-Wahhāb's form. Al-Ḥārith roundly refutes this account, saying that he's told no untruth about the child's origins and that these are nothing but the ravings of an old man (*wa-mā anta illā kharāfta min kathrat al-sinīn*), though in so doing he and the physiognomist touch upon a pseudo-scientific discourse found in several sources, both Classical and medieval.

Cases of "image-imprinting," or impressing a birthmark or defect on a child through acts of sexual fantasy or psycho-emotional fixation, are attested in many cultures.³²⁷ One prominent instance in *adab* sources is found in Ibn Ḥazm's *Ṭawq al-Ḥamāma* (*The Dove's Neck-Ring*). Ibn Ḥazm relates the Biblical account of Jacob stripping poplar branches and setting the wood before his flock's trough to encourage them to calve piebald offspring, to strengthen the ranks of his flock (Gen. 30:37–39). After seeing the mottled bark whenever they feed, the sheep mimetically calve spotted offspring. To this, Ibn Ḥazm adds, "also, one physiognomist gives an account of a black child brought forth from white parents." Then he recalls the tale of a white man and woman who give birth to a black child because of a portrait of a black man hung on the wall,

³²⁷ What is referred to here as "image-imprinting" is often designated "maternal impression," attesting to the oddity of this outcome being the responsibility of the male partner, as with al-Ḥārith. Several literary works in the European tradition take maternal impression as a central element, and it features in Galenic medicine as well, though again with the mother empowered as the sole "impresser." See Graham Anderson, "Two Notes on Heliodorus," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 99 (1979), 149; Cristina Mazzoni, *Maternal Impressions: Pregnancy and Childbirth in Literature and Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 16–17. On Middle Eastern folk beliefs about maternal impression during pregnancy, see Remke Kruk, "Pregnancy and Its Social Consequences in Mediaeval and Traditional Arab Society," *Quaderni Di Studi Arabi* 5/6 (1987–1988), 426–428.

upon which the woman fixed her eyes during sex.³²⁸ Like ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s physiognomists, the one in the tale looks at the bodily “signs” and sees beyond a doubt that the child belongs to his non-black parents (*nazara ilā a ‘lāmihi fa-rāhu lahumā min ghayr shakk*), and on further investigation of the couple’s home he finds the offending picture. This story, for Ibn Ḥazm, constitutes an example of how images stimulate lust, the cautionary aspect of which is evident. Implicitly, curating a woman’s environment and limiting objects for her potential stimulation also limits reproductive risk, represented by the black child, who is a physically hyper-marked proxy for a bastard. The *sīra*, in grappling with a similar set of concerns over ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s legitimate paternity, hearkens to the scenario with the physiognomists adjudicating one such case in a similar fashion in Ibn Ḥazm and evokes the misleading and dangerous nature of thoughts. This shifts the blame for the child’s condition from a question of physical infidelity to a question of emotional infidelity. The idea of images impressing themselves upon one’s offspring is also hinted at in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* through the relationship between al-Khaḍrā’ seeing a black crow and so desiring a child (“even if he is black”) that the child emerges resembling the crow’s color. In this fashion, blackness is represented as the physical symptom (albeit displaced onto one’s offspring) of an uncontrolled fixation of the mind, in a fashion not dissimilar to the ensuing explanation of blackness as a punishment for a man’s uncontrolled lusts resulting in his having sexual intercourse with a menstruant. This impulsiveness may result, as seen in the epigraph above, not only one’s offspring being black, but also possibly being mentally impaired or mad—a permanent reprisal for a parent’s momentary lapse of judgment.

After pronouncing on al-Ḥārith’s wayward thoughts during conception, the physiognomists invite all of the men in the room to walk alongside ‘Abd al-Wahhāb across sand

³²⁸ ‘Alī b. Aḥmad b. Ḥazm, *Tawq al-Ḥamāma*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Laṭīf et al. (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘a al-Madanī, 1975), 11.

strewn on the floor. They then judge from the similarity between his footprints and those of al-Ḥārith, in conjunction with their other common physical features, that al-Ḥārith is indeed the father. This too is related to numerous ḥadīths that discuss the divining methods of physiognomists from such things as the stars and sand, and in particular echoes a tale of one physiognomist determining that a black child belongs to his white father using the soles of their feet,

‘Ā’isha, may God be pleased with her, relates that the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, came to me pleased, with joy showing upon his face, and said, “Did you not see that Mujazziz looked previously at Zayd b. Ḥāritha and Usāma b. Zayd, and said that they have the same feet? [...] In the narration that follows [this ḥadīth], [the physiognomist] went in and Usāma b. Zayd and Zayd had a blanket upon them covering their heads, and their feet were exposed. [...] During the *jāhiliyya*, the people of lineage [*nasab*] would attack Usāma’s pedigree because he was deeply dark black, and his father Zayd was whiter than cotton, so when the physiognomist said what he said regarding the difference of their color, the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, was gladdened by this for it made them stop mocking him, since they believed it.³²⁹

Still unsatisfied even with this dense application of traditional methods and references, al-Ḥārith mocks the physiognomists’ (*qā’if*, pl. *qāfa*) approach and threatens to kill his wife and son. Al-Ḥārith’s father recites some palliative verses assuring him that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is a bastard, likening his origins to those of dogs—an insinuation of Fāṭima’s promiscuity—and his appearance to a crow. These verses are reminiscent of a poem recited earlier by al-Ḥārith when he accused Fāṭima of adultery:

| | |
|---------------------|--------------------------|
| وقالت إنه ولدي كذوب | أنت باين الزناء وليس مني |
| وهذا لونه حلك مريب | ولوني أبيض حسن جميل |
| ولوني أبيض هذا عجيب | يحاكي رزق قطران للعرب |
| ونيران لها رطب رطيب | رأيتم نخل تحمل قط قتي |

³²⁹Ibn Ḥajar and al-Bukhārī, “Bāb al-qā’if,” in *Fath al-Bārī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (al-Maktaba al-Islāmiyya, 1996), http://library.islamweb.net/newlibrary/display_book.php?flag=1&bk_no=52&ID=12405#docu.

She bore a bastard son, and he is not from me
 Though she said that he is my son—liar!
 For my color is white, beautiful, and good
 And this color of his is suspiciously muddy
 This child resembles tar for the Arabs
 And my color is white—how strange
 Have you ever before seen date-palms bearing cucumbers?
 Or flames moist, fresh dates?
 Leave off with this absurdity, I do not accept your words
 And I won't countenance [such] disgrace³³⁰

The deep brown dates simmering in flame evoke not only the paradoxical marriage of water and fire, but perhaps also Fāṭima's non-normative passions for the imagined brown-skinned man that al-Ḥārith interpolates as his adulterous wife's lover. The bizarre and priapic image of the cucumbers hung from date palms further accentuates this theme of sexual deviance. Insulting 'Abd al-Wahhāb's complexion as resembling "tar" draws on a common racial cliché. And yet, the word for young dates (*ruṭab*) recalls the Qur'ānic image of when Mary, while in labor, is given a date palm by God and instructed to sustain herself with its fruits (Q 19:25). These fruits and the desert palms that bear them echo Fāṭima's remarkable fecundity, posed against the adverse environment of flame. Similarly, in *Sūrat Maryam*, the miraculous appearance of a palm in full fruit reflects Mary's own miraculous pregnancy, and moreover is sent to shade and comfort her as she gives birth in isolation. Fittingly, the "palms" (*nakhīl*) are the subject of the verb *taḥmal*, "to bear," conjugated in the feminine. This gendering links the fructification of the palms even more explicitly to a woman's childbearing. Even when impugning her, al-Ḥārith selects images that ironically reinforce Fāṭima's chastity and forbearance.

³³⁰ *Sūrat Dhāt al-Himma* VII:16.

Not all agree with al-Ḥārith's view of his own pristinely white complexion, though. In the midst of the argument, one of Fāṭima's defenders says, "do you not see regarding the child that his mother is radiantly white, and his father though fair is speckled (*ashqar abq'a*), bringing about his color—a leathery black?" In using causal language to render al-Ḥārith's complexional defect as the thing that "brings about" the black skin of 'Abd al-Wahhāb, the anonymous commenter implies that Al-Ḥārith's allegedly "speckled" skin carries with it a hereditary potential that is expressed in exaggerated fashion in his child's complexion. Though al-Ḥārith's ancestors are not described, the implication may even be that 'Abd al-Wahhāb presents in full force the trait of blackness that al-Ḥārith carried forward, and even presented, albeit in an atrophied way. This passage seems to subtly reference the theory of atavism that was discussed at some length above with respect to Abū Zayd al-Hilālī's distant black ancestry. This rationalization does not resurface elsewhere, but its use indicates at least tangential familiarity within yet another *sīra* with a principal Classical theory explaining how blackness can emerge from whiteness.

To return to the tale, at the suggestion of the physiognomists, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq is sought to offer the final word. From the outset, the imam is described in a manner indicating that his judgment will be incontrovertible. First, his kinship with the Prophet is referenced. He is then described as a "trove of virtue [*futuwwa*]," who dispels anxieties and showers generosity upon the downtrodden. When the assembled crowd sees him, they remark on the greatness of his "Alid aspect and patent Hashemite roots," further underscoring the significance of physiognomy in ascertaining or reinforcing genealogy within the text.

During his judgment, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq compels al-Ḥārith to confess that he copulated with Fāṭima while she was menstruating. In light of this, Ja'far blames the coloration of the fetus on

the mixing of menstrual blood with the embryogenic *nutfa*, or seminal drop. In so doing, though, he must explain how it is that such a mixture would tint the fetus black and not red. Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq’s character finds recourse in a distinction that is highly debated in early exegesis and jurisprudence, namely, the difference between a woman who is a *ḥā’iḍ* (menstruant) and one who is a *mustahāḍa* (metrorrhagic, or “spotting”):

أقبل الإمام جعفر بوجهه عليهم وقال معاشر من حضر أما نزل حكم الله أن الأبيض من الأسود خلق عيسى بن مريم من غير [...] والأسود من الأبيض ليس يصعب على الله ولا ينفد من قدرة الله كل أحد أب ومع ذلك أخبركم أن الرجل إذا جامع زوجته وهي حائض جاء الولد أسود لأن الله تبارك وتعالى خلق الأنفس على جلالتها من النطفة كما بدأ الأشجار على منابتها والتحف وركب هذا الجسم الأبيض الوسيم الكريم من هذه النطفة الحقيمة في ظلمات الأحشاء وهو يديرها كيف يشاء

[T]he imam Ja‘far turned his face to them and said, “People who are in attendance, has not the judgment of God been revealed, that white may come from black and black from white? This poses no difficulty for God, nor does anything exhaust the power of God—not one thing! [...] He created Jesus [‘Isā] son of Mary [Maryam] without a father, and moreover I inform you that if a man has intercourse with his wife and she is menstruating, the child will emerge black because God, blessed and glorious, created the souls, in their sublimity, from a sperm-droplet just as He initiated the trees upon [the process of] their germinating. And He enfolded and assembled this white, handsome, noble body from this vulgar droplet in the darkness of the womb, and He conducts it however He wills.”³³¹

Ja‘far then questions al-Ḥārith, who admits that Fāṭima was menstruating at the time of their sexual encounter. To this, Ja‘far responds using an analogous case that was brought before his forefather, the Prophet Muḥammad:

وقال ان الرجل اذا واقع زوجته والدم اسود مختنق في اول الحيض جاء الولد احمر اللون وان واقعها عند انتهاء الحيض وصفاء الدم جاء الولد شبيها لابيها وهذا حكم جدي وانت يا حارث واقعت زوجتك وقد لحقها ما يلحق النساء من الحيض والمستحاضه دمها احمر والحيض اسود والنطفة بيضاء ودم المرأة اغبر فاجتمع احمر وابيض واسود واغبر وخلق الخالق ودبر

And [Muḥammad] said of the man that should he have intercourse with his wife while the blood is black and stopped-up at the beginning portion of the menses, this [will cause] the boy [to] become red in color, while if he has intercourse with her at the end of the menses, when the blood is pure, the child comes to resemble his father. This is my ancestor’s judgment. And you, o Ḥārith, had sex with your wife while there clung to her whatever adheres to women from the menses—and

³³¹ *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* VII:39.

during metrorrhagia, a woman's blood is red, and the menses is black and the sperm droplet is white and a woman's blood is dust-colored, so the red and white and black and dust-color mixed together and the Creator created and arranged [him].³³²

Below, I discuss the referenced case that was supposedly brought before Ja'far's grandfather, the Prophet Muḥammad, but here I wish to address the varieties of menstrual issue that, according to Ja'far, all play a distinct role in fashioning 'Abd al-Wahhāb's appearance. A number of early *tafsīr* works grapple with this distinction between *ḥā'id* and *mustahāda* in exegeses of a verse of *Sūrat al-Baqara* that states, "And should they ask you about menstruation, say, 'it is harm [*adhā*], so withdraw from women during menstruation'" (Q 2:222). Many of these debates are preoccupied mainly with the question of timing. Some attest that *istiḥāda* represents spotting, while others define it as the condition when menstruation extends beyond a certain point, often ten or fifteen days.³³³ Qurṭubī (d. 1273), writing later, adds a distinction with respect to the type of blood, claiming that *dam al-ḥayḍ* is initially black and thick, but is later overwhelmed by red blood.³³⁴ That is, Qurṭubī, like the fictional Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, offers a color- and consistency-based timetable of menstrual blood types.

Fāṭima is not asked to confirm whether she was menstruating or which stage of menstruation she was in; rather, the evidence is clearly inscribed on her son's flesh. Nor does Fāṭima's rape become a feature of legal consideration; she does not disclose it, and who else would on her behalf?³³⁵ Instead, the seeming violence of her assault is diminished by Ja'far's

³³² *ibid.*, VII: 39.

³³³ Though his *tafsīr* postdates most of this article's primary sources, al-Qurṭubī cites the views of earlier jurists on this debate, with al-Shāfī (d. 820), for example, asserting that a woman is metrorrhagic if she bleeds for less than one full day or exceeding fifteen days; Abī 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Anṣārī al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jām' i li-ahkām al-Qur'ān*, vol. 3 (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1967), 83; Marion Katz, "Scholarly versus Women's Authority in the Islamic Law of Menstrual Purity," in *Gender in Judaism and Islam: Common Lives, Uncommon Heritage*, ed. Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet and Beth S. Wenger (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 73–105.

³³⁴ al-Qurṭubī, 82.

³³⁵ It bears noting here that understanding Fāṭima's violation as a "rape"—a concept that in contemporary society tends to carry an implicit set of legal ramifications—would be anachronistic, although I believe for reasons

judgment: Fāṭima having been left bleeding by her husband no longer connotes possible battery or her hymen tearing open, but simply an instance of lust prevailing over perspicuity. Al-Ḥārith must not have noticed her bleeding prior to his attack.

There is a critical disconnect, however, between the emission of this black blood from the feminine subject and the resemblance that it forges between the child and the masculine agent—as the physiognomists and Ja‘far have both confirmed, though ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is black, he does resemble his father. Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq enigmatically mentions that the “purity” of the blood towards the end of the menses causes this paternal resemblance; below, I propose that this ambiguity may be due to a departure in the 1909 edition from a clearer, prior telling of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s story that appears in one of the manuscripts under our consideration. However, if we are to encounter the 1909 edition on its own terms and try to make sense of this anecdote as presented, the above allusion to the purity of the blood in the later stages of the menses may refer to the chromatic saturation of the substance, meaning that it is a very pure, consistent black.

Nonetheless, the black blood’s causal link to paternal resemblance is still not immediately intelligible. It is for this reason that the double entendre through which the word for “purity” (*ṣafā*) may alternatively mean “pleasure” or “contentment” is perhaps suggestive. As expressed in a *ḥadīth* recorded by the “real” Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq about the color, viscosity, and potency of male and female *nuṭfa*, the first individual to ejaculate during copulation was thought to bear primary responsibility for the child’s appearance: if “the water (= the ejaculate) of the man precedes the water of the woman,” then the child will resemble the paternal line, and vice

previously stated that calling it rape is warranted and necessary; the text clearly wants to elicit the audience’s discomfort with the Fāṭima’s treatment, as is signaled by a number of cues, including Marzūq’s misgivings, Fāṭima’s much-lauded forbearance, ‘Uqba’s vilification, and so on, however, it would be incorrect to think of the rape as having legal bearing within the world of the *sīra*. Rape, according to Hina Azam, was understood to only be able to exist within the confines of relationships that already fit the description of *zinā*, or a sexual relationship outside the bounds of legal marriage or concubinage. Indeed, she states that, “In classical Sunnī jurisprudence [...] what jurists understood by ‘rape’ was, first and foremost, ‘coercive *zinā*.’” See: Hina Azam, *Sexual Violation*, 69.

versa.³³⁶ By extension, if menstruation is a harm or pain for a woman, and her blood meanwhile offers enjoyment to her male partner, he necessarily will be the first (or only) party to orgasm. As such, the mother's black blood could counterintuitively lead the child to resemble his father through a syllogistic reasoning not dissimilar to the idea of black blood blackening the embryo; the man's semen gains both literal and figurative primacy over the woman's reproductive materials by being the first to arrive. This ascription of agency to the man's sperm as well as the woman's blood in fashioning the child's appearance upholds the mutual culpability of each parent's body for the child's coloring: his father contributes the initial "motive force" (his ejaculate) and his mother, unwittingly and unwillingly, provides the impetus to that motive force as well as the material upon which it acts (her blood).

We may read the process by which a man is enticed to copulate with a menstruant and the ensuing effect of his child bearing an uncanny resemblance to him as a mechanism for moral refraction. The father who sired a child while his partner was menstruating, upon meeting that child, is met with a tainted image of himself. In rejecting this image by claiming that it is a product of sin—in this case, of adultery—the father ironically repudiates his own behavior, imbuing the whole scenario with didactic force. Similar notions about the ill effects of menstrual sex for the father's honor and legacy prevail in other cultures as well, and will be discussed below.

For al-Ḥārith, added to the malefaction of menstrual sex is his unwillingness to claim his resultant child. His act of paternal rejection is not a unique one; a similar event precipitated Fāṭima's own heroic ascent. Mortified at having had a daughter instead of a son, Fāṭima's father nearly committed infanticide. He was narrowly coaxed out of doing so by a slave woman, who

³³⁶ Ja'far al-Šādiq, *Tibb al-Imām al-Šādiq*, ed. Muḥsin 'Aqīl (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lāmī, 1998), 520.

then took Fāṭima into her care, only to be captured by a rival tribe during a raid. It was in this environment of estrangement, fatherlessness, and male duress that Fāṭima began to show her martial prowess.³³⁷ Both instances of rejection buttress the *sīra*'s refrain that one's actions can eclipse certain social deficiencies or indignities, the natural limit of which is *nasab*, or lineage, which for both the captive Fāṭima and the black 'Abd al-Wahhāb offers the strongest rebuttal to the two's perceived slavishness.

The formative challenges faced by both mother and son stem from their naturally (or unnaturally) constituted marginality, that is, their gender and race. This is thrown into sharp relief by the results of the trial. Fāṭima's exoneration comes at the price of having aspects of her bodily functions put on public display, after having already had her body violated and impregnated against her will. 'Abd al-Wahhāb's blackness is rendered not only as socially downgrading, but also chemically grotesque through its association with the denaturalizing taboo of menstrual sex. This grotesqueness directly undermines attempts, such as Fāṭima's praise-poem for her child, to naturalize blackness through its association with benign images. Although the alternative taboo of 'Abd al-Wahhāb's potential black father is disproven, this is only achieved through the exposure of a mystifying, contemptible act that thwarts conventional biological formulae.

The fluids to which the *nutfā* is exposed in the *sīra* to bring this unconventional result to fruition—depicted mainly as various kinds of menstrual discharge in the 1909 edition—have a long legacy in Islamic and pre-Islamic literature of being used both in the works of the learned and by God himself to didactic and disciplinary ends, typically to reinforce aspects of purity law. Below, I discuss some of the representations of bodily fluids formative to 'Abd al-Wahhāb and

³³⁷ For a translation of episodes from Fāṭima's early life, see: Melanie Magidow, "Epic of the Commander Dhat al-Himma," *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 9 (2018): 1–62.

to other black or marginal bodies in view of their uses in anathematizing taboo or non-normative behavior, explaining human reproduction, and making sense of human difference and otherness.

Skin, Blood, and Bile

Blood is generally perceived of as a main element necessary for reproduction in Islamic thought, and, as evidenced in the *sīra*, though it is intrinsic to humans it is also used by God to wondrous and sometimes unexpected ends. Many litterateurs, including the prolific al-Jāhīz, his near-contemporary Ibn Qutayba, and Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, developed theories pertaining to blood’s reproductive functions. All share the common belief that the blood that a woman would otherwise lose through menstruation is diverted to the womb to encase and nourish the fetus. Other fluids, such as the male and/or female *nuṭfa*, mingle prior to the embryonic ingress into the blood-sac of the woman’s womb. Medieval Arab physicians and theologians were divided on whether this *nuṭfa* was indeed a mixture of ejaculates contributed by both male and female, or whether it was exclusively male; this debate roughly follows the divide between the Hippocratic and Aristotelian theories of reproduction that reigned throughout Antiquity.³³⁸ Whereas for Hippocrates, both male and female could produce a seminal discharge, Aristotle averred not only that women could not emit semen, but that their menstrual blood was moreover a result of the same physiological process through which males generate semen, namely drawing nourishment from one’s organs to then concoct and nourish another body. Undergirding this is the notion that women’s humors are less balanced, rendering them reproductively deficient and dependent.³³⁹ With respect to the Qur’ān, Kathryn Kueny names the Hippocratic model—wherein the fetus “comes into being” at the very time that its flesh, blood, and bone come into existence (the stage

³³⁸ Etin Anwar, *Gender and Self in Islam* (London: Routledge, 2006), 75; Kathryn Kueny, *Conceiving Identities: Maternity in Medieval Muslim Discourse and Practice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 28–31.

³³⁹ Basim Musallam, *Sex and Society in Islam: Birth Control Before the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 43–44.

at which another “creation” is twinned with the fetal matter)—as according most closely with the scripture’s seven-stage process, outlined in *Sūrat al-Mu’minīn* (Q 23:12–14):³⁴⁰

We created man of an essence of clay, then We placed him as a drop of fluid in a safe place, then We created of the drop [*al-nuṭfa*] a clinging form [*‘alaqa*], and We made that form into a lump of flesh [*mudgha*], and We made that lump into bones, and We clothed those bones with flesh, and later We made him into other forms—glory be to God, the best of creators!³⁴¹

Blood first becomes reproductively relevant after the seminal entity is formed, though before the fetus itself becomes a mass of blood, flesh, and bone. Theoretically, blood should not interact with other sexual fluids until the stage at which the *‘alaqa* (“clot,” or embryo) lodges itself in the blood-filled uterus. According to most medieval Arabic medical-scientific texts, blood diverted for gestational uses is not evaluated as impure or disgusting in the way menstrual blood generally is, because it remains internal to the body and therefore cannot exert an impurifying effect on other objects or people. This is notably untrue, however, in the case of the Nusayrī Ismā‘īlī text *al-Haft al-Sharīf*, attributed to Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, the same Shī‘ī imām who appears within the text of *Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma*.³⁴² This text claims that God employs the bloody environment of the womb to torture infidels (*kāfirūn*) by “ensouling” their bodies earlier than their believing counterparts:³⁴³

Then, when [the embryo] becomes an attached thing [*‘alaqa*], the angels take a spirit from amongst the spirits of the infidels and they put it into that attached mass. Then, the spirit of the infidel is tortured in the [layers of the] womb, in the

³⁴⁰ Kueny, 28.

³⁴¹ *The Qur’an*, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 215.

³⁴² This work is also known by the title *al-Haft wa-l-Azīlla*; see Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq and Mufaḍḍal b. ‘Umar al-Ju‘fī, *al-Haft al-Sharīf*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ghālib (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1964). See also Farhad Daftary, *Ismaili Literature: A Bibliography of Sources and Studies* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 163; Mushegh Asatryan, “Mofazzal Al-Jo‘fi,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica* (New York: Encyclopedia Iranica Foundation, 2012), <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mofazzal-al-jofi>.

³⁴³ “Ensoulment,” as the term suggests, represents the time at which the soul of an unborn human enters its body. There is not a consensus in early *tafsīr* writings on when, exactly, this occurs, though several exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī do introduce the concept in exegeses of Q 22:5. See Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Ja‘far b. Yazīd al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur‘ān*, <http://altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=22&tAyahNo=5&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

blood and the menstrual secretion and the darkness and the obscurity until it becomes a body, for [the purpose of] castigation. Meanwhile, the spirit of the believer is luxuriating in the Garden. As to the enfeebled spirit of the infidel, it is tortured until it becomes a small lump of flesh [*mudhgha*]. At that point, a spirit from among the spirits of those who have lapsed into unbelief is taken, and that body is lodged in the womb, then it is turned upside down [...] and the spirit of the tortured infidel is inverted in the blood and menstrual secretion and other things that are within the belly, until the body has reached its term.³⁴⁴

Although the author imagines the womb's menstrual blood as a hellish space for the unbeliever, he does not imply that the blood in any way taints the unbeliever or permeates his body. Rather, the infidel is already *ipso facto* tainted. And yet, Ja'far al-Šādiq is unique in his preoccupation with menstrual blood as an affecting substance that disturbs the fetus, whereas for other scholars it was typically an unremarkable natural condition of the womb. Ja'far moreover offers an instance of the blood's instrumentality; it is a means to the end of afflicting the unbeliever much in the way that it will come to cause 'Abd al-Wahhāb's coloration.

In other texts focused on human reproduction, such as the section of al-Jāhiz's creation treatise, *al-'Ibar wa-l-'tibār* (translated by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem with the title *Chance or Creation?*)³⁴⁵ that concerns the fashioning of the body, blood has a tincturing effect, but this is described as an incidental and temporary aspect of the gestational process. Unlike in *al-Haft al-Sharīf*, blood is rendered here as benign sustenance for the fetus. In a rather bizarre forerunner of the "you are what you eat" adage, al-Jāhiz proposes that different types of nourishment have distinct skin-dyeing effects:

Indeed from the blood of his mother, [the fetus] receives that which nourishes him, like water irrigating plants, and his food supply does not abate until once his creation has been completed [...] and when he has been born, that which had nourished him shifts from the blood of his mother to her breasts, and his coloring becomes fair and pure and beautiful when his taste is sweetened.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ al-Šādiq and al-Ju'fi, *Haft al-Sharīf*, 83.

³⁴⁵ Al-Jāhiz and M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *Chance or Creation?: God's Design in the Universe* (Reading: Garnet Publishing Ltd., 1995).

³⁴⁶ al-Jāhiz, *al-'Ibar wa-al-'tibār*, ed. Šābr Idrīs (Cairo: Al-'Arabī, 1994), 78.

Implicitly, al-Jāhiz observes that children emerge pink, or “blood-colored” from the womb. Whereas al-Jāhiz attributes the subsequent change in a child’s coloration to an improvement in the type of nourishment, *ḥadīths* collected by his near-contemporary Ibn Qutayba instead claim that breast milk creates a conduit between mother and child (or wet-nurse and child) that results in the child’s skin tone coming to resemble her own.³⁴⁷

Prophetic lore of the sort found in *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*, or “stories of the prophets” anthologies and universal histories offers perhaps the most robust set of literary precedents for the intermixing of corrupting or colorful fluids at conception permeating and coloring fetuses, though here other substances—most prominently black bile (*mirra sawdā’*)—take the place of blood. Such is the case in both Tha‘labī’s (d. circa 1036) and al-Kisā’ī’s (d. circa 805) accounts of the story of Noah and his sons, recorded in their respective collections of stories about the prophets.³⁴⁸ In each case, a different admixture of substances transforms Ham and his offspring into the first dark-skinned people ever to exist, bringing into effect the so-called “Curse of Ham” that has been discussed previously. These etiologies of race, a narrative subgenre typical to anthologies of stories of the prophets, provide one of the closest points of comparison to the etiological narratives of black heroes in the *sīra sha‘biyya* texts in their structure and explanatory logic.³⁴⁹

For Tha‘labī, the possibility of racial differentiation was latent in Adam, who was made from clay of all colors, pulled from all parts of the earth; racial differentiation merely required a

³⁴⁷ ‘Abd Allāh b. Muslim b. Qutaybah, *Uyūn al-Akhhbār*, vol. 2, ed. Abī Muḥammad ibn Qutayh al-Dīnwarī (Cairo: al-Mu’assasah al-Miṣriyyah al-‘Āmma lil-Ta’līf wa-l-Tarjamah wa-l-Nashr, 1964), 68.

³⁴⁸ The narrative of Ham’s curse is directly referenced in another *sīra*, that of Sayf b. Dhī Yazan, wherein the white Arabs are pitted against the black Ethiopians, and Noah’s curse foretells eventual Arab victory (Kruk, *Warrior Women*, 189).

³⁴⁹ Cf. David Goldberg’s description of the “etiology of race” story type, in David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

catalyst.³⁵⁰ This comes during the flood, when Noah prohibits his family members from sexual intercourse while they are in the ark. Ham defies this ban, and Noah then curses him; thus God alters his *nutfa* so that he bears black offspring.³⁵¹

Rather than imagining Adam as racially prismatic, Kisā'ī pictures him as transcending epidermally-delimited race entirely, though we might note that his “default” for racial ambiguity is still related to paleness—Adam’s skin is described as almost translucent, with the light of the spirit that God breathed into him shining through it.³⁵² Eve’s skin, meanwhile, is said to be even softer and paler than Adam’s. Ham’s curse in Kisā'ī’s account more closely mirrors the Biblical narrative, wherein Ham “sees” his father’s nakedness and is then censured (Gen. 9:21–27). Ham, according to Kisā'ī, laughs when Noah’s robe slips in his sleep and his genitals are exposed, causing Noah to stir and utter, “What is this laughter? Do you laugh at your father’s genitals? May God change your created form [*khalqaka*] and blacken your face!” Immediately, Ham’s visage turns black. Noah then adds, “may slave women and slave men come from Ham’s line, until the Day of Judgment.” This command is fulfilled when, while Ham is having intercourse with his wife, God splits open his gall bladder and that of his spouse, so that the black bile produced in the gland mixes with their *nutfas*, resulting in a “black slave boy and slave girl [*ghulām wa-jāriya aswadayn*]” being born.³⁵³ Black bile in Tha‘labī and black menstrual discharge in the *sīra* are thus made to behave in an analogous fashion, in that their overproduction or redirection punishes parents for illicit acts by imposing a physical change upon their children. This is not the only instance in which this similarity between the use of these

³⁵⁰ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Tha‘labī, and ‘Abd Allāh b. As‘ad Yāfi‘ī, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’: al-Musammā bi-l-Arā’is al-Majālis* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Jumhūriyya al-‘Arabiyya, 1900), 22.

³⁵¹ al-Tha‘labī and Ibn As‘ad Yāfi‘ī, 49.

³⁵² Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh al-Kisā’ī, *Vitae Prophetarum, Auctore Muhammed Ben Abdallah Al-Kisai: Ex Codicibus Qui in Monaco, Bonna, Lugduni-Batavorum, Lipsia et Gothana Asservantur*, ed. Isaac Eisenberg (Leiden: Brill, 1922), 26.

³⁵³ al-Kisā’ī, *Vitae Prophetarum*, 99–100.

two fluids emerges, rather, menstrual blood also plays a specific role in dyeing or otherwise affecting other fluid substances on a few occasions in Islamic prophetic literature. Moreover, as shall be addressed below, the overproduction of black bile—believed to also cause leprosy—is cited in both Islamic and pre-Islamic sources as a consequence of menstrual sex.

In certain narrations about the workings of bodily fluids upon other materials, direct contact between fluid and material need not be made. Rather, contact with someone made ritually impure by the presence of the fluid is sufficient to exert a physical change upon the surrounding environment. In *al-Kāmil fī-l-Ta'rikh (The Complete History)*, Ibn al-Athīr cites a story in which the prophet Abraham (*Ar. Ibrāhīm*)—having recently departed from Egypt for Syria—helps a community build a well, but contact with a menstruating woman causes the water to run dry:

فكان إبراهيم قد خرج بها إلى الشام من مصر خوفا من فرعون فنزل السبع من أرض فلسطين ونزل لوط بالمؤتفكة وهي من السبع مسيرة يوم وليلة فبعثه الله نبيا وكان إبراهيم قد اتخذ بالسبع بئرا ومسجدا وكان ماء البئر معينا طاهرا فإذاه أهل السبع فانتقل عنهم فنضب الماء فاتبعوه يسألونه العود إليهم فلم يفعل وأعطاهم سبعة اعنز وقال إذا أوردتموها الماء ظهر حتى يكون معينا طاهرا فأشربوا منه ولا تغترب منه امرأة حائض فخرجوا بالأعنز فلما وقفت على الماء ظهر إليها وكانوا يشربون منه إلى أن غرقت منه طامت فعاد الماء إلى الذي هو عليه اليوم

Ibrāhīm left Egypt [with Sarah (*Sārra*)] for the Levant, out of fear of the Pharaoh, and settled in Saba'a in the land of Palestine, and Lot [*Lūt*] settled in Mu'taflika, which was a day and a night's journey from Saba'a. God sent him there as a Prophet, and Ibrāhīm fashioned a well and a place of worship in Saba'a, and the well's water was clear and pure, but the people of Saba'a abused him, so Abraham departed from them. The water then ran dry, so they followed [Ibrāhīm], asking him to return to them, which he did not do, instead giving them seven goats. He said: when you bring them to the water, it will well up until it is clear and pure, so drink from it and do not allow a menstruating woman to ladle from it. They left with the goats, and when they stopped at the watering hole, the stream reappeared to them. They were drinking from it, but then a menstruating woman ladled from it so the water dissipated to the way it is to this day.³⁵⁴

³⁵⁴ Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil fī-l-Ta'rikh* vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1997), 10-11.

Here, it is not contact with menstrual blood itself but rather with a woman who is menstruating that renders the well unusable. The cleanness of the well's fluid, described as clear (*ma'īn*) and pure (*tāhir*) is juxtaposed with the ritual impurity of the menstruant (*al-ṭāmith*), generated by the fluid issuing from her womb, with the latter overpowering and cutting off the former. Notably, the term used for menstruant here is not the more generic term, *al-ḥā'id*, but rather one that evokes the deflowering of a virgin or the onset of menarche, that is, it is a term that may be applied to bleeding for the first time from various causes suggesting sexual maturity, placing the woman on the threshold of womanhood as it is generally construed, in addition to being in a ritually and medically liminal condition. In the above tale, a lack of control of such bodies effects not only the woman herself, but the entirety of her community, implying a link between the management of sexually mature women and the maintenance of society as a whole. This lesson is dispensed through symbolism rather than through science, yet the relationship between menstruation and the alteration of other fluids is a remarkable constant between this tale and the other literature explored here.

In contrast to this allegorical representation of the effects of menstruation, Ṭabarī's *Ta'riḫ al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk* (*History of Prophets and Kings*), menstruating women are directly linked with the alteration of a material that is still observable to this day, namely the Black Stone in the Ka'aba,

Al-Ḥārith relayed to me that Ibn Sa'd said, via Ibn Hishām b. Muḥammad, via his father, via Abī Ṣāliḥ, from 'Abbās, that "When Adam fell from the Garden, the Black Stone was sent down with him, and it was more intensely white than snow, and Adam [Ādam] and Eve [Ḥawā'] cried over what they had lost, meaning the luxury of the Garden, for hundreds of years. And they neither ate nor drank for forty days, then they resumed eating and drinking, and on that day they were on Mount Būdh, where Adam had fallen, and he did not draw near Eve for a hundred years.

Abū Humām said that his father told him via Ziyād b. Khaythuma from Abī Yaḥiya, the fodder seller, that "While we were sitting in the mosque, Mujāhid

said to me, ‘do you see it?’ I said, ‘O Abū al-Ḥajjāj, [you mean] the stone?’ He said, ‘That’s what it’s called?’ I said, ‘Is it not a stone?’ He said, ‘By God, ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Abbās told me that it was a white gem with which Adam left the Garden, and which he showered generously with his tears, for Adam’s tears did not cease from the moment he left the Garden until his return two thousand years later, when Iblīs could no longer compel him to anything.’ So I said to him, ‘O Abū al-Ḥajjāj, then what blackened it?’ He replied, ‘Menstruating women would touch it during the *jāhiliyya*.’”³⁵⁵

Again, unlike with ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s tale in the 1909 edition, the effect of menstrual blood is not brought about through direct contact between the affected material and the substance itself. Rather, contact between the sacred stone—sent down from the heavenly Garden itself with Adam—and impure menstruating women exerts a blackening effect, implicitly due to the sin of mixing the sacred with the profane. Other sources do not include this tradition that freights the women of the *jāhiliyya* with all the blame for the Black Stone’s loss of its original coloring, instead claiming that the generally sinful conduct of people during the *jāhiliyya* gradually corrupted the stone’s nature. Still other writers cite the blackness of the Black Stone as a mark of beauty, not of desecration, as was seen in the case of al-Jāḥiẓ referring to it as lustrous or resplendent (*baṣṣāṣ*) above. And yet, Ṭabarī’s unique indictment of women’s behavior during the *jāhiliyya* accords with Islamic legal precepts about the limitations placed on women’s activities during menstruation; one *ḥadīth* quoted in the jurist al-Shāfi‘ī’s *Umm*, for example, permits women to perform every activity during the *ḥajj* except for circumambulating the Ka‘aba (a permission given by Muḥammad after ‘Ā’isha begins menstruating during the pilgrimage), thus militating against prayerful engagement with this most sacred of sites for menstruating women while permitting other rituals.³⁵⁶ Though the tradition cited by Ṭabarī does not appear in legal sources, it nonetheless provides an exemplary demonstration of a phenomenon expressed by

³⁵⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk* (Al-Ḥakawātī), <http://al-hakawati.net/arabic/civilizations/77a1.pdf>, 51.

³⁵⁶ Al-Shāfi‘ī, *Kitāb al-Umm*, 77.

Haggai Mazuz with respect to myths around menstruation gleaned from midrashic literature, namely that as long as myths and notions inherited from the pre-Islamic period did not conflict with the precepts of Islamic orthodoxy, there was seemingly no serious opposition to them among traditionists.³⁵⁷ Several slight variations on such myths appear across the editions of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* discussed below.

Variants of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s Blackening in MSS of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*

A tacit permissibility around apocryphal notions that shore up religio-legal consensus may help to explain the persistence of a set of myths around the ill effects of menstrual sex that have roots that significantly predate Islam, a number of which are put to use in explicating ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s condition across *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*’s variant manuscripts and print editions. Reading the section of the *sīra* depicting Ja‘far’s final pronouncement on ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s paternity as it appears in several versions of the *sīra*, it is possible to extract a list of several socially and/or physiologically devastating alleged consequences to menstrual sex, all of which are visited upon one’s progeny rather than upon the couple guilty of this forbidden act. In one 17th-century manuscript of the *sīra* held by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS Arabe 3855,³⁵⁸ menstrual sex is said to result in children who are black, deformed, or mentally infirm, while typical bodies are said to be white and handsome (*al-abyaḍ al-wasīm*),

اما الاسود من الأبيض فانه ليس بصعب على الله عز وجل اذ كل ما يبلغ {؟} ³⁵⁹ يقدر يصنع في صنعته الأبيض والأسود ولا يقدر يصنع الأبيض اسودا ولا الأسود ابيضا الا الله فقال والله عز وجل قادر ان يقول للشئ كن فيكون انما امره بين الكاف والنون خلق عيسى بن مريم من غير اب ومع هذا ان الرجل اذا جامع زوجته وهي حايض جا الولد اما اسود واما ناقصا واما معتوها لاجل فساد دم الحيض لان الله تبارك وتعلي خلق الانفس على جلالتها من قطرات النطفة كما بدع الأشجار على منابتها من لطايف المواهب والتحف وركب هذا الجسم الأبيض الوسيم الكريم من تلك النطفة الحقيمة في ظلمات الاحشا وهو يدبرها كيف يشا

³⁵⁷ Haggai Mazuz, “Midrashic Influence on Islamic Folklore: The Case of Menstruation” *Studia Islamica* 108 (2013): 201.

³⁵⁸ Using nearly 30 different manuscripts of the *sīra*, Claudia Ott proposes four different stemmata for the text. With one exception (BnF MS Arabe 3840 and Cambridge MS Qq 247), each manuscript and print version I have used accounts for a different stemma. See: C. Ott, *Metamorphosen des Epos*, 101-137.

³⁵⁹ This word is in the crease and thus unclear, except for the final letter (*ghayn*).

“As for black from white, such a thing is not hard for God, mighty and exalted. Behold—all that exists, he is capable of [bringing into being]. With his creative skill, he fashions the white and black, and no one can make the white black nor the black white save God.” He said, “For God, mighty and exalted, is able to say to a thing ‘be’ [*kun*] and it will be, commanding it between the *kaf* and the *nūn*.³⁶⁰ He created Jesus [‘Isā], son of Mary [Maryam] without a father. And along with this, if a man has intercourse with his wife while she is menstruating, the child will be either black or deficient or feeble-minded because of the corruption of the menstrual blood, for God, blessed and praised, created souls in their gloriousness from drops of sperm, like trees are made to grow [from seeds], by the graces of the Giver, and He enfolds and transports this white, handsome, honorable body from this vile sperm drop in the shadows of the bowels, and He designs it as He wills”³⁶¹

As is visible when comparing this version with the 1909 edition, there is otherwise quite a large amount of verbatim overlap between this rendering of the tale and its later, definitive version.³⁶² The same set of ideas about what types of bodies and bodily infirmities menstrual sex can produce is repeated in MS Arabe 3840, a composite manuscript dated to approximately a century after MS Arabe 3855 and situated on a different stemma according to Ott’s scheme. She identifies it as the progenitor text for a number of other manuscript copies of the *sīra* made throughout the 19th century.³⁶³ Here though, only blackness and physical defectiveness (*nāqiṣ*, an ambiguous term that literally means “lacking” or “defective,” but here seems to connote bodily weakness), are mentioned, with Ja‘far claiming:

اخبركم ان الرجل اذا جامع زوجته وهي حايض جاء الولد اما اسود اما ناقصا لاجل فساد الدم

“I inform you that should a man have intercourse with his wife while she is menstruating, the child will be born either black or defective because of the contamination of the blood.”³⁶⁴

³⁶⁰ The Arabic command “be,” is “*kun*,” and is comprised of two letters (*kāf* and *nūn*), hence this phrase is the equivalent of saying that God commands something to “be” and it comes into existence between uttering the “B” and the “E.”

³⁶¹ The ellipsis is due to the fact that the volume (the final in this fragmentary version of the *sīra* containing only the first four parts) concludes here. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS Arabe 3855, ff. 173.

³⁶² For the full excerpt of the above and all further passages cited from different *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* editions, please see Appendix A.

³⁶³ C. Ott, *Metamorphosen des Epos*, 112.

³⁶⁴ For the full excerpt, see Appendix A. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS Arabe 3840, ff. 379.

Some editions of the *sīra*, including the 1909 Cairo version used above, attempt through syllogism to relate the color of menstrual issue to the colors of one’s progeny conceived during menstrual sex. Because, in the view of most Islamic medical scholars, the coloring of menstrual issue is not uniform throughout the duration of the menses, this means that children conceived at different points in a woman’s cycle will be colored in a different way. This idea is repeated in the Tunisian Judeo-Arabic version of the *sīra*, printed at some point in the 1890s. Rather than Ja‘far explaining this syllogism, though, the narrator of the text articulates it as an instructive aside, saying that because of the telltale tincturing of one’s children, a concealed sin is bound to be brought to light. Moreover, unlike with the 1909 Cairo version, which expounds lengthily on the exact way in which reproductive materials combine to bring about the dyeing of the embryo, the Judeo-Arabic version simply pronounces that the idea that black children result from menstrual sex is one “in which there is no doubt,” implying that perhaps over time this myth became more stable, canonical, or commonplace,

وثمة كلام صحيح انه اذا كان راجل خالط مرة ويكون هاك الوقت مجال الحيض متاعها ودفق وترفع هاك الوقت يحنق المولود يجي اكحل واذا كان على عقاب الحيض يجي الصغير اسمر وهذا شي ما في شك ومع هذا كله باش ما يقعدشي قبر في ظهر.

There is a truthful saying that if a man has sexual intercourse with a woman and at that time her menses is at its height, while [the blood] is pouring forth and [its level] is elevated, it is determined that the newborn will emerge dark-colored, and if it was on the heels of the menses, then the little one will come out black. This is something in which there is no doubt, and through this that which is buried comes to the surface.³⁶⁵

Notably, this narrative follows the 1909 Cairo edition’s format of assigning different skin colorings to the child depending on the stage of the menses during which its conception occurs, with a child being dark-skinned but not necessarily black at the initial phase (mirroring the “red”

³⁶⁵ For original Hebrew and remainder of the excerpt, see Appendix A. E. Farhi and H. Sitruk, *Sīrat al-Dalhama* (Tunis: 1890-?), ff. 382.

skin of the child conceived at this time in the 1909 version), and black if the copulation occurs in the menses' final days. The sureness with which the relationship between menstrual sex and a child's mutation is asserted here may also depend, to some extent, on the context of the Judeo-Arabic version's audience. As shall be discussed further below, rabbinic literature promises dire consequences for sexual intercourse during menstruation, some of which affect the mother and others the children: one's children will be afflicted with leprosy or elephantiasis, and women will die in childbirth.³⁶⁶ For an audience for whom the wisdom dispensed in these lines of the *sīra* would echo with much more ancient sources of communal norms and theological truths, it may have been a matter of little controversy to declare that there was no doubt in the text's specious medical assertions.

Though Ott places this version directly in MS Arabe 3840-51's genealogy, Cambridge MS Qq 247 most closely approximates the text of the 1909 Cairo version in its thoroughness and in the nature of its explanation of 'Abd al-Wahhāb's blackness. As with the Cairo edition, a differentiation between menstrual issue and metrorrhagia is made on the basis of timing and color (this difference is also seemingly alluded to in the Judeo-Arabic version, though not expressed in the clinical terminology of *ḥayḍ* and *istihāḍa*),

اعلموا يا سادات العرب واهل المناصب والرتب ان مثل هذه الحكومه جرت بين يدي جدي رسول الله صلي
الله عليه وسلم وحمل اليه مثل هذا الولد ولد اسود وابوه وامه ابيضان فحكم جدي انه ولدهما لاجل الموافقه
في حيض النساء وقال ان الرجل اذا واقع زوجته والدم اسود مختنق في اول الحيض جا الولد عميق السواد
فان واقعها عند انتها الحيض وصفا الدم ونضافه {نظافة؟} الرحم جا الولد شبيه ابيه وهذا حكم جدي وانت
يا حارث واقعت زوجتك وهي حايض ولحقها ما يلحق النساء من الحيض والمستحاضه دمها احمر والحيض
اسود والنطفه بيضا ودم المرأة اغبر فاجتمع اسود واحمر وابيض اسود واغبر وخلق الخالق ودبر

“Know, o prominent Arabs and people of rank and esteem, indeed this is like a case that fell into the hands of my ancestor the messenger of God—peace and

³⁶⁶ The literature produced by the Christian clergy in Late Antiquity shares these beliefs as well, as with the church father Jerome, who claims that fetuses conceived during menstruation will be deformed due to the corrupting effects of the menstrual blood—a sentiment that is reproduced nearly word-for-word in the *sīra*. On this, see: Sharon Faye Koren, “The Menstruant as ‘Other’ in Medieval Judaism and Christianity,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues* 17 (2009): 33-59.

blessings upon him—there was brought to him a child like this one, a black child whose father and mother were both white. So, my ancestor judged that he was their child because of the accordance with [the time of] women’s menstruation. He stated that if a man has intercourse with his wife and the blood is black and flowing profusely at the beginning of the menstrual period, the child will come out a deep black, and if he has sex with her at the end of the menses, at which time the blood is unmixed and the womb is clean, the child will emerge looking like his father. This was the judgment of my ancestor, and you, o Hārith, had sex with your wife while she was menstruating and there clung to her that which clings to women from her menses, and the blood of metrorrhagia is red and that of the menses is black and the sperm drop is white and the woman’s blood is dark, so the black and red and white and dark color mixed and created this creation and design[ed it].³⁶⁷

This version of the *sīra* could also be used to clarify an aforementioned ambiguity in the Cairo edition, namely the question of what is meant by *ṣafā’* (purity, but also delight or pleasure) in relation to the condition of one’s blood. Above, I assume that in the Cairo edition the *nihāya*, or end, of the menses is meant to indicate its final stage rather than the time after which the menses has elapsed, and I speculate that the term could, through a double-entendre, indicate both the pleasure that comes from the added natural lubrication afforded by having sex during the menses and the comparative purity of the blood’s color, with black blood often likened in various sources to something mixed or to a suspension, like ink sediment.³⁶⁸ However, in MS Qq 247, *nihāya* appears to mean the time at which the menses ends and the womb reverts back to its typical state: filled with blood, yes, but with pure blood not contaminated by coexisting with menstrual issue and not perturbed by the main cause of blood being regarded as impure in Islamic thought, namely, by its egress from the body. Rather, the womb is described as being clean in addition to the blood being pure (*ṣafā’ al-dam wa-nazāfat al-raḥim*). During the menses, when blood is exiting the body, the womb is rendered impure because, this line between inside

³⁶⁷ For full excerpt, see Appendix A. Cambridge MS Qq 247, folios not numbered.

³⁶⁸ Haggai Mazuz, “Islamic and Jewish Law on the Colors of Menstrual Blood,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 164 (2014): 100.

and outside is being actively transgressed by the uterine lining being sloughed off, making it impossible to discern “clean” portions of the womb from “unclean” ones; the child accordingly becomes black in the above narrative during the peak of a woman’s flow. Following the logic of the manuscript above, we find that blood in a ritually pure womb exerts no ill effect, and if anything it makes space for the salutary consequences of normative conception that are brought about by the natural potency of a healthy male *nutfa*—the child will resemble his father.

Taken together, this batch of renderings of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s birth narrative give the following consequences for menstrual sex: one’s children may be red-brown or black, depending on the stage of the menses, they may be physically weak, or they may be mentally ill. Evoking such outcomes in popular literature clearly serves as a scare tactic, militating against non-normative and religio-culturally prohibited sexual practices, but why these specific consequences? What are the precedents for this set of beliefs? And why do these ideas scarcely crop up in any *adab* sources save the tentatively connected episodes espoused in renderings of the lives of early prophets as they appear in universal histories such as that of Tha‘labī, Ṭabarī, and Ibn al-Athīr? Looking to Hindu, Zoroastrian, and Jewish writings on the etiology and nature of menstruation may provide answers to a few of these questions.

‘Abd al-Wahhāb, The Metaphorical Leper

In his essay on the representation of black people in medieval Arabic literature, *Tamthīlāt al-Ākhar: Ṣūrat al-Sūd fī-l-Mutakhayyal al-‘Arabī al-Wasīf* (“Representations of The Other: The Depiction of Blacks in the Medieval Arab Imaginary”), Kāzīm Nādir notes that the choice of ascribing ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s blackness to menstruation is a clever one on the part of the *sīra* composer, because it combines a few disparate myths and notions about menstruation and racial difference in such a way as to simultaneously explain ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s non-hereditary

blackness, indict al-Ḥārith for his rape of Fāṭima, and to suit the sensibility of an urbane literary audience. To this last point, Kāzīm Nādir notes that one of the only *ḥadīth* narratives that explicates how one can be born black to white parents does so through the metaphor of camel-breeding, in which offspring differing in color from their parents is a common enough occurrence,

A man from the Banū Fazāra approached the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, and said, “My wife gave birth to a black boy,” so the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, said, “Do you have camels?” [The man] replied, “Yes.” [The Prophet] said, “And what are their colors?” He said, “Red.” [Muḥammad] replied, “Are there ash-colored ones?” He said, “Sure, there are ash-colored ones among them.” [Muḥammad] said, “So how did that come about?” [The man] said, “It’s possible that it’s an interruption of the breed [*la ‘allahu naz ‘ahu ‘irq*].” [Muḥammad] replied, “And this could be an interruption [of the child’s origins].”³⁶⁹

In this highly Socratic scenario, Muḥammad helps a man confounded by his newborn son’s appearance to reason through an explanation based on his lived experience, rather than offering the simple aforementioned pronouncement of *al-walad li-l-firāsh*, used in cases of contested legitimacy. This is perhaps because here the target of Muḥammad’s rhetoric is not the diffusing of an accusation but rather the dispelling of perplexity over a seemingly irrational or impossible result. Responding to the question of why this *ḥadīth* was not simply quoted to explain the case of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, Nādir offers the following explanation,

As we mentioned a bit earlier, it is known that the Messenger of God (peace and blessings upon him) interpreted the birth of a black child to a white mother and father as a kind of “abrogation of origin” (*naz ‘ al- ‘irq*) as happens among camels, and when the shocked parents heard this explanation they understood it, for they were Bedouin Arabs and camel owners. The society of the *sīra*, though, seems to be a settled, urbanized society that does not live with camels or have experience

³⁶⁹ Ibn Ḥajar and al-Bukhārī, “Bāb idhā ‘araḍ bi-naḥī al-walad,” in *Fath al-Bārī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (al-Maktaba al-Islāmiyya, 1996), http://library.islamweb.net/newlibrary/display_book.php?idfrom=9693&idto=9694&bk_no=52&ID=2957.

with them, and for this reason the choice of the Messenger of God's interpretation would not be understood among them, nor would it be persuasive for them.³⁷⁰

Nādir notes, moreover, that the ascription of a child's maladies to having been conceived during its mother's menses is a feature of Islamic—and particularly Shī'ī—legal discourse. However, many such cases describe the child as being fated to become leprous (*majdhūm*), a condition which turns the skin white rather than black. Through a clever decision (*ikhtiyār dhakī*), Nādir claims that the *sīra* author(s) have married these two concepts—namely that having sex with a menstruant can alter the condition of the child's skin, and that a child can naturally be born a wholly different, darker color than its parents—to contrive a resolution for 'Abd al-Wahhāb's tale that can plausibly be linked to both the Prophet and to a prominent Shī'ī thinker in the form of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq.³⁷¹

While I believe that Nādir has found a plurality of important elements that could all play a constitutive role in 'Abd al-Wahhāb's story, in investing the *sīra* composers with sole creative control, Nādir does overlook some other possibilities for how blackness and contact with a menstruant come to be associated not only in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, but in various other sources as well, from al-Ṭabarī to the *sīra* of 'Antar b. Shaddād. Moreover, we need not think of blackness and leprosy as being entirely opposite conditions; rather, there are several ways in which the two are intimately conceptually related. To account for this, it is useful to revisit some pre-Islamic views on menstruation and its effects.

The notion that menstrual blood can cause darkening, disease, and putrefaction is an ancient one. In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder lists a number of the effects of menstruation on a woman's surrounding environment: storms can be kept at bay, the color of linens is altered

³⁷⁰Nādir Kāzīm, *Tamthīlāt al-Ākhar: Ṣūrat al-Sūd fī-l-Mutakhayyal al-'Arabī al-Wasīf* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr), 346.

³⁷¹*ibid.*, 344.

even by the ash of the blood, metals corrode, crops are contaminated, vermin are made to flee from the space where a menstruant has walked, and contact with a menstruant can cause men fatal diseases and even make other women miscarry.³⁷² As with Ibn al-Athīr’s menstruant at the well, one need not even make physical contact with the blood itself to experience many of the menstruant’s polluting effects, rather, Pliny cites the terrible smell of menstrual blood as one of the main impetuses to the myriad strange effects he describes.

The *Dharmashastras*, a collection of Sanskrit legal maxims, caution men not to take food from women during their menses because it has sinful pollutants latent within it, from when women agreed in a primordial covenant to take on some of the guilt of the god Indra after he had killed Vritra, another deity.³⁷³ Even when such rules are abided by, a menstruating woman sitting in the home of a high-caste individual downgrades the caste of the household—*brahmanas* become tantamount to *shudras* (members of the lowest caste) under these circumstances.

Ancient Iranian culture also ascribes menstruation to a curse inherited from the activity of deities, though in a rather different fashion: according to the *Bundahišn*, a Zoroastrian collection of stories that includes tales of creation, the first menses occurs when the demon-harlot, Jeh, tries to rouse the demon king Ahriman from a coma-like state by offering to do all sorts of polluting deeds on his behalf, saying she will “vex the water, [...] vex the plants, [...] vex the fire of Ohrmazd, [and will] make the whole creation of Ohrmazd vexed.”³⁷⁴ Ahriman awakens, and kisses Jeh on her forehead as a reward, whereupon she starts to bleed from her vagina. The Zoroastrian *Dēnkard* carries Jeh’s sinister promises forward, saying that menstruating women

³⁷² Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. A.C. Andrews, D.E. Eichholz, W.H.S. Jones, and H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 56-61.

³⁷³ Janet Chawla, “Mythic Origins of Menstrual Taboo in Rig Veda,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 29 (1994): 2819.

³⁷⁴ Joseph H. Peterson, *Greater Bundahishn*, *Avesta.org*, 2002, <http://www.avesta.org/mp/bundahis.html>.

still make food lose its taste, soil waters, and cause mental infirmities and loss of memory to interlocutors.³⁷⁵ Shai Secunda argues persuasively that it is from this Zoroastrian association of menstruation with the demonic and demon-possession that the Babylonian Talmud derives its extremely negative views on menstruants, which seem *sui generis* against the backdrop of the remainder of Jewish law both in the Bible and in the Jerusalem Talmud.

It is in the Babylonian Talmud that, to my knowledge, menstrual sex first becomes associated explicitly with the potential for fatality or affliction of sexual partners, with the infliction of leprosy (*tsara 'at*) upon one's offspring first attested in midrashic (homiletic narrative) literature such as Leviticus *rabbah*, composed in Babylon around 500 CE. It is perhaps only fitting that many of the problems caused by the contagion of leprosy mirror those that were thought to be caused by menstrual blood in many of the sources above—water and food is contaminated by its presence and should not be shared with the unaffected, the leprous body emits an offensive stench, as does the menstruating one, and people are cautioned to withdraw physically from the afflicted in either case and take extreme measures to quarantine him/her.³⁷⁶ The man who enjoys his wife while she is in such a state is thus made to have a child whose daily life serves as a constant reminder of the taboo conditions in which his father took a moment's pleasure. The metaphor of leprosy being applied to grotesque or toxic femininity also appears elsewhere in Talmudic literature, further concretizing the link between a woman's excesses and the affliction of men and their households, as in the passage:

³⁷⁵ Shai Secunda, "The Fractious Eye: On the Evil Eye of Menstruants in Zoroastrian Tradition," *Numen* 61 (2014): 88.

³⁷⁶ On the connection between illness and menstruation in the Babylonian Talmud and the medical implications of menstruation in ancient Persian culture writ large, see: Shai Secunda, "The Construction, Composition, and Idealization of the Female Body in Rabbinic Literature and Parallel Iranian Texts: Three Excursuses," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 23 (2012): 60-86. On the punishment of leprosy for intercourse with a menstruant, see: H. Mazuz, "Midrashic Influence on Islamic Folklore," *passim*. Cf. BT *Peṣahim* 111a; Leviticus *rabbah* 15:5; Midrash Tanḥūmā, Leviticus, Meṣōra' 39:22b, etc.

An evil wife is a *ṣāra‘at* [=leprous affliction] to her husband. Wherein lies the cure? He should divorce her. Then he will be cured from his leprosy.³⁷⁷

A connection between the transgression of menstrual sex and leprosy in turn appears in Islamic exegetical and prophetic literature: a number of *ḥadīths* attest that should a man copulate with his wife and conceive a child, “[the child] will be afflicted with leprosy (*judhām*), and he’ll certainly have no one to blame but himself [*fa-lā yalūman illā nafsahu*].”³⁷⁸ A variant on this *ḥadīth* makes the warning nature of it even more explicit, saying, “Beware of women in their menstruation period because *elephantiasis* [attacks] the children born as a result of intercourse during menstruation.” In much the way that menstruation “vexes the water,” in the ancient world, so too does it implicitly vex the “disdained water” (*mā’ mahīn*) of the nuṭfa during reproduction.

The appearance of such ideas in *ḥadīth* but comparative absence from Islamic legal literature on menstruation is remarkable. Haggai Mazuz has remarked that though Islamic scholars rejected most *halakhah* about women’s ritual purity (*niddah*) as it relates to menstruation, they nonetheless “still adopted Jewish Aggada [= narrative or anecdotal portions of the Talmud] on the subject,” cultivating a folkloric tradition around menstruation not dissimilar to the views of the rabbis that ran parallel to—but was often not included in—major doctrinal sources.³⁷⁹ This tradition may have conflicted somewhat with legal precepts, such as that which appears in the epigraph above, from Shāfi‘ī’s *Kitāb al-Umm*, which casts contact with menstrual blood as no more or less sullyng than contact with any other blood, but it nonetheless

³⁷⁷ Sanhedrin 100a, quoted in: Joseph Zias, “Lust and Leprosy: Confusion or Correlation?” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 275 (1989): 30.

³⁷⁸ Al-Mawārdī, “*Bāb ḥarf al-mīm*: 9078,” in *Fayḍ al-Qadīr, al-Maktaba al-Islāmiyya*, http://www.islamweb.net/newlibrary/display_book.php?flag=1&bk_no=304&ID=18191.

³⁷⁹ H. Mazuz, “Midrashic Influence on Islamic Folklore,” 190-191.

supported the overarching legal aim of minimizing sexual contact with menstruants.³⁸⁰

Moreover, these explanations may in fact have had more force than many legal strictures that deterred such contact; the punishment for men who copulate with their wives during their menses was typically a fairly minor, penitential fine amounting to between a half dinar and a dinar.³⁸¹

The Arabic term typically used for leprosy in these discouraging anecdotes is *judhām*, a term often associated with a specific form of leprosy called elephantiasis, one of the most striking symptoms of which is the exaggerated swelling of the limbs. One who is afflicted with such a condition is either *majdhūm*, *ajdham*, or sometimes *mujadhdham*. There are a few ways in which the condition of being *majdhūm* could have come to be associated with blackness, despite Kazim’s salient point about the dichotomous appearance leprous sores (which tend to be light or silvery in color) and black skin. Prevalent understandings of humoral pathology during the medieval period ascribed leprosy to the spread of black bile (*al-mirra al-sawdā’*) throughout the body;³⁸² it is the overproduction or loosing of same substance upon the other internal organs that was instrumental to the creation of the original black bodies, if we recall Kisā’ī’s aforementioned account of the etiology of race in his *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* anthology. That is, uncontrolled black bile could result in either leprosy or epidermal blackness, and as such the two may have been regarded as epidemiologically linked.

More plausible still is that blackness—insofar as it was considered a deformity or blight—was lumped together with a range of other bodily defects that came to be regarded as rendering one *majdhūm* in layman’s terms. Though not physiologically leprous, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s character may thus embody a secondary definition of the word “leper,” as “a person to

³⁸⁰ al-Shafī‘ī, “Bāb dam al-ḥayḍ,” 70.

³⁸¹ K. Nādir, *Ṣūrat al-Sūd*, 344.

³⁸² Timothy S. Miller and John W. Nesbitt, *Walking Corpses: Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 65-67.

be shunned; a reviled or repulsive person; an outcast,” due to the plurality of other causes of social rejection and loathing for which leprosy has long been an evocative metaphor.³⁸³

According to Kristina Richardson, the parameters for bodily normativity in medieval Muslim society were fairly narrow, and the range of physical defects correspondingly numerous. She describes the physical ideal as follows:

The normative body belongs to an Arab male who has dark (not blue or green) eyes, dark (not light) hair, a hooked (not flat) nose, a full (not thin) beard, and brown (not black) skin, and who stands at medium height.³⁸⁴

In the early period, Richardson finds that people who deviated from this norm were not explicitly conceived of as a class unto themselves, and the term *‘āhāt*, which later comes to be the catch-all for various types of difference and disability, is used only “in reference to blighted crops” in the *ḥadīth* literature.³⁸⁵ Terms for certain kinds of physical difference may have incorporated a more nebulous range of meanings prior to the taxonomies of *‘āhāt* being stabilized—a process that Richardson traces through Mamlūk-era encyclopedic literature. Moreover, Richardson notes that even in the Qur’ān the use of illness and disability as metaphor (as with the previously discussed blindness of unbelievers) is common.³⁸⁶ Likewise, similar to the English usage of “leper,” outside of the purview of medicine the designation of being leprous, or *ajdham*, appears to have signified a number of superficial deformities that merited social shunning. Most of these blighted the skin and limbs. Indicative of this is a *ḥadīth* narrated by Ibn ‘Abbās describing blemishes that devalue a woman,

Four [types of woman] are fit neither for sale nor marriage: the mentally ill woman [*al-majnūna*], the elephantiasis-afflicted woman [*al-majdhūma*], the

³⁸³ “Leprosy,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://www.oed.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/107371?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=1w2MJp&>.

³⁸⁴ Kristina Richardson, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 11.

³⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 23.

³⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 25.

leprous woman [*al-barṣā*'], and the woman with a pudendal hernia [*al-‘aflā*']. All of these are [classified as] mutilated [*wa-l-jam‘ min dhālik jadhmā*], like [the terms] mentally and intellectually defective [*mithl ḥamqā wa-nawkā*].³⁸⁷

The idea that *jadhmā* indicates people suffering generalized mutilations perhaps comes from another meaning of *ajdham*, “amputated,” which is to say someone who is missing an essential part of themselves. It does not seem coincidental that, though leprosy itself is not mentioned at all in the explanations of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s coloring, other terms that are synonymous with those on the list above do appear; thus, we find that a child conceived during its mother’s menses may be *ma‘tūh*, or mentally disabled, as with *majnūn* in the *ḥadīth* above, or the child might be *nāqiṣ*, lacking or deficient, which would seem to overlap with the general meaning of *majdhūm* as deformed or defective. In al-Jāhiz’s treatise *al-Burṣān wa-l-‘Urjān* (“The Lesioned and the Limping”), *baraṣ*, which typically indicates leprosy, comes to incorporate a whole range of dermatological ailments that result in changes to skin pigmentation, some of which appear to have in fact darkened the skin. An example of this is *barash*, a form of discoloration that tends to raise black spots on the fingernails, but which can also arise in the form of black patches on the skin of the armpits or the genitals (*wa-l-sawād ya‘tarī al-nās kathīra fī mawāḍi‘ min julūdihim ya‘atrī al-ḥaṣā wa-l-madhākīr wa-rubbamā a‘atrā julūd al-ābāṭ wa-jild al-‘ijjān*), and can cause black tufts of hair that look like coxcombs to grow on the head even well into old age, when the hair should turn white.³⁸⁸ Likewise, Ibn Sīnā cites a type of *judhām* in his *Qānūn* that manifests in the form of dark ulcerations, an engorging the lips and a blackening of the skin.³⁸⁹

In addition to this, there is a certain degree of overlap in the treatment of *majdhūm* people and other marginal members of Arabo-Muslim society in legal terms and in the day-to-day.

³⁸⁷ Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1981), 579.

³⁸⁸ Al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Burṣān wa-l-‘Urjān wa-l-‘Umyān wa-l-Ḥulān* (Baghdad: Dār al-Rashīd li-l-Nashr, 1982), 70.

³⁸⁹ Ahmed Al Sharif, “Judham, Baras, Wadah, Bahaq and Quwaba’: A Study of Term and Concepts in ‘Al Qanun Fit Tib’ of Ibn-Sina,” *JISHIM* 5 (2006): 32.

Though some narrations from the Prophet contravene the idea of the transmissibility of leprosy and instead advocate treating lepers with closeness and charity, several other *ḥadīths* advise bodily comportment around one who is *majdhūm* that suggests *judhām* was understood either to be fairly contagious or to merit avoidance on some other grounds, as in the sayings, “run from a *majdhūm* person as you would from a lion,” or, “speak with a *majdhūm* person with a spear’s length or two between you;” none of this implies the total quarantining of lepers that was experienced in medieval Europe, though.³⁹⁰ In fact, such *ḥadīths* suggest that one might have run into a person who was *majdhūm* while going about their day. Michael W. Dols has noted that lepers were neither perceived as negatively in the Muslim world as they were in Europe contemporaneously, nor were they made into the Muslim world’s literary bogeymen, whereas the pages of medieval European literature are haunted by lepers.³⁹¹ Although people who were *majdhūm* were made social pariahs by their condition, they nonetheless remained relatively visible in society, and this perhaps also impelled the widening of *j-dh-m*’s semantic field to connote those whose physical form renders them outcasts for a whole range of physically manifested reasons. According to Dols, lepers were also given a legally protected status across most *madhāhib* that reflected not only their infirmity but also the social inferiority and dependency it produced, and the company that lepers keep within the legal structure is perhaps remarkable when contemplating the potential for slippage between lepers and other marginal figures,

Leprosy is not discussed in the Arabic legal texts as a separate subject; rather, it is treated as a disability within such broad areas as marriage, divorce, inheritance, guardianship, and interdiction of one’s legal capacity (*ḥajr*). Because leprosy is

³⁹⁰ Ibn Ḥajar and al-Bukhārī, “Bāb Ālamna Shifā’ li-l-‘Ayn,” in *Fatḥ al-Bārī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (al-Maktaba al-Islāmiyya, 1996), http://library.islamweb.net/newlibrary/display_book.php?flag=1&bk_no=52&ID=10434.

³⁹¹ Emphasis mine. Michael W. Dols, “The Leper in Medieval Islamic Society,” *Speculum* 58 (1983): 892.

considered a mortal illness, the leper is limited in his legal rights and obligations – *along with the minor, the bankrupt, the insane, and the slave.*³⁹²

Leprosy and blackness share another commonality that could forge a link between the two in common consciousness—both are popularly regarded as punishments for immoral conduct and are curses invoked against bad actors.³⁹³ Though the Qur’ān states that there is no crime in being blind, lame, or sick, this did not stop some from calling down leprosy on their peers as an imprecation against the badly behaved in a manner that echoes Noah’s curse of blackness upon his son, Ham, which came into effect after Ham gazed upon his father’s exposed genitals and caused him to feel shame.³⁹⁴ The parallels between leprosy and blackness as punishments for a violation of norms is especially visible in the case of its being a purported consequence of menstrual sex, in which the threat of leprosy is clearly a deterrent against breaching sexual codes of conduct. With the continued demand for a salient countermeasure against menstrual sex, the list of menstrual sex’s ill effects may have burgeoned from the specificity of a single form of illness as found in rabbinic tradition into the broader, vaguer set of plights found elsewhere, including those recorded in the *sīra*.

It seems a smaller leap from these many associations between leprosy and other forms of biological and social marginality to arrive at blackness than Nādir’s proposed explanation of a complete and calculated color reversal on the part of the *sīra* author(s); just as Richardson notes that blackness was often included in lists of *‘ahāt* or disabilities in the medieval Arabic-speaking

³⁹² Emphasis my own. *Ibid.*, 897. Cf. Matthew L. Long, “Leprosy in Early Islam,” in *Disability in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Darla Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 43-61.

³⁹³ In 14th-century Iberia, such an imprecation was treated with grave seriousness. According to David Nirenberg, “[T]he word ‘leper,’ like ‘sodomite,’ ‘whore,’ ‘traitor,’ or ‘Saracen’ (to a non-Muslim), represented an insult actionable as slander when used against ‘respectable’ people. Accusations of leprosy, like those of infamy, seem to have been used by communities to expel people perceived as troublemakers.” He adds that this features in both Christian and Muslim legal codes of the time. See: David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 105. See also: M. Dols, “The Leper in Medieval Islamic Society,” 902.

³⁹⁴ Cf. Q 48:17

world, it seems to have likewise been tacked on to a broad array of socially alienating and physically stigmatizing conditions in the case of those versions of the *sīra* that offer a list of maladies afflicting progeny conceived during menstruation. A leap on the part of the *sīra* authors of the scale suggested by Nādir also seems less likely in light of the lengths to which the syllogistic versions of the *sīra* anecdote visibly go in order to make explicit the connection between menstrual blood and blackness, which suggests an interest on the part of the text in upholding some standard of biological plausibility, although the underlying sources and reasons for this are themselves homiletic. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s blackness arising from menstrual sex also forges a very literal relationship in the text between blood purity and racial purity, even as blood purity is distanced from its racial significance and moved instead into the realm of religio-ritual conscientiousness. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s blackness is thus situated at the crossroads of a few longstanding, didactic traditions around race, religion, and sex.

The non-syllogistic versions of the *sīra* seem to function less on a strict logic of commensurability between the condition of mother and child than on their direct inheritance of a seemingly widely known version of the idea that menstrual sex produces illness. In being translated across multiple languages and contexts, the negative results illicit by contact with a menstruant multiply and shift, moving away from leprosy and toward the more generalized list of defects (mental illness, deformity, blackness) that appear in the *sīra*; many of these ill effects also have analogues in other Arabic literature, as with Ibn al-Athīr’s poisoned well metaphorically linking the menstruant to collective infirmity and contagion, or Ṭabarī’s explanation for the blackness of the Black Stone linking menstrual contact with the darkening of a thing’s surface.

In sum, rather than conceiving of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s blackness as a result of menstrual sex as a radical departure from other accounts of the consequences of violating purity law in the Islamic and pre-Islamic world, we may think of this vignette in the *sīra*—and of its analogue in *Sīrat ‘Antar*—as thematically and functionally continuous with its predecessors across a number of traditions. Much in the way that the leper and the menstruant receive similar treatment in Jewish law and society, in which the rules governing the segregation of menstruating women are stricter than in Islam, the black child and the illicit fornicator receive similar treatment in Arabo-Muslim society, such that al-Ḥārith’s punishment for menstrual sex is having a son whom he and others are bound to reject.³⁹⁵ That the crime of menstrual sex reflected more harshly on the man in the relationship than on his wife is patent both in the Islamic legal literature alluded to above and in the corrective projection of blame in the *sīra* itself onto al-Ḥārith, with Fāṭima being exonerated of any wrongdoing.

For ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s part, he is cast in several of the above editions as having dodged a far direr consequence of menstrual conception in being black rather than being mentally ill, physically deformed, or otherwise gravely sick. Nonetheless, it is perhaps overreaching to say that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s name is fully cleared along with his mother’s. From a traditional perspective, there are in fact several perceived similarities between the *ibn zinā* (i.e. the “child of fornication” that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb had initially been presumed to be) and an *ibn ḥayḍa*, or child conceived during the menses. A *ḥadīth* recorded in the *Jāmi‘* of al-Suyūṭī states that, “A

³⁹⁵ The purported alternative punishment of one’s progeny being *nāqiṣ* due to menstrual sex may operate in a similarly reflexive fashion, blighting the child with a reminder of the condition of his/her mother at the time of his/her conception, in that menstruation is often linked in traditional sources with Eve’s punishment for transgressing God’s will in the heavenly Garden, resulting in all women being “lacking in rationality and in religion” (*nāqiṣān ‘aql wa-dīn*); in Tha‘labī’s anthology of prophetic tales, these two punishments are listed together among the fifteen reprisals for Eve’s actions. In the *ḥadīth* tradition quoted in the text, the lack of rationality is attributed to women’s being only partial witnesses vis-à-vis men’s full capacity to witness, while the lack of religion is ascribed to the lessened prayer and fasting obligations for women due to menses and pregnancy. See: al-Tha‘labī, *Arā’is al-Majālis*, 25-26.

(morally) beautiful nature is divested only from the child of adultery or menstruation” (*al-khulq al-ḥasan lā yunza ‘illā min walad ḥayḍa aw walad zāniya*).³⁹⁶ Though such thinking seems to contravene the prevalent notion that the sins of parents ought not be visited upon their children, such a *ḥadīth* is perhaps supported by the belief that the traits of one’s parents and the environmental circumstances of one’s conception impress themselves immutably upon a child. In Shī‘ī discourse, the moral impoverishment of such children leads them to hate ‘Alī, as in the saying, “no one reviles you, o ‘Alī, except the child of fornication, the child of menstruation, or the hypocrite” (*lā yabghuḍuk yā ‘Alī illā ibn zinā aw ibn ḥayḍa aw munāfiq*).³⁹⁷

That the qualities of an *ibn zinā*’ and an *ibn ḥayḍa* were so closely related would seem to render the resolution of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s legitimate paternity somewhat ambiguous, and it is perhaps for this reason that the text takes some final pains to thoroughly redeem ‘Abd al-Wahhāb before the group leaves Ja‘far’s court. We are thus reminded that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb will be a great *mujāhid*, one who struggles and fights in the path of God, and a shield over the grave of Muḥammad, or, in other versions, a pillar upholding Islam (*wa-llāh la-yakūn ḥādhā-l-walad mujāhid fī sabīl Allāh ta‘ālā wa-ruknan li-l-Islām*).³⁹⁸ It is with this final, recuperative pronouncement hanging in the air that our black hero embarks on his first set of adventures.

Conclusion

Both this chapter and the previous one have sketched the birth narratives of the three major black-skinned heroes of the Arabic *siyar*, two of whom are unexpectedly born black to Arab parents through either accidental or intercessional acts. As stated at the outset, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s birth narrative is far more protracted and complicated in its explanation than the birth

³⁹⁶ Al-Mawārdī, *Fayḍ al-Qadīr*, 4129.

³⁹⁷ For background on this *ḥadīth* and others like it, see: Etan Kohlberg, “The position of the ‘walad zinā’ in Imāmī Shī‘ism,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 48 (1985): 239.

³⁹⁸ Cf. MS Qq 247, n.p.; MS Arabe 3840, ff. 379

of his peer figure, Abū Zayd al-Hilālī. Above, I analyze the 1909 Cairo version of his birth narrative—concerning which I conclude that female biology is martialled in the text to create or alter race, with the effect of erecting punitive boundaries around transgression of both racial and sexual norms that reinforce social orthodoxies not strictly grounded in Islamic religious precepts, but rather in popular anxieties traceable in a number of other texts, appearing most prominently in apocryphal prophetic literature or *isrāʿīliyyāt*. That is, like Chouki El Hamel, I find that the primary justifications in such texts for anxiety around black bodies or the use of blackness as a reprisal for “bad” behavior are furnished by looking not at Qurʾānic scripture but instead toward other aspects of traditional sources and even toward other, prior traditions.³⁹⁹

Amongst the various editions of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* that were consulted, the way in which blackness is discussed takes two subtly different forms; in some versions, it is one of several frightful consequences of menstrual sex that is not directly linked through “scientific” reasoning to the color of menstrual blood, but rather is one of a number of possible, unpredictable results of the blood’s “corrupting” nature, echoing the fact that racial differentiation has often been read by societies as a literal corruption of blood and bloodlines. In the alternate scenarios, the color of the menstrual blood is adduced as being directly related to the coloring of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s skin, which restores both a more rigorous “scientific” valence to the text and aligns it with a commonly known, scholarly debate within the Islamic legal establishment about the duration and phases of a woman’s menses and the types of blood at each stage.

These explanations do, however, depart from the more widespread Late Antique idea that the medically endangering result of menstrual sex was not the affliction of one’s progeny with

³⁹⁹ C. El Hamel, *Black Morocco*, 62-86.

blackness, but rather with leprosy. Because of the popular intertexts that link menstrual sex with leprosy, and because of the medical, legal, and social parallels between the conditions of lepers and those of people with other socially marginalizing types of physical difference (not to mention the legal similarities between lepers and slaves), I argue that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s blackness and its associations with leprosy both share in a broader discourse on exclusion and inclusion that render the former a plausible outgrowth of the latter. This is in contrast to Kāzīm Nādir’s argument that the switch from leprosy to blackness was the product of direct authorial intervention; rather, the various negative effects that accrete to the violation of rules around *ḥayḍ* point to a potentially quite far-ranging set of popular superstitions about the ill effects of contact with menstrual blood more of the ilk of Pliny the Elder’s massive list than of midrashic lore’s more narrow set of consequences.⁴⁰⁰ As with leprosy being a condition that afflicts an individual and dictates his or her social treatment without necessarily impinging on the individual’s moral disposition, so too does ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s superficial blackness uphold a truism found in much of the poetry of the *aghribat al-‘Arab*—brought to an even more exaggerated peak because of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s nonblack ancestry—namely that an individual who is black can have a sound, “white” inner self who is beyond moral reproach.

Nonetheless, despite certain similarities, fears of racial difference and fears of debilitating illness are far from interchangeable. The companion texts to the *sīra* explored above from al-Ṭabarī to Ibn Ḥazm point to there being a fear of blackness as a particular, punitive result of crimes of thought, of ritual violations, and of general social corruption. A point of frequent

⁴⁰⁰ It bears remarking that the specification of leprosy as a consequence of *niddah* violations in midrashic literature likely is itself an attempt by the rabbis to cover the liability incurred by making an iron-clad diagnostic pronouncement of this kind. Leprosy’s sometimes decades-long incubation time may have meant that ascribing it as the punishment for menstrual sex could keep parents credulous and fearful well into a child’s adulthood. On the incubation period of leprosy and its possible implications for use in legal and theological discourse, see: J. Zias, “Lust and Leprosy,” 28.

debate amongst scholars of the *sīras* is the extent to which their authors and audiences took the texts' pretensions to historical truth and historiographical rigor seriously.⁴⁰¹ In light of the above, we might add the question of popular belief in these works' scientific veracity to the question of belief in their historicity. This question looms large when considering the fact that the ideas about race reflected in the *sīra* appear not to have circulated as baseless superstitions. Instead, the scientific knowledge of the time often fused with what might be considered popular knowledge, creating a racial logic—albeit one that was built upon comparison between groupings of colorful substances, coloring climes, and colored peoples, or on reasoning through the already accepted “Manichean allegory” of black being sinful and white being salvific.⁴⁰² Though science has itself changed, this usage of it is hardly new; per the discussion in the introduction to the prior chapter, the tendency to develop “scientific” theories for explicating human difference is a trend that has been continuous across many times and places, despite its common association with modernity. In many cases, this scientific dialogue has taken place with a great amount of help from metaphorical and analogical thinking that permits such conflation as the blackness of menstrual blood and of the flesh.⁴⁰³ In the words of Ania Loomba,

[T]he ‘development’ of racial ideologies in the West depended upon making particular kinds of comparisons between women, non-Europeans, blacks, religious minorities, the poor, sexual ‘deviants,’ and animals in order to deepen, broaden, and fine-tune the idea of a ‘natural’ hierarchy between peoples and groups. Such comparison was foundational to disciplines such as anthropology,

⁴⁰¹ On the historiographical methods of *sīra* composers, see: T. Herzog, “‘What They Saw With Their Own Eyes...’ Fictionalization and ‘Narrativization’ of History in Arab Popular Epics and Learned Historiography,” in *Fictionalizing the Past: Historical Characters in Arabic Popular Epic*, ed. Sabine Dorpmueller (Peeters Publishers: Leuven, 2012), 25-45.

⁴⁰² On the “Manichean allegory,” defined by Abdul R. JanMohamed as “a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other, subject and object,” and its implications, see: Abdul R. JanMohamed, “The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature,” in *“Race,” Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 78-107.

⁴⁰³ On the use of metaphor in “racial sciences,” see: Nancy Leys Stepan, “Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science,” *Isis* 77 (1986): 261-277.

but more broadly to religious, literary, and cultural discourse. It was also an essential part of the development of racial ‘science,’—analogies and ‘metaphor [otherwise regarded as antithetical to the method of science]’ became ‘part of the logic of science itself.’⁴⁰⁴

Perhaps what distinguishes the racial logic showcased in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* from its European counterparts, then, is that racial differences are entangled with ideas of other “others” not only through comparison but also through causation: female biology—and particularly its most grotesque, foreign, or particularly feminine elements—has a direct relationship with the generation of differences in skin-color, through either the tincturing nature of a woman’s own bodily fluids or her bodily vulnerability to violation from external forces and persons; this vulnerability is vividly represented in the text specifically through the construction of a black body—not a sick or mentally ill one, as some manuscript versions of the *sīra* forebode—and this construction of a black body through what may be understood as feminine weakness flirts suggestively with other infamous images of black people as the ever present and willing objects of uncontrolled female sexuality in Arabic literature, as in the previously examined frame tale of the *1001 Nights*.

The linkage between a woman’s body and the construction of racial difference is adduced not only in the final explanation of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s etiology, but also in various other theories that are proposed while the characters are en route to Mecca and to the birth narrative’s final resolution: despite al-Ḥārith’s incrimination in the *sīra*, image-imprinting is almost exclusively the fault of the woman in other sources, to the point that it is often referred to in scholarship as “maternal impression,” and the oft-cited sheer divine providence that draws black from white and white from black does so, of course, within the locus of the womb. Moreover, as distinct from late Antique ideas of racially constitutive climatology and atavism and Abrahamic notions

⁴⁰⁴ Ania Loomba, “Race and the Possibilities of Comparative Critique,” *New Literary History* 40 (2009): 501.

of Hamitic genealogy, none of the hypotheses applied to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb suggests even the most distant African heritage as a contributing factor to his appearance. Denuded of culture and genealogical history, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s race centers all the more on Fāṭima’s biology, and becomes bound up in a set of scientific and speculative discourses that remove it entirely from the notions of black “civilization” evident in the work of authors such as al-Jāḥiẓ and Ibn al-Jawzī. This has several ambivalent implications: because ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is not culturally African despite appearing racially black, he is not assigned any of the negative personality traits stereotypically associated with blacks. However, his putatively ugly, Nubian-like form does stand as a warning within the text, didactically cautioning the audience against sexual trespass even as one such encounter engenders a valiant hero. The complex way in which the young ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s character is rendered fearsome from a bodily standpoint while still being morally laudable perturbs the usual portrait of the black “other” in Arabic literature as a sexually mature male who simultaneously attracts and repels, and moreover exposes the raw and unbridled fear of blackness *qua* the color in these texts as opposed to *qua* Africanness. This is similar to what Mino Southgate has observed in Persian popular literature:

The fear of blacks seen in Persian Alexander romances is not explained by any event in the history of Iran’s relation with Africa. Iran was devastated by Turks and Mongols, yet nowhere in its literature are these invaders hated and feared as blacks are. One is left, therefore, with color-consciousness and the perception of blacks as “the Other” (simply because of their physical differences) as the major source of the attacks against them.⁴⁰⁵

However, whereas Southgate finds that the ahistorical and inchoate nature of anti-blackness expressed in Persian literature furnishes portraits of black African characters that are categorically negative, in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, I find that as black characters take on certain

⁴⁰⁵ Mino Southgate, “The Negative Images of Blacks in Some Medieval Iranian Writings,” *Iranian Studies* 17 (1984): 26.

cultural, contextual, and personal particularities, views of their blackness within the text alter and become more complex in kind, and the reflexive anti-blackness expressed in several key vignettes is made to undergo some amount of scrutiny—as is apparent in the vilification of ‘Uqba, al-Ḥārith, and his father, Zālim, whose remarks on ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s blackness are by far the most vicious in the text—despite the text capitalizing on the sexually disciplining functions of its audience’s presumed anti-blackness. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s blackness is especially open to such complication because it is hybridized with an unmixed, noble Arab identity. Ultimately, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s blackness positions him as the ultimate go-between. As shall be explored further in the next chapter, as his story unfolds ‘Abd al-Wahhāb will frequently be found liaising between the blacks and the Arabs and vacillating between positive and negative modes of moral instruction, much as he was made to from birth.

Black, Muslim, African (?): ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and Discourses of Assimilation

On that Day when the Trumpet is blown, the kinship ties between them [ansāb baynahum] will be as nothing and they will not ask about each other: those whose good deeds weigh heavy will be successful, but those whose balance is light will have lost their souls for ever and will stay in Hell [...]—Qur’ān 23:101-103

The primary hero of a sīra must be of a prominent line [karīm al-nasab]. —Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn al-Ḥajjājī⁴⁰⁶

Cultural mythology is one of the key frameworks of traditional and colonial historicism because it provides the images and stories that unite a variety of disparate individuals and helps make them feel that they are a part of a cohesive group. [...] Most colonial and African traditional narratives make the potential disappearance of some cultural practices one of the central components of their language and aesthetics. —Boulou Ebanda de B’beri⁴⁰⁷

In much medieval Arabic popular literature, the audience encounters black people (*sūdān*) who are inferably from the African continent, but are nonetheless rarely designated as African, to say nothing of reference to the multifarious, multiethnic potential dimensions of Africanness. Instead, blackness is typically presented in terms that Edward E. Curtis IV might refer to as “ideal-typical” and “thin”: it functions as an aesthetic and somatic property that intimates racial “truths” discernable through the physiognomic, biological, and geographic sciences, while being largely divorced from conceptions of civilization or culture.⁴⁰⁸ Perhaps the most literal cases of this cleaving of Africanness from blackness can be found in the *siyar sha‘biyya*. By examining the mechanics and motivations of this decoupling of blackness from Africanness in the *siyar*, I pursue the question of why Africanness seems so often to get obviated in popular Arabic texts more generally, and complicate the assumption that the rationale behind such epistemic violence is universal: a function of ambivalence, or even malice, on the part of the text’s creators. Rather than being emblematic of the text’s indifference toward black identity, I propose that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s character in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* is a constitutive figure in an allegory of identity formation and assimilation that mimics a process undergone by numerous

⁴⁰⁶ Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn al-Ḥajjājī, *Mawlid al-Baṭal fī-l-Sīra al-Sha‘biyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1991), 81.

⁴⁰⁷ Boulou Ebanda de B’beri, “The Semeiotic [sic] of Africanicity in Gaston Kaboré’s film *Buud Yam*,” *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 44 (2007): 100.

⁴⁰⁸ Edward E. Curtis IV, *The Call of Bilal: Islam in the African Diaspora* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 13-14.

non-Arab Muslim minority communities in Islam's formative centuries. This allegory is ultimately one of "racial uplift:" read against the portrayal of black people's lives during the pre-Islamic period (*jāhiliyya*) in the *sīra*, the black Muslim community is presented as morally guided, secure, and socially mobile.

As previously noted, one of the most widespread of these texts, *Sīrat 'Antar*, spotlights the eponymous half-Ethiopian, half-Arab warrior poet 'Antara b. Shaddād, and while subsequent *siyar* often include a black hero, unlike 'Antar, some of them irrupt spontaneously into the text, as black men born to "white" Arab parents. Though several treatments of the *siyar* in scholarship have traced these heroes' existences back to the prototypical figure of 'Antar, the unnaturalness of these characters' insertion into their respective texts provokes a fundamentally different kind of analysis; unlike with 'Antar, these heroes call upon the audience to query their presence, and often the text provides rationales for their appearance, thus calling direct attention to the question of the perception of black persons in the Arabo-Muslim sphere. One of the most explicit articulations of this occurs in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* through the formation of the character 'Abd al-Wahhāb.

Previously, I have examined the biomedical discourses that swirl around the ontogenesis of 'Abd al-Wahhāb, that is, *how* his character is produced and racialized. I have concluded that 'Abd al-Wahhāb's strange and grotesque etiology may be read as an erasure: despite his blackness, he is divested of an African heritage and installed instead in an Arab line.⁴⁰⁹ Here, I wish to examine the *why* behind this literary maneuver: to what end does 'Abd al-Wahhāb's composite nature as a phenotypically black individual of a purely Arab bloodline operate in the

⁴⁰⁹ Rachel Schine, "Conceiving the Pre-Modern Black-Arab Hero: On the Gendered Production of Racial Difference in *Sīrat al-amīrah dhāt al-himma*," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 48 (2018): 325-326.

sīra? What is the significance of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s status as the anchoring figure for the *sīra*’s black community?

In contemporary theoretical discourse, the idea of a self-articulating black community has often revolved around the notion of a common point of origin (albeit of continental proportions) in the form of Africa. Black communities outside of the African continent are said to be living in diaspora, and notions of an intercommunal cultural or experiential coherence and set of shared traditions among black people are often given monikers that evoke an African source, such as Africanity, Africanism(s), and Africanicity.⁴¹⁰ At times, reference to a common African origin is as much a means of affirming sociopolitical solidarities among dispersed groups as it is a technical point of fact; in the United States especially, the pedagogical and discursive intervention offered by Afrocentric theories and methods as a means of countering white

⁴¹⁰ Each of these terms has its own context and respective set of detractors and defenders, which I can only sketch in brief here. Joseph Holloway, writing on the term Africanism, critiques its historic use as a byword for a monolithic conceptualization of “West-Africanisms,” and argues that Africanisms should denote traces of cultural identities that are “conglomerate and heterogeneous.” Africanity, in the view of both Paul Gilroy and Boulou Ebanda de B’béri, is overly fixed, though for Gilroy it is in the timeless land of myth (he asserts that “Africanity [...] is itself stamped by its origins not in Africa but in a variety of pan-African ideology produced most recently in black America”) while for de B’béri it is in a vision of the pre-colonial past. In contrast to this, de B’béri offers the concept of Africanicity, which he defines as a “conjunctural terrain of expression” through which black people engage in a practice of communicating their experiences and identities across regions and media, creating a pluralist and fluid rather than fixed web of African identities that nonetheless has common spaces (like film or the novel) and symbolic languages of representation. Some scholars, such as Gilroy, take issue with the use of Africa as the defining sign of a coherent, global black identity. Nonetheless, Gilroy resists what he views as the scholarly trend of fragmenting black identity into its constituent parts in the name of an anti-essentialism that undermines any notion of black political solidarity. Gilroy moreover acknowledges that not all peoples who have been historically raced as black trace their origins to Africa, saying that the operative thing about blackness regardless of territory and ancestry is the color’s connotation of “racial subordination,” and that such cultures are joined by common experiences of oppression and a contemporary “unity of action.” Gilroy’s notion of an “open” blackness that has been used to legitimate racial subordination but now forms a ground for modern solidarities across the peoples of what we might now call the global South perhaps better reflects the geo-racial conceptions espoused by certain medieval Arabo-Muslim authors, for whom the black world could be much larger than it is in the modern imagination, at times incorporating southern parts of the Indian subcontinent, certain islands in the Indian Ocean, and even southern sections of the Arabian Peninsula as well as continental Africa. See: Joseph E. Holloway, “The Origins of African-American Culture,” in *Africanisms in American Culture*, Joseph E. Holloway, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 18-39; Paul Gilroy, “‘Jewels Brought from Bondage’: Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity,” in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 72-111; Boulou Ebanda de B’béri, “Africanicity in Black Cinema: A Conjunctural Ground for New Expressions of Identity,” *Cultural Studies* 22 (2008): 187-208.

supremacy in the academy, “involves locating students within the context of their own cultural references so that they can relate socially and psychologically to other cultural perspectives.”⁴¹¹ Implicitly, for black students, this requires orientation within a culturally African frame of reference. Even scholars such as the anthropologist Sheila S. Walker—who views blackness and Africanity as discrete expressions of identity that manifest variably in different arenas of the African diaspora—pose blackness in direct, though oppositional, reference to Africanness:

[B]lackness is not the same as Africanity. Most Afro-Brazilians, even most Brazilians who are white by both Brazilian and U.S. standards, have maintained a great deal of obviously African culture because the African presence remains an integral, defining and acknowledged component of Brazilian culture. In fact, some Euro-Brazilians are more culturally Afro-Brazilian than some Afro-Brazilians, and are definitely more culturally African than many African-Americans. In the United States, although African-American and all-American culture contains many more Africanisms than are generally known and acknowledged, most African-Americans are not aware of them and so do not claim their Africanity.⁴¹²

Here, Africanity becomes a matter of authenticity and directness of relationship between one’s traditions and customs outside of Africa and those that are indigenously African; blackness is a replacement identity for Africanity when the latter is corroded. For Walker, black people remain African, but their capacity to “claim their Africanity” varies according to historical circumstance.

And yet, if reference to a common Africanness is the fundamental concept through which blackness may be communally and cross-culturally engaged, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb—black, but not African—would be discursively marginalized from blackness, just as he is from Arabness in the context of his birth narrative. Nonetheless, he quickly becomes the leader and organizer of the *sīra*’s large black populace. While we could attribute this to a willful and malicious

⁴¹¹ M.K. Asante, “The Afrocentric Idea in Education,” in *Afrocentricity and the Academy: Essays on Theory and Practice*, James L. Conyers, Jr., ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1997), 38.

⁴¹² Sheila Walker, “Africanity vs. Blackness: Race, Class and Culture in Brazil,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 35 (2016), 16-20.

misconstruing of black identity, I argue that the obviation of distinct African cultural identities in the *sīra* is used to a didactic end.

In light of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s centrality to representations of blackness in the text, we must begin with the premise that Africaness—that is, the geo-cultural common point of origin, however vast, that black characters other than ‘Abd al-Wahhāb putatively share—is not the binding element that coheres black communality in the *sīra*. Instead, what emerges as the least common denominator between many of the black figures in the text is a specific brand of pious bellicosity, one which reaches an exaggerated pitch in the bodies of the allegedly gargantuan black warriors whose nomenclature (Elephant’s Tusk, Despiser of Life, Killer, ‘*Ifrīt* of the Youths, etc.) often signals their destructive power, and whose capabilities are recurrently mobilized under the banner of Muslim expansionism into Byzantine territory.⁴¹³ The black figures in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* thus come to be typified not by their common point of origin prior to their Islamicization, but rather by the specificity of their role within the Muslim community. This role is clearly delineated from that of their Arab peers, so much so in fact that one black inductee into ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s charge, Abū-l-Hazāhiz (Father of Convulsion), mistakes ‘Abd al-Wahhāb for the “caliph of the blacks,” (*khalīfat al-sūdān*) perceiving the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd as the exclusive ruler of the whites.⁴¹⁴ We may thus, it seems, read the *sīra* as aiming to strike a balance between two tensile and countervailing ambitions: it conditions black assimilation into the Muslim faith on the prioritization of this faith over preexisting identities while also enclavizing black Muslims and setting them apart from the broader confessional population.

⁴¹³ Throughout the narrative, soldiers in ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s army are designated with names such as these. Though these could be *laqabs* rather than their given names, this is not stated and no prior nomenclature is provided.

⁴¹⁴ *SDH* X:62

In the text, this tension between expressing aspirational religious universalism and depicting the socio-cultural divisions that nonetheless persist is often expressed through the renegotiation of *ansāb* (sg. *nasab*), or genealogical ties, which remain an organizing paradigm for community-building and the legitimation of societal membership in the transitional period between early Islam and the heyday of the ‘Abbasid caliphs described by the arc of the *sīra*; piety comes to take precedence over tribe and bloodline in determining the status of actors in the text, but also therefore exerts a predictive influence on one’s prospects for genealogical inclusion in the faith community by bettering one’s chances of manumission, clientage, marriage, and so on. Such revaluations and renegotiations of genealogical affinity within the Muslim faith community are articulated not only in the *sīra*, but also in a range of early Islamic texts, most notably in prosopographic registers of pedigree, wherein the previously unchallenged augustness of certain pre-Islamic tribal lineages come to clash with emergent prophetic genealogies.⁴¹⁵ It is also manifest in historiographic writing that seeks to collate remote, prophetic lore with more contemporary historical accounts.

Other scholars have previously noted the importance of *nasab* in the characterization and legitimation of the *sīras*’ heroes; in his monograph on the births of *sīra* heroes, Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn al-Ḥajjājī devotes a chapter to the heroes’ *ansāb*, which he introduces with the following explanation:

⁴¹⁵ Though this is not how the genre is denoted, many early genealogies—along with other sorts of biographical dictionaries—incorporate the term *jamhara* into their title. This term, meaning an assembled crowd or throng, suggests both the quantitative breadth of such works and their community focus. Tarif Khalidi relates this genre to that of *ṭabaqāt*, or prosopographic records of individuals in certain trades, political positions, or social classes, and notes that key differences between *ṭabaqāt* and genealogies are that the former is exclusively for humans and Muslims, while genealogies often collate information from the pre-Islamic past and can be used for breeding animals such as horses. Also, while *ṭabaqāt* are typically organized by region, collections of *ansāb* are organized generationally, in a form akin to family trees. For more on the formulation of tribal genealogies in the early Islamic period, see: Tarif Khalidi, “History and Hadith,” in *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 17-83.

There is scarcely a *sīra* from amongst the popular Arabic *sīras* that is devoid of interest in the hero's *nasab*; so before it speaks about the hero, [the *sīra*] sketches an image of his ethno-tribal and personal inheritance [*mīrāthihi al-'irqī wa-l-nafsī*] as constitutive elements of this cultural heritage. The hero does not lead his constituency from its ethno-tribal margin. On the contrary, he leads it as one of its direct descendants [*min ṣulbihā*] and [a member of] one of its most noble lineages [*min a'raq a'rāqihā*].⁴¹⁶

Though heroes are marginal in other ways, to be sure, al-Ḥajjājī is adamant that *nasab* is almost never the basis on which a heroic figure is marginalized; rather, his or her genealogy places the hero at the center of his society's kinship and power structures, poising them to lead a community. The hero also visibly internalizes his or her *nasab*'s importance and can often be seen deploying it at strategic moments: the hero will typically preface a battle by reciting his *nasab* before his opponents, and, in one exemplary anecdote from *Sīrat Sayf b. Dhī Yazan*, a recitation of the hero's lineage even becomes the literal key for unlocking a chest containing a weapon owned by one of his ancestors, which perhaps may be said to bring the link between elite genealogy and material entitlements into particularly sharp relief.⁴¹⁷

In Islam's formative centuries, the project of "recovering" and codifying prophetic genealogies was frequently manipulated on behalf of *mawālī*, or non-Arab Muslim clients, who compensated for their lack of standing within an Arab milieu by fashioning mythical contiguities and relations amid a more multi-ethnic and primeval prophetic network. At times, such lineages were likewise drawn between non-Arab Muslim communities and non-Arab companions of the Prophet Muḥammad, as with the many African Muslim populations that trace their roots to the figure of Bilāl b. Rabbāḥ.⁴¹⁸ In the final section, I raise a number of genealogical sources to the reader's attention in order to suggest that the methods through which the *sīra* legitimates and

⁴¹⁶ Al-Ḥajjājī, *Mawlid al-Batal*, 85.

⁴¹⁷ Helen Blatherwick, *Prophets, Gods, and Kings in Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan: An Intertextual Reading of an Egyptian Popular Epic* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 120.

⁴¹⁸ See chapter 1, note 68.

incorporates a black Muslim community reflect—and perhaps even pantomime—other textual processes of assimilating non-Arab groups into the burgeoning early Muslim world through the fabrication of cultural myths that antedate their monotheism or historicize their ties to the Arabian Peninsula’s sacred terrain and its peoples. These cultural myths, like the mythicization of African cultures and traditions that advanced the colonial projects indicated in the epigraph above, empower and even necessitate certain “disappearances” and substitutions to a purportedly constructive, civilizing effect. In the case of the *sīra*, the discourse of “civilization” may be said to be supplanted with one of salvation. Absorption into the fold of Islam, crystalized through genealogical integration, betters not simply one’s culture, but one’s very soul.

To this end, the black-Arab hero ‘Abd al-Wahhāb functions in the *sīra* as not only an exemplum of piety and thus a catalyst for the conversion of his black peers, but also as a figure of Arab heritage who frequently manumits, “adopts,” and otherwise pseudo-genealogically draws members of the black community into his superior social rank;⁴¹⁹ this maneuver also serves to better the economic conditions of blacks within the text, and militates especially against the seductions of Byzantine wealth to which black soldiers are depicted as acutely vulnerable. That ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s jurisdiction within the text continues to be exclusively among the blacks suggests that even after the coming of Islam, *nasab* retains a racialized utility with respect to

⁴¹⁹ I place adoption in quotes because it is somewhat of a loose misnomer with regards to the process of fosterage in most Muslim societies. Legal adoption in the sense of conferring one’s family name to someone not in their natal line is prohibited in the Qur’ān (Q 33:5, Q 33:37), but certain bonds of fosterage are permitted. Fosterage typically is brokered through a milk-kinship relationship, integrating an infant into a family through a biological process. Though cases are infrequent, in the event of adopting adults, several Muslim legal schools permit “non-infant suckling” (*radā’ al-kabīr*), typically using pumped milk, as a means of ceremonially brokering this relationship later in life. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb often takes on black characters as his “companions” or even his “children” without any *radā’* relationship explicitly taking place. However, as shall be examined below, there often appears to be a symbolically familial implication to his activities. For more on fosterage in Islamic law, see: J. Chelhod, “Raḍā’ or Riḍā’,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam II*, P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, et al., eds. Accessed 29 April 2018, http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0896. On adoption, see: E. Chaumont, “Tabbanin,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam II*, P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, et al., eds. Accessed 29 April 2018, http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_8913.

assimilating groups at the fringes of the *umma* even as it has become more dissociated from its prior service to the hermeneutics of Arab tribal prestige. This shift in emphasis from tribally- to sacredly-predicated *nasab* empowers the rise of non-Arab heroes such as ‘Abd al-Wahhāb in the text by simultaneously enabling their social mobility and stabilizing their standing among their Muslim coreligionists.

To examine this phenomenon within the *sīra*, I present two vignettes that concern black figures vying for membership within an Arabo-Muslim milieu, one of which is antecedent to the *sīra*'s invigoration with Islamic themes and the other of which succeeds the emergence of Islam as a central feature of the text, and moreover follows ‘Abd al-Wahhāb's maturation into the text's central, black-Muslim hero. The former vignette depicts a series of three different black slaves affiliated with the Banū Ṭayy all contesting to steal the chief of the Banū Kilāb's famed mount, with their prize being the captivating daughter of the Banū Ṭayy's chief, Ghatrīf. Each slave, the ugliness of whom is described in grotesque terms, perishes in the attempt or else expires in the marriage bed before consummation, leaving Ghatrīf's daughter a virgin untainted—as the text assures us—with respect to her “rank and lineage” (*al-ḥasab wa-l-nasab*). In the second vignette, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb must bring the giant, black warrior Abū-l-Hazāhiz back into the fold of Islam after he is captured and converted by the Byzantines. In so doing, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb succeeds almost too well, and the oafish Abū-l-Hazāhiz is transformed into an obsequious *vade mecum* of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, hell-bent on guarding his honor. In the first vignette, the audience is presented with three iterations of black trickster figures, whose tragically fatal racialization offers a critique of Arabian tribal culture and its chauvinistic emphasis on endogamy, while the second vignette attests a turn toward inclusivity within the

text, with the pious ‘Abd al-Wahhāb supplanting the scheming slaves and brokering the induction of another black figure into both Islam and a lineage of note.

To the modern eye, the ostensible pruning of black people’s genealogies within the text and their prosthetic attachment to an Arabo-Muslim ancestral line may appear to be a deletion that has nefarious resonances with Hegel’s infamous claim that sub-Saharan Africans do not “[realize their] own being,” and can therefore have neither autochthonous religion nor history.⁴²⁰ Nonetheless, I contend that in the imaginary domain of the *sīra*, the literary maneuver of positioning ‘Abd al-Wahhāb as foster father and role model to the text’s other black figures gestures (though perhaps fumblingly) toward an egalitarian social ethic.

I begin this chapter with a section on broad themes that are common to the representation of black characters in the text. I then present an overview and analysis of the two vignettes. I close with an inspection of historical discourses on *nasab*, its significance in the pre-Islamic and Islamic eras, and its ongoing utility as a tool for the religio-social assimilation of non-Arab populations. This examination leads into an analysis of the literary value of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb as an instrument of black assimilation into the *sīra*’s imagined Muslim society.

Representations of Blackness in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*

We may recall from the introduction that black figures appear in the text of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* from its earliest stages, with its first hero (into whose line Fāṭima and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb are born), Junduba, taking charge of the black legion of his defeated adversary after making an impassioned appeal to their sensibilities. In his poetic overture, the translation of which I reproduce below, Junduba repeatedly makes reference to race and social rank,

O children of Ḥām, listen to my words,

⁴²⁰ Georg Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche Books, 2001), 111. On the critical reception of Hegel’s thesis among African scholars and Afro-centrist thinkers, see: Babacar Camara, “The Falsity of Hegel’s Theses on Africa,” *Journal of Black Studies* 36 (2005): 82-96.

And take unto yourselves these favors,
 Seek not after my murder, wrongfully, on this day,
 For my sword-blade and iron fetters will then seek you!
 For you are the sons of Ḥām, son of Nūḥ
 And knights upon the highest [rank] of steeds
 I am not pleased by your humiliation, from having
 Lived and served under an anklet-wearer [*i.e.* a woman]
 Acting under the direction of an evil old crone,
 Brought up under the heel of husbands
 Shame on you for serving her
 When you are fierce lions [*usd fuḥūl*]!
 She's bereft now of all festive days,
 I've brought her a dreaded day instead!
 So become my fellowship, o children of Ḥām
 You shall find honorable rank [*'izz*] and acceptance [*qabūl*], for all time
 And this fortress shall be a gift unto you,
 That you may be stirred by pleasure and approval
 [From] within it, go forth before me, and attack,
 With lance-points and spearheads⁴²¹

At the outset, Junduba threatens the men with death and imprisonment in the form of his “sword and iron fetters,” harkening eerily to images of slave raiding. He then strikes a parallel between the vision of the men’s manacled ankles and the persistent humiliation of the men at the hands of a creature who is likewise fettered upon its feet and debased—an anklet-wearing woman. We are reminded here of al-Jāḥiẓ’s contestation and Kecia Ali’s assertion that the condition of the (black) slave is womanlike.⁴²² Junduba closes his plea by offering to advance the rank and station of the “People of Ḥām,” which is to say, the black and slavish progeny wrought by Ḥām’s sins against his father.⁴²³ In *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, the usage “People of Ḥām” is rarely expressly

⁴²¹ *SDH* I:18-19

⁴²² See chapter 1.

⁴²³ Much has been written on the “curse of Ham” across Muslim, Christian, and Jewish discourses. Most recently, in his monograph *Black and Slave*, David Goldenberg has traced the merging of two separate myths, namely that Ham was cursed by his father with having his progeny be slaves, and that the curse marked Ham and his issue by turning them black; these two accounts gradually become spliced together during the medieval and early modern period. Like Goldenberg, Benjamin Braude concludes that in much visual art of the medieval Christian world, Ham’s issue was only infrequently conveyed as black or having African features. Moreover, it is not always the case that black Africans are considered the progeny of Ham. Rather, this is dependent on the ambitions of one community vis-à-vis another. In keeping with this, several fifteenth and sixteenth century Italian texts attest the Ethiopians as fellow sons of Japheth on the grounds of their mutual Christianity and shared geopolitical interests, saying, “Italians had every

derogatory despite its sinister echo with widely known prophetic history. However, the negative or antagonistic valuation of the descendants of Ḥām arises in other *sīras*, as with *Sīrat Sayf b. Dhī Yazan*, which is framed explicitly as a battle between the “people of Ḥām and the people of Sām,” or Semites, with the latter being the Arabs and thus the favored victors; their victory will, according to the framing of the tale, bring Noah’s curse of his son into full effect by completely subduing the peoples of Ḥām to Arab rule.⁴²⁴ Prior to this there is *Sīrat ‘Antar*, the Būlāq edition of which begins with a lengthy exposition on the different peoples and tribes that inhabited the earth before the time of Muḥammad. When the narrator arrives at Nūḥ’s (Noah’s) progeny, he opines,

وكان الملك فى أولاد سام والتجبر والقسوة فى أولاد حام والفتوة والنبوة فى أولاد يافث

And dominion [*mulk*] was [distributed] among the children of Sām, and among the children of Ḥām pride [*al-tajabbur*] and hard-heartedness [*al-qaswa*], and among the children of Yāfit [*sic*] chivalry [*al-futuwwa*] and prophecy [*al-nubuwwa*].⁴²⁵

The negative qualities of the children of Ḥām travels down the generations. *Sīrat ‘Antar* foregrounds ‘Antar’s birth with some major conflicts among the powers that will intersect in his

reason to know that Ethiopians were different from themselves, but such a vulgar and superficial corporeal conceptualization of ancestry and relationships could be overwhelmed by the more profound affinity of faith.” See: David Goldenberg, *Black and Slave: The Origins and History of the Curse of Ham* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017). See also: 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 (1997): 126-127.

⁴²⁴ On the role of Noah’s curse in the *Sīrat Sayf* narrative, see: Blatherwick, *Prophets, Gods, and Kings*, 81-87. Blatherwick notes that though the curse of Ḥām sets up the initial animus between Yemen and the Ethiopians in the tale and “defines the warfare as racial,” the narrative also holds an egalitarian view towards anyone who elects to enter Islam regardless of his race, and that the text does not place emphasis on the characters’ color, instead focusing on the prospect of universal reconciliation under a single faith.

⁴²⁵ The narrative material of this portion of the *sīra* is attributed to Waḥb b. Munabbih, who was well known for his transmission of *isrā’īliyyāt* during the early period and whose reports appear in a number of historical chronicles, most prominently the early *siyar* of the prophet and *maghāzī* writings. Harry Norris has done much to trace the contributions of other historical works to the composition of *Sīrat ‘Antar*, the heavy use of which he argues is unparalleled in the genre of the *siyar*, which mostly are less heavily reliant on direct borrowings from other textual sources. *Sīrat ‘Antara b. Shaddād* vol. 1 (Cairo: Būlāq, 1886), 8. See also: H.T. Norris, “From Asia to Africa: The ‘Tuḥfat al-Albāb’ by Abū Ḥāmid al-Gharnāṭī (473/1080-565/1169) as a Source of Chronology and Content of the ‘Sīrat ‘Antar B. Shaddād,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57 (1994): 174-183; H.T. Norris, “The Futūḥ al-Bahnasā: And its relation to pseudo-‘Maḡāzī’ and ‘Futūḥ’ literature, Arabic ‘Siyar’ and Western Chanson de Geste in the Middle Ages,” *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* (1986): 71-86.

own life, including the rivalry of Nimrod (Nimrūd), a descendent of Hām, and Abraham (Ibrahīm), of the bloodline of Shem (Sām). Nimrūd is the archetypal polytheist, and according to Ibrahīm his physiognomy is a mark of this:

كان عند أمه يوماً فنظر الى وجهه في المرأة فقال لامه يا أماه أينما أحسن وجهها أنا أم النمرود فقالت له يا ولدى أنت أحسن وأجمل وإنما المرود اسود أدبى معبس الوجه أحول افطس فقال لها سيدنا إبراهيم لو كان الهاما ما كانت هذه الحالة حالته ولا كانت هذه الخلقة خلقتة ولا هذه الصفة صفته

[Ibrahīm] was with his mother one day and looked at his face in the mirror, then said to his mother, ‘O mother, who has the lovelier face, me or Nimrūd?’ She replied, ‘O my son, you are lovelier and comelier, for in contrast Nimrūd is black and dark [*aswad adbas*], with a glowering face [*mu‘abbis al-wajh*], squint-eyed and flat-nosed,’ so our master Ibrahīm said to her, ‘Were he divinely inspired, this state and this form and this nature would not be his.’⁴²⁶

This line of reasoning positions the proto-Muslim ‘Antar as a redemptive figure, whose hybrid Arab-African (or, more appropriately here, Semitic-Hamitic) ancestry—despite the physiognomic dominance of his African side⁴²⁷—empowers him to rise above the fate allotted to him in accordance with his physical form and manifest the latent, nobler elements of his nature.

Returning to *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, it is notable that Junduba offers not only high rank (‘*izz*), but also the more mundane reward of acceptance (*qabūl*). Much as with the figure of ‘Antar, this concept of social acceptance and integration as a reward for the deeds of black men on behalf of Arab beneficiaries is to become a common trope throughout *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*. To this end, Junduba is presented as eminently impressive and his qualities as highly coveted, while the black people who come under his charge are in turn eminently accommodating,

ولما سمعوا العبيد من فصاحته ما قال وقد بان لهم شجاعته عند الحرب والقتال وقوة جنانه عند ملاقاتة الابطال فعند ذلك وقفوا واشتوروا مع بعضهم البعض ساعة زمانيه وبعد ذلك تقدموا اليه وقالوا له فما الذى تريد منا يا فارس الخيل واحكم علينا حكم الموالى على العبيد فقال لهم اعلموا يا بنى عمى أن المال الذى عندكم فى الحصن يكون لكم وأنا أقسمه بينكم بالسويه ولا أريد منكم سوى خلاص أبى واخوتى والسلام (قال الراوى) فلما ان سمعوا منه ذلك المقال وعابنوا كرمه بين الرجال فترجلوا وقبلوا كلهم الأرض قدامه وقبلوا

⁴²⁶ *Sīrat ‘Antara b. Shaddād* vol. 1, 38.

⁴²⁷ Malcolm Lyons offers the following translated description of ‘Antar from his birth narrative: “[Zabība] brought forth a boy, black and swarthy like an elephant, flat nosed, bleary eyed, harsh featured, shaggy haired.” Lyons, *The Arabian Epic* vol. 3 (18).

يديه وأجابوه الى قصده ومرامه وأخذوه وساروا به الى ان وصلوا الى حصن الشمطا ودخلوا الى داخل الحصن وقد أحضروا له جميع ما كان الشمطا من المال فقسمه عليهم ولم أخذ منه عقال وبعد ذلك قام الأمير جندبه الى المكان الذي فيه الأمير دارم وخلصه مما هو فيه من الاغلال والقيود وخلص أولاده مما كانوا فيه من النكال وخرج بهم من الحصن وأركبهم على الخيول العوال ورجعوا الى الاحيا بالمال والنوال والجمال والخلع النفيسة الغوال

After the slaves [*al-'abīd*] had heard the eloquence of what [Junduba] had said, and his bravery in war and fighting and strength of mettle in facing adversaries had been made clear to them, they paused and consulted with one another for a short while. Afterward, they approached [Junduba] and said to him, ‘And what is it that you want from us, o mounted knight? Pass judgment on us as masters do their slaves. [Junduba] said to them, ‘Know, o cousins of mine, that the money you have in your fortress shall be yours, though I will divide it equally among you. And I want nothing save the release of my father and brothers, and peace.’ The narrator said: Then, when they had heard his words and had witnessed his honor among men, they dismounted and each kissed the ground before him and his hand. They responded to his aspiration and wish, taking him and going with him to Shamṭā’s fortress, entering it, and fetching for him everything all the riches that had previously belonged to Shamṭā. [Junduba] divided this up among them and did not take even one thing from it. After this, Junduba sought out the place where [his father] was held and released him from the manacles and chains that were binding him, and freed his children from their shackles. He then left the fort with them and mounted them on noble steeds and returned to the village with the money and the gifts, and the male and female camels, and the robe of investiture of dear expense [*khil‘a nafīsat al-ghawwāl*].⁴²⁸

Of note here also is that, as a collective, the black men discussed in the two passages above are not distinguished from one another in any way. No identifying qualities are given, nor names or lineages. They are all, in lieu of a more nuanced *nasab*, assigned to the “family of Ḥām,” which at least makes them “cousins”—however distant—of the Arab Junduba. Moreover, here they appear to have no property save that which they have earned through raiding—a practice Junduba is happy enough to continue though with an added requirement of just division of the booty. This portrait of black figures in the text as ahistorical or bereft of substantive genealogical content is attested even in the names given to many of them, which tend to connote solely their martial prowess (as with those listed above) or their quality as assets to their owners, as with

⁴²⁸ SDH I:19

names like Nafa‘a (Benefit) or Najjāh (Exceedingly Successful). This essentializing approach to describing black persons—or, more accurately, black men—will persist throughout the text, with few exceptions. Arabs and Byzantines in the text, by comparison, tend to be introduced with a *nasab* that goes back at least to their father, and often proceeds further up the paternal ancestral line.

Another theme common to the representation of black characters in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* even before the advent of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is more paradoxical in nature: in aggregate, blacks are often represented as having unintelligible speech, likely in reference to their non-Arabic mother tongues. Often, they are said to *yubarbir*, or jabber noisily (barbarically?)⁴²⁹ when setting out to do battle. While it is possible that there may be an intentional allusion to people of Berber ethnicity—themselves often numbered amongst the types of blacks (*sūdān*)—it seems clear here that what is primarily meant is simply that black speech, in aggregate, was clamorous and unintelligible. Onomatopoeic references to black African speech patterns that echo *yubarbir*’s expressiveness appear in more “rigorous,” ethnographically-concerned writings as well, as with Ibn al-Nadīm’s (d. 990) description of the language and writing systems of various non-Arab peoples in his preface to his famed book catalogue, the *Fihrist*,

As for the kinds of blacks [*ajnās al-sūdān*], like the Nubians and Beja and Zaghāwa and Marāwa, the Astān and the Berber, and the varied sorts of Zanjis [*aṣnāf al-zanj*]—except for the [people of] Sind (for they write in Indian [characters] as a function of proximity)—indeed, they have no pen and no writing. Per what al-Jāhīz mentions in the *Kitāb al-Bayān*, the Zanj have rhetorical skill and eloquence [*khaṭāba wa-balāgha*] in their own way [*‘ala madhhabihim*] and in their own language. And someone who saw this and bore witness to it said to me, ‘When serious matters befall them and they are bound up in adversities, their orator will sit upon some high mound of land and bow [his head] and speak in what resembles *grumbling* [*al-damdama*] and *growling* [*al-hamhama*], with the rest understanding him.’ He added, ‘And contrary [to what you might think], in

⁴²⁹ There is speculation that Arabic borrowed this word (the root of which is also used in Aramaic and Hebrew to mean “to babble”) from the Greek. On this, see: “Barbary, n.,” *OED Online* (March 2018), Oxford University Press. Accessed 28 May 2018. <http://www.oed.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/15400?redirectedFrom=barbary>.

that oratory the sound opinion [*al-ra'y*] that they desired would manifest itself and they would learn from it, and God knows best.⁴³⁰

In a similar vein, on an individual level, black characters are often described as achieving great feats of eloquence in the Arabic language. They are portrayed as performing affecting *wa'z* sermons, reciting poetry that provokes tears, and being entrusted frequently as messengers in urgent cases. As we shall see below, this often conduces especially well to trickery—silver-tongued black men make for persuasive fraudulent preachers and false friends, and this tool allows them to ingratiate themselves with people in power. However, most of these black characters prove minor and short-lived, with their lies ultimately leading to their downfall. This is in marked contrast to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s picaresque companion, the pale-skinned and blue-eyed al-Baṭṭāl, who acts as a successful and admired trickster figure across most of the text’s arc, aiding ‘Abd al-Wahhāb in his military endeavors through feats of disguise, rhetorical manipulation, and sabotage.⁴³¹ Meanwhile, black characters are frequently portrayed as practiced in the arts of eloquence as a matter of social exigency to compensate for a lack of other kinds of cultural capital, but by the same token, they are only given so much free exercise of this power

⁴³⁰ Emphasis my own. See: Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, Ayman Fu’ad Sayyid, ed. (London: Furqan, 2014), 21. Onomatopoeic “nonsense” words were also used in coining ethnonyms by a number of medieval Arabic writers, designating various Central and West African peoples. Both *lamlam* and *damdam* figure in several such sources. Though some etymologies have been posited (e.g. that *lamlam* relates to rarity or nothingness, from *lam*, and *damdam* to blood, or *dam*, because of its associations with cannibals), the relationship with language appears not to factor into claims concerning the nomenclature’s origins. See: Michael A. Gomez, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 45 n. 15. Cf. al-Mas’ūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab wa-Ma’ādīn al-Jawhar* (Qum: Dār al-Hijra, 1983), 1:422.

⁴³¹ In his monograph on the topic of the wily figure in *sīra* literature, Malcolm Lyons devotes his chapter on tricksters in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* exclusively to al-Baṭṭāl. Though many of his feats (disguising himself and infiltrating enemy camps, drugging people and filching their effects, pretending to be a pious ascetic or preacher in order to ingratiate himself into the Byzantine elite, stealing precious relics out from under his enemies’ noses) mirror those of the slaves of the Banū Tayy, Lyons does not mention them or confer them the status of ‘*ayyār*’ (“man of wiles”) either because they are too minor and underdeveloped as characters or because they, unlike al-Baṭṭāl, ultimately fail in their enterprises. Perhaps, also, the moral mettle of the slaves of the Banū Tayy is not in keeping with Lyons’ definition of the ‘*ayyār*’, for, as he tells us of al-Baṭṭāl, he “combines the role of servant with that of the opponent of evil.” Malcolm C. Lyons, *The Man of Wiles in Popular Arabic Literature: A Study of the Medieval Arab Hero* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 146.

before society's natural hierarchy reasserts itself. This is thrown into especially sharp relief by tale of the three slaves of the Banū ʿUyayy that I examine below.

ʿAbd al-Wahhāb is preceded by a genealogy of Arab heroes who, like him, engage in acts of internecine warfare on often pious grounds. Each of these figures from Saḥṣāḥ onward—with Saḥṣāḥ being the first in the line to war with the Byzantines on behalf of the caliphal state—acquires a side-kick of sorts to support him in his endeavors, typically from a position of loyal servility. It should be of little surprise that many such figures are black. However, unlike ʿAbd al-Wahhāb himself, their blackness is obviated or naturalized in such a way as to go unstated for large portions of the text, either because it is inessential to the servants' characterization or because it would have been easily inferred due to the conventionality of the *topos* of the black underling. Saḥṣāḥ's associate, Najjāḥ, is only referred to explicitly as black a handful of times in his story arc, which spans several hundred pages. Fāṭima's travel companion and milk brother, Marzūq, is rarely ever referred to as black through anything but allusion, primarily through allegations that he is the real father of the black ʿAbd al-Wahhāb. While Marzūq's character plays a more active role in Fāṭima's life, Najjāḥ is a sidekick *par excellence*, acting mainly as the taciturn muscle for Saḥṣāḥ. He rarely says anything other than words of assent after being given orders.

It should be stated here that only two black women are mentioned explicitly in the text prior to ʿAbd al-Wahhāb's birth, and one is an anonymous slave girl while the other is Su'da, Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma's wet-nurse and surrogate mother who takes her in after her father spurns her because of her gender. In Su'da's case, her blackness is not directly referenced but is inferable from the stated coloration of her son, Marzūq, who figures largely in Fāṭima's later life as an accomplice to her rape and the man with whom she is subsequently accused of committing

adultery.⁴³² As a function either of their relative invisibility within the public sphere or the martial bent of the text, black female characters are a rare sighting in the *sīra*. Like black men, these women are often described in superficial strokes, sometimes not even meriting names. Unlike the men, though, they are rarely seen traveling or working together, likely due to the fact that when they are rendered visible to us it is because they have stepped momentarily out of the confines of the private domiciles in which they serve as domestics. A notable black female figure will come to figure in ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s adventures, though, in the form of the Ethiopian warrior princess Maymūna, who kills her father Damdāman out of love for ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and then bears him a child, Baḥrūn.⁴³³

The Three Slaves of the Banū Ṭayy

One notable exception to the minimally descriptive approach to black characters preceding ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s advent in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* is found in the tale of the three slaves of the Banū Ṭayy. Though this vignette occurs during the Umayyad stage of the text, the Arabian tribes on which the narrative centers have yet to fully embrace their new religion; it is not until the coming of the hero Ṣaḥṣāḥ, so-called “King of the Arabs,” that the tribes of Ṭayy,

⁴³² On the prohibition against marriage and copulation between those related through milk kinship (*riḍā’a*), which is equivalent to the prohibitions pertaining to those who share blood kinship (*nasab*), see: Soraya Altorki, “Milk-Kinship in Arab Society: An Unexplored Problem in the Ethnography of Marriage,” *Ethnology* 19 (1980): 233-244. On milk kinship as a structure that is used to supplant or simulate adoption in Islamic societies, see: Balkrishan Shivram, *Kinship Structures and Foster Relations in Islamic Society: Milk Kinship Allegiance in the Mughal World* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2014). The miraculous acquisition of milk kinship is a common trope in Persian romance as well, wherein the heroes are often rendered foundlings due to strife in their biological families, and are fostered by a mother who spontaneously produces a profuse quantity of milk for the child, leading the hero to develop what Peter Parkes dubs in his comparative study of milk kinship in the Muslim Hindu Kush, “a duplicate set of adoptive kin,” whereby the child is, “assimilated in address and manners with the natal kin of its foster-siblings, but distinguished in reference by a prefixed term of milk or suckling.” In *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, we might note that the implications of Fāṭima’s milk kinship with Marzūq may foreshadow her son’s future para-genealogical intimacy with the black community. See: Peter Parkes, “Fostering Fealty: A Comparative Analysis of Tributary Allegiances of Adoptive Kinship,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45 (2003): 746.

⁴³³ Maymūna’s story arc occurs mostly in the fourth volume of the *sīra*. Cf. Lyons, *Arabian Oral Epic*, 412-447; Kruk, *Warrior Women*, 59.

Kilāb, and Sulaym are brought directly under caliphal control.⁴³⁴ These groups' contemporaneity with and resistance to Islam—a resistance that preserves them in a condition that may still be described as *jāhiliyya*, or a state of pre-Islamic ignorance—bespeaks their precarity vis-à-vis the rapidly spreading Muslim faith. The transitional quality of this portion of the text holds the mores of the *jāhiliyya* at arm's length for examination, but only just. The scenario depicted in the text demonstrates that the ideologies and habitudes of the “age of ignorance” are not actually temporally bounded, but rather can and do penetrate into the so-called Islamic era, thus raising the threatening prospect such attitudes' contemporary persistence. And yet, the parodic tone of the vignette maintains a “critical distance,” that holds the *jāhilī* subjects at arms length while still presenting them as relatable and perhaps even unsettlingly resonant with a contemporary audience.⁴³⁵ That is, the way in which the *jāhiliyya* is portrayed in the *sīra* can be read as a warning to the *sīra*'s contemporary audience, cautioning them against reproducing the values of the pre-Islamic Arabs, who in the vignette below mistreat and devalue the non-Arab blacks in their midst, covet worldly wealth and social esteem, and engage in decadent, frivolous habits.

The black slaves who people the fringes of this *jāhilī* domain constitute a bleakly humorous, grotesquely depicted threat against what the audience knows is an already degenerate and degenerating social order—they are of the classes that stand to gain power and worth through the advent of Islam. And yet the manner in which the text conjures up and tortures these

⁴³⁴ Maslama, son of the caliph ‘Abd al-Mālik b. Marwān, is dispatched to travel with Ṣaḥṣāḥ, heir to Junduba's chieftainship over the Banū Kilāb, to the Hijaz region, and prepare to make war on the other tribes in the region who rebel against caliphal authority. This prompts one leader to initially declare, “Who is ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan to the Bedouins who have taken the desert on as our abode and the rope halter [of camels] as our homelands? We obey not a soul, either from the Bedouins or from the settled folks” (SDH II:76). Maslama encourages Ṣaḥṣāḥ to project his authority over Bedouin tribal leaders at caliphal behest, directs him to engage in pious *ghazwa* against the Byzantines, instructs him in the terms of just warfare in Islam (SDH III:33), gifts him a Qur’ān *maṣḥaf* that supposedly belonged to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (SDH III:71-72), and generally succeeds in ultimately rendering Ṣaḥṣāḥ a pious, unifying arm of the caliphate presiding over a number of Arabian tribes.

⁴³⁵ I borrow this concept of critical distance as a feature of parody from Linda Hutcheon. See: Linda Hutcheon, “The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History,” *Cultural Critique* 5 (1986-87): 185.

grotesque black bodies under the pretense of simulating the meanness of a bygone reality partakes in what Anne Donadey dubs the “double-bind” of critiquing stereotypical representations, namely that the critique necessitates a repetition of the stereotype itself, and that this repetition can re-inscribe harm upon the image’s subject.⁴³⁶ In elaborating on this plight with respect to analyzing racially charged colonial-era images of colonized individuals, Donadey inquires, “what would be some of the conditions distinguishing a reactivation of colonial nostalgia from the process of working through the overdeterminations wrought by colonial history?”⁴³⁷ We might pose a similar question of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*’s representation of *jāhili* ethnocentrism through its caricatures of black slaves as we examine the narrative below: how much of the text’s racial humor traffics in nostalgia for when such opinions was commonplace, and how much is it a critical ironizing of out-of-fashion attitudes?

The opening portion of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* is dominated by the story of the protagonist Junduba of the tribe of Kilāb, who is the owner of a much-coveted mare named Muzna. This mount’s tale—per the narrator’s commentary—is “an astonishing affair and a travail hounded by strangeness, which we would very much like to tell in well-composed [fashion].”⁴³⁸ She is described in thorough detail as a peerless creature with pitch-black eyes and flanks that blaze white like the sun. The chieftain of the tribe of Ṭayy, Ghaṭrīf, hearing of Muzna’s charms, becomes so enamored with the idea of her that he gambles the wealth and lives of his people in pursuing her through abortive schemes. The narrator claims that “many people died because of [Muzna], after which [Ghaṭrīf] left off his pursuit of her, while still craving her deeply [*inqat ‘a*

⁴³⁶ Anne Donadey, “‘Y’a bon Banania’: ethics and cultural criticism in the colonial context,” *French Cultural Studies* 11 (2000): 10.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.* 10.

⁴³⁸ *SDH* I:41

‘*an ṭalabihā ṭam ‘a-l-ṭām ‘i*.’⁴³⁹ And yet, a short while later when Ghaṭrīf’s beautiful daughter, Salmā, comes of age and suitors begin plying her father with money for her hand, Ghaṭrīf’s own lusts are inflamed afresh and he offers Salmā instead to whichever man is able to bring him Muzna, with the added bonus of a handsome dowry to accompany her. It is here that we are introduced to al-Jaffāl:

وكان في بنى طى رجل يقال جفال ويلقب بالمحتال وكان شنيع الخلقه وكان لا يطمع في سلما بالوصال ولا
يعدلها من الاشكال فلما بذل الغطريف ما بذل أيقن جفال ببلوغ الآمال فنهض جفال على عجل وقال ما
تصلح سلما الا لي ثم ركب ناقته وودع أهله وعشيرته وصار يقطع الفيافي والقفار وهو ينشد ويقول هذه
الابيات صلوا على سيد السادات

| | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| خلى انى ذاهب غير ذاهب | وفى قلبى نار من فراق الحبايب |
| انى مشغوف بسلما متيما | وملقى على فرش الضنا والنحائب |
| وانى ذو مال وعقل ومورد | وصبر اذا اشتدت على المصائب |
| وما ابنة الغطريف عندى رخيصة | سأبذل نفسى دونها في الكتائب |

There was amid the tribe of Ṭayy a man called Jaffāl, and he was nicknamed ‘Imposter’ [*yulaqqab bi-l-muḥtāl*]. He was of repugnant form and he neither could hope for loving communion with Salmā [*lā yaṭma ‘ fī Salmā bi-l-wiṣāl*] nor was he well-suited to the likes of her, but when Ghaṭrīf made his offer, Jaffāl became confident that his wish could be fulfilled, so he rose in a hurry and said, ‘Salmā is meant for no one but me!’ then he mounted his she-camel and took leave of his family and fellows, and he sped across the deserts and plains, composing and reciting these verses, praise be to the Lord of lords,
‘My two companions, I am one who goes without perishing,
And in my heart there is a flame from lovers’ separation
Indeed I am utterly in love with Salmā,
Though [now] my trysting place is upon a bed of emaciation and sobs
Indeed I am a possessor of wealth and wit and resources
And patience, too, when miseries grow
And the daughter of Ghatrif is not cheap to me,
I shall sacrifice my soul [in pursuing] her in the battalions!’⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁹ *SDH* I:42

⁴⁴⁰ *ibid.*

We still have yet to be told explicitly what it is that makes Jaffāl so physically repulsive, but Salmā gives an indication when, disgusted, she prays that Jaffāl will not be successful in procuring the mare,

ولا بلغ الله ابى آمال لانه يريد أن يعطينى لهذا الشيطان الفاجر المحتال الذى انسلخ في صورة انسان
بشوارب مريجة وريحة كريهة وانف أعوج وفك افلج ولقد كنت لغيره أحوج

May God not let my father obtain his desires, for he wants to give me over to a profligate, deceitful devil who has stripped into a human visage [*insalakh fī šūrat insān*], with a repulsive mustache and detestable smell and a crooked nose and a cleft palate, surely I need someone other than him!

A pitiful Salmā then threatens to kill herself rather than allow Jaffāl to have intercourse with her, and offers up some verses to clinch her petition,

| | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| أرى الغطريف مال عن الصواب | ويطمع في خيول بنى كلاب |
| ومن عظم المصائب والبلايا | تزف حمامة نحو الغراب |
| لئن تم الذى قد قال يوما | فنوحوا حسرة وابكوا شبابى |

I see Ghatrīf has a distaste for the proper,
And he covets the steeds of the tribe of Kilāb
But it is among the greatest of miseries and afflictions
*To wed a dove to a crow*⁴⁴¹
Should that which he has said one day come true,
Wail and lament over my youth!⁴⁴²

We are presented in these verses with the first indication that Jaffāl, in addition to being a pathological liar and a profoundly disfigured man, is black, and the buildup to this euphemistic reveal gives it the air of a crescendo: in describing Jaffāl, Salmā begins with solvable physical offenses such as the unkemptness of his facial hair and his body odor, progressing to more irredeemable and permanent features such as his malformed nose and palate, all of which

⁴⁴¹ Emphasis my own.

⁴⁴² *SDH* I:43

constitute congenital forms of *'āhāt*, or blight. To crown it all, Jaffāl is her diametric opposite—a black crow to her white dove.⁴⁴³

Though this description might lead one to think Jaffāl is hard-pressed to do much about his litany of blemishes, he is able to manipulate his appearance with dexterity and disguise himself as an elderly, wandering ascetic in order to gain entry into the Kilāb tribe's village and ingratiate himself with its chiefs,

وكان جفال طويل الشبيه مليح الهيبة فلبس مسح أسود وكشف رأسه وكان له شعر طويل مثل أذنان الخيل
ووجه أسود مثل سواد الليل ثم انه قوس ظهره وأرخا ذقنه وأسبل شعره على أكتافه ونفش لحيته وارخاها
على صدره ودخل الحى وهو ينشد ويقول ونحن نصلى على سيدنا محمد الحبيب الرسول

| | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| أين العشائر والقبائل | أين أصحاب المحافل |
| أين السلاطين الكبار | هلكوا فما تبعتهم المنازل |
| ملكوا وما ملك المنازل | وتغيرت تلك الهواكل |
| شربوا الحمام وأعدموا | تلك المشارب والمآكل |
| يا غافلين عن الفنا | ليس الفنا عنكم بغافل |
| فاستيقظوا من قبل | يوم تكون فيه النوازل |
| لم ينج من نار الجحيم | سوى فتى الله عامل |

Jaffāl had long, white hair and a charismatic gravitas [*malīḥ al-hayba*], so he donned black sackcloth and exposed his head, and he had hair that was long as a horse's tail, and a face black like the darkness of night. He hunched his back and slackened his chin and draped his hair over his shoulders, then he teased out his beard and loosed it upon his chest and he entered the village composing and reciting poetry, and we praise our master Muḥammad, the beloved Prophet, 'Where are the kinsmen and tribes? Where are the assembled companions?'

⁴⁴³ In her book, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World: Blighted Bodies*, Kristina Richardson notes that bodily abnormalities were defined broadly in Arabic writings during the medieval period, with physical differences such as black skin, flat noses, or blue eyes, disabilities such as lameness, congenital diseases, and the visible symptoms of recent illness (boils, baldness), all grouped together as *'āhāt* (blights). She further finds that certain types of blight, especially one-eyedness, narrow eyes, or dark skin, are often associated with aberrant figures such as Satan or the antichrist-like demon, Dajjāl. Though the extreme blightedness of Jaffāl here seems to be done to comedic effect, this description might well have recalled a nightmarish and demonic spectacle to the audience. See: Kristina Richardson, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World: Blighted Bodies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), *passim*.

Where are the great sultans?
 They've perished, but the campsites have not followed suit
 They've taken possession, but they did not possess the campsites,
 Though [their] temples have been changed
 They sipped death's brew, and were obliterated
 Their places of eating and drinking
 O you who are forgetful of mortality [*fanā*],
 Mortality has not forgotten you!
 So be wakeful in advance of the Day [of Judgment],
 On which the sent-down [judgments] shall come to be
 None shall be saved from the hellfire,
 Except the courageous one who labors on behalf of God!⁴⁴⁴

The people of the tribe of Kilāb are immediately impressed by Jaffāl's eloquent, pious verses (termed a *wa'z*, or a sermon of pious warning in the text itself) and even more so the pious eloquence of his scraggly appearance, which leads them to conclude that "this one is one of the tent-pegs of the earth, one of the unaffiliated ones [*hadha min awtād al-arḍ al-mustawaḥashīn*] who roam with beasts [*al-wuḥūsh*] in obeisance to the Lord of the worlds."⁴⁴⁵ Like an animal that puffs itself up to appear more fearsome and deflect predators, so too Jaffāl, in rendering his appearance even more outlandish, deflects suspicion in enemy territory. In doing so, he transforms from a man spurned for his outward appearance to one who has ostensibly elected to be alienated from the human world, approaching instead the realm of wild animals as an act of asceticism and faithfulness. It is noteworthy that as with the bloody heroics of 'Abd al-Waḥhāb and his confederates against the Byzantines that compel them time and again to apply his size and strength in the cause of God, in magnifying his body's beastly qualities and exaggerating its extremes of difference, Jaffāl is able to gain access to the ranks of the pious (if only superficially).

⁴⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁴⁵ *ibid.*

The resonance of Jaffāl's construction as a black-skinned, ascetic primitive who dwells in the wilderness and emerges to dispense wisdom to a more urbane cohort echoes both forward and backward in time. It harkens directly to the marginal pre-Islamic figures of the *ṣa'ālīk* (vagabond) poets, one of the most famed of whom is the half-Ethiopian Ta'abbāṭa Sharran. It also shares commonalities with the "noble savages" who came to populate the proto-colonialist and colonialist imaginations of Europe from around the 16th century, and who arose out of a primitivist nostalgia for the European man's pre-Enlightenment and pre-industrial connection with nature, channeled through their pastoral impressions of the black and brown peoples with whom Europe was increasingly in contact. Edna Steeves characterizes the savage in European romantic literature, as "a symbol of perfectibility, although the order of achieving this became in his case the reverse of the idea of progress [...]. The savage represented a return to nature [...] a primitive stage of existence from which the world had declined."⁴⁴⁶ That is, one role of the noble savage in literature is to perturb the linear march of time and its corollary in the modern Western tradition of progress by suggesting that time has wended in heterogeneous itineraries throughout the world, placing some peoples at more "advanced" stages than others. As a result, some regions can be "modern" while, in perfect simultaneity, others are "primitive." For the noble savage's admirers, the prospect of civilizational—and thus temporal—reversion through travel to the other's lands or appropriation of the other's customs becomes the object of fantasy.

Not unlike the advent of the noble savage in literature upon the eve of Europe's colonialist apogee, Jaffāl arises at a time during which the borders of the Islamic world are expanding, cross-cultural interactions are increasing, and tribal groups are fighting to maintain relevance and power within a shifting political dynamic that has been corrosive to Bedouin

⁴⁴⁶ Edna L. Steeves, "Negritude and the Noble Savage," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 11 (1973): 97.

mores. Swarthy and desert-weathered, Jaffāl arrives at the tents of a regnant tribal chief and opens with an *ubi sunt*, playing off of the Banū Kilāb’s nostalgia for their former rulers, and opining that though their modalities of worship have changed there is no reason that the extant institutions of the tribe should not still be helmed by equally great men who win themselves grandiose legacies. The tribe’s wonderment at Jaffāl deepens the more primitively spiritual he makes himself appear: when sitting down to eat, Jaffāl asks that he only be served vegetation that grows upon the summits of mountains or in the depths of *wādīs*, or river valleys (*lā ākul illā mimmā tanbut al-arḍ fī ru’ūs al-jibāl wa-buṭūn al-awdiya wa-l-tilāl*); Jaffāl has visions foretelling Junduba’s future, and weeps openly in prayer because he is so affected by the vividness of what he has seen.⁴⁴⁷ All of this is, of course, by design. Jaffāl knowingly cultivates a persona that is persuasive to the Banū Kilāb, indicating that his disguise is not so exaggerated as to strain plausibility, but rather harmonizes with preexisting stereotypes. He thus becomes a self-conscious and auto-exoticizing “noble savage” who makes himself appear even saintlier and wilder in order to prey on the credulity of his peers, exercising an artifice that convinces through its conformity to the leitmotif of the primal black unused to urbanity and comfort in order to dissimulate from his actual identity.

Jaffāl and the audience are soon to find that he is not the only solicitous black slave going to extremes to prove his worth to an Arab master through procuring the steed Muzna. Rather, when he goes to retrieve the steed after pilfering the key from a sleeping Junduba, he finds the creature has already been taken. Her kidnapper was Fātik, a slave from another tribe, “who was, per his name, like unto the night in his blackness and, when he ran, could outstrip horses.”⁴⁴⁸ Fātik, too, volunteered to steal the horse on behalf of his tribal leader, a handsome figure named

⁴⁴⁷ *SDH* I:44-45

⁴⁴⁸ *Fātik* literally means one who destroys or slays. *SDH* I:47

Ṣāliḥ, on the condition that he be betrothed afterward to his lovely daughter Su‘da, and thus the two are placed on a collision course in a comedy of errors, the quixotic stakes of which are embodied both by their masters’ romantic obsessions with the horse and the similarly immodest romantic ambitions of the lowly slaves.

Mirroring Jaffāl, Fātik recites poetry lauding his beloved Su‘da as he makes for the camps of the Banū Kilāb, and upon arrival he doffs his “uniform of a settled Bedouin peasant” and disguises himself by cross-dressing as a woman, lining his eyes with kohl and taking advantage of the slightness of his form, described as “dark brown of color, handsome of composition, and thin of waist as though he were a female.”⁴⁴⁹ Under this guise, he sneaks in and grabs Muzna just before Jaffāl arrives to do the same. Resolving to follow her tracks, Jaffāl sets off in pursuit. The two meet in a clearing, and exchange words about the respective merits of their putative future wives, then fall to blows. Jaffāl is killed by Fātik, but Fātik then is compelled to relinquish Muzna to Junduba, who arrives on the scene shortly afterward. Ghatrīf then, on the advice of a tribal elder, elects to temporarily spare his daughter the dishonor of being wed to some slave-born man of no account, and instead attempts to woo Junduba into wedding her on the condition of Muzna as a bride-price. To soften the ground for this endeavor, Ghatrīf assembles an elaborate procession and has a messenger go in advance of him to proclaim his rank and lineage (*ḥasab wa-nasab*)—a form of declaration that is, as mentioned above, common also in pre-battle moments in the *sīras*, during which the hero announces his full name and titlature to his opponents, often accompanied by the refrain, “allow me to introduce myself” (*sa ‘arrifukum bi-nafsī*).⁴⁵⁰ Not fooled by the display, Junduba refuses Ghatrīf’s proposition.

⁴⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁵⁰ *SDH* I:50

Another of Ghatrīf's black slaves, Maymūn, then takes up the charge of winning Muzna through subterfuge and succeeds where Jaffāl had failed.

When Salmā's presence is requested by Ghatrīf in order to offer her to her new betrothed, the young girl exclaims, "O father, are you not shame-faced among the disgraced ones for marrying me to slaves and passing over valiant champions?" To this, Ghatrīf replies with no hint of irony, "O my daughter, as for your saying that he is a slave, indeed he is among the children of Adam and a woman should have nothing for her husband save obedience, so heed him and do not talk back to me."⁴⁵¹ Though Ghatrīf's retort calling attention to Maymūn's humanity is meant to mitigate his lower social rank, it simultaneously suggests that there is little more to say in praise of a slave's lineage than that he is the issue, however distantly, of Adam and is therefore a member of the human species. Meanwhile Ghatrīf, for his own part, had been avid in announcing his noble line when making his first impression on Junduba only a short while before, thus indicating his belief in a hierarchy of humanity.

As with Jaffāl, Maymūn's yearning for Salmā is not to be fulfilled. Rather, he dies in a chaste embrace with his recalcitrant new spouse from the wounds he sustained when escaping with Muzna. Knowing that he is dying, he approaches the marriage bed, dramatically declaiming,

| | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| وتعبنا لغيرنا وشقينا | قد لقينا الاهوال حيننا فحيننا |
| وافترقنا كاننا ما التقينا | التقينا وما شفينا غليلا |

We have encountered horrors time and again
 And we shall follow after the rest, and be made wretched
 We met, but could not be healed of our ardent desire
 We've separated, as though we had never met⁴⁵²

⁴⁵¹ *SDH* I:65

⁴⁵² *SDH* I:66

Maymūn gasps out his final breath and expires, leaving Salmā to “take immense joy” in narrowly evading sex with her repugnant husband. Maymūn, meanwhile, was prescient in his final declamation about following others into the grave; yet another black slave comes to take his place, because Muzna has been restored once more to the Kilābīs through a series of dramatic events. This time, Salmā’s would-be betrothed is both black and blind, and is described as an “old man, bleary-eyed and blind, wooly-haired and gap-toothed, flat-nosed, blue of eyes and dun-colored like an *ifrīt* from the among the reviled people.”⁴⁵³ To add to the impossibility of Salmā taking him seriously as a marriage prospect, the man’s name is Jamrat al-Ḥaddād, or The Blacksmith’s Embers, likely in reference to his complexion; in his adventures he is accompanied by his son, Sharāra, Spark. These names in and of themselves seem tailor-made to provoke laughter whenever uttered—even the vigilant Junduba openly derives amusement from them when Jamra makes his acquaintance. Jamra is a practitioner of techniques that hearken to the fallen Jaffāl, though with added flair—he pretends to be far blinder than he actually is, alleging that though he cannot navigate the earth he is a seer of the stars, and offering his wisdom up to Junduba. Junduba accepts the blind seer’s authority and asks that he perform some apotropaic magic on Muzna. Jamra asks that Junduba’s slaves make her ready, during which time he doses the men with a soporific added to their drinking vessels, kills them, and makes off with the mare.

When Jamra emerges as the latest contender for her heart, Salmā openly despairs; her mother consoles her with the prospect that this one, too, may perish through God’s providence. Her mother proves to have been prescient: when Jamra returns, it is with injuries from his escape, which he must make twice over because he is intercepted *en route* by warriors from the Banū Asad who also have eyes for Muzna. Adding to his losses, Jamra’s son has been killed by a

⁴⁵³ *SDH* I:68

wild beast, dragged off and eaten when he went to relieve himself on their journey homeward through the desert (a cautionary tale, perhaps, about taking care of one's business before a road trip). Ghatrīf bridles the horse with jeweled garlands, swaths her in silk, and parades her into the village, then calls for doctors to nurse Jamra to health.

Jamra's condition only worsens, so he urges that the marriage be hastened so that he can enjoy Salmā before dying. When she is ordered to "enter into the presence of [her] husband," Salmā laments to Ghatrīf, "yesterday you gave me over to a slave of little value, today to an elderly blind man [who looks like] the *'ifrīts* of the wasteland!" It should be noted that the recurrent likening of black men to *'ifrīts* is likely related to the association between blackness, dust (black figures are frequently termed *aghbar*, or dust-colored), and the etymological and conceptual association of *'ifrīts* with the chthonic realm. The root *'-f-r* is related with dust and grime, compounding the fact that, like many varieties of *jinn*, the *'ifrīts* are typically represented as ground-dwellers.⁴⁵⁴ The stated physical likeness between the grotesque Jaffāl and the demonic *'ifrīt* is patently negative in this case, but it is remarkable that the description of a human as *'ifrīt* is used in some cases to "[express] cunning and strength," giving the word multiple resonances that reflect several facets of Jaffāl's character aside from his physical form. That is, even as Salmā laments her suitor's appearance, she calls to mind the exercise of useful qualities through which he is able to exert a legitimate claim on her hand.

To this, Ghatrīf replies, "Leave off talking to me this way! For though his face may be ugly his deed was lovely, and there is no beauty greater among men than patience and the

⁴⁵⁴ See: J. Chelhod, "'Ifrit,'" in *Encyclopedia of Islam II*, P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, et al., eds. Accessed 27 March 2018, Masters, Their Freed Slaves, and the Waqf in Egypt (Eighteenth-Twentieth Centuries)." On the chthonic nature of the *jinn*, see: Simon O'Meara, "From Space to Place: The Quranic Infernalization of the Jinn," in *Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions*, Christian Lange, ed. (Brill: Leiden, 2016), 56-72.

management of dreaded things.”⁴⁵⁵ Dreaded things nonetheless advance quickly, and Jamra’s patience amounts to little, as he too expires just before consummation. When Salmā emerges from the boudoir praising God, her father inquires about what has made her so elated. She says, “my husband died.” Her father laughs and responds, “you are not very blessed when it comes to spouses.” At this point, Salmā has the last word: “O my father, you have failed to grasp my meaning, truly God has wasted neither my rank nor my lineage [*fa-mā dayya ‘a Allāh ḥasabī walā nasabī*].”⁴⁵⁶

Throughout this account, the tribal Arabs’ preoccupations with accruing themselves the trappings of status, be it through noble marriage or remarkable steeds (the quality of which was often itself certified through a record of pedigree) comes with the false promise and ultimate withholding of these same prospects from an interminable and expendable supply of black slaves, each of whom unknowingly dovetail cyclically with their forebears. Recurrently, the text’s universe takes pains to snatch the black characters from the world of the living at the very moment that they are about to consummate their marriage with Salmā and thus secure their posterity, suddenly summoning forth unhealable wounds that had gone previously unnoticed or tragicomic run-ins with doppelgänger slaves from other tribes. This serves to underscore the fact that the slaves are being punished not for their thievery and subterfuge, but for their attempt to advance in the social ranks through marriage to Arab women. And yet, despite their inability to transgress the bounds of their own flesh through the sexual act, the black men in the text do have a regenerative capacity in that the expired body of one is replaced swiftly by another, for, in the words of Bakhtin, “in the grotesque body [...] death brings nothing to an end, for it does not

⁴⁵⁵ *SDH* I:77

⁴⁵⁶ *SDH* I:78

concern the ancestral body, which is renewed in every generation.”⁴⁵⁷ As such, the fates of the black figures in this vignette all are cosmically connected despite their lack of biological or social relation.

The grotesque descriptions of the slaves’ prevailing lusts even as their bodies bleed and their organs fail, Jaffāl’s and Jamra’s deformities, the ludicrousness of Jamra’s and Sharāra’s names, and Sharāra’s excretorily-predicated demise are all elements that might prompt laughter at the text’s black subjects, even as the positioning of this narrative in an anterior thought-world frames the text’s racial humor as an anathematized and anachronistic holdover of the *jāhiliyya*. The historiographic pretense of setting this vignette in a *jāhilī* context seems to make these racialized caricatures licit. Such trends in humor are not kept up in later portions of the narrative. On the one hand, it could be that this license to deride black people in ways the text later abandons is derived from the text’s didactic motivations, in light of which preserving a detailed account of the *jāhiliyya*’s norms would function to ensure their discontinuation and to enhance the esteem of Islam and its values vis-à-vis its cultural precursor. On the other hand, this may be a case of narrative opportunism, in which the narrators and audience share in a moment of “allowable” inappropriate humor enabled by the story’s archaized setting. The lack of more forceful censure of the treatment of the black slaves is compelling evidence toward this latter conclusion. Moreover, even if we assume the text to be staunchly ethically committed in this portrayal, Donadey’s notion of the “double bind” complicates our ability to read these moments as effective—to say nothing of benign—social critique.

In addition to the obvious cost to black slaves and clients of the tribes, the text’s determined preclusion of exogamy results ultimately in jettisoning the posterity of the tribal

⁴⁵⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Helene Iswolsky, trans. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 322.

Arabs themselves, as with each new suitor's demise Salmā's sexual development is arrested yet again; she becomes a time capsule of genealogical purity whose biological futurity is doomed again and again by her very desire to preserve her lineage and forestall miscegenation. Ghaṭrīf, for his part, is exposed as a hypocrite when he mandates the proclamation of his own elite lineage even as he demonstrates his willingness to ransom this mark of honor, along with his daughter's virginity, for a horse. The text thus imagines the pre-Islamic world as unsustainable, a victim to its own social restrictiveness and skewed priorities, in that ultimately what remains is an unwed Salmā, a thwarted Ghaṭrīf, and scads of dead men, many of whom are slaves who died vying for better social purchase, and often using the vestments of pagan spirituality and superstition in order to do so. As we've seen, this unsustainability disproportionately imperils the survival of black characters, who are therefore presented as standing to gain a particularly great amount from the coming of Islam; these gains will be couched specifically in the ability for black people to access and assimilate into elite *ansāb*, a prospect precluded by the pre-Islamic Arabs. Through the confessional invigoration stimulated by Ṣaḥṣāḥ's aforementioned Islamicization of the Banū Kilāb, the proscription against *al-ṭa'n fī-l-ansāb* (attacks on the basis of genealogies) found in the Qur'ān in such passages as that quoted in the epigraph (Q 23:101-103) and in the *ḥadīth* increasingly becomes a pious ideal, to the point that debasing one's origins becomes a hallmark of villainy in the *sīra*; typically, anyone caught referring to the hero 'Abd al-Wahhāb as "son of Marzūq," falsely claiming that he is the bastard issue of his mother's dalliance with her milk-sibling, is summarily beaten to a pulp, with the implication being that this retribution is deserved.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁸ On *ṭa'n fī-l-ansāb*, see: "Ḥasab wa-Nasab," in *Encyclopedia of Islam II*, P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, et al., eds. Accessed 11 April 2018, http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_2751.

By the time that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb has his encounter with Abū-l-Hazāhiz, the text is firmly ensconced in the period of the ‘Abbasid caliphate under the rule of Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 809 AD). *Ḥasab wa-nasab*, or inherited merit and kinship ties, have not lost their importance. Rather, their connotation has been altered such that a new set of genealogical priorities and potentials are dominant. As shall be discussed below, no longer is *ḥasab wa-nasab* strictly a way to taxonomize tribal pedigree and achievements, rather, it is a vehicle for legitimating membership in the *umma* and claims to authority therein. Genealogies are flexed to admit a number of non-Arab actors on grounds of their confessional affinity, and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb for his part opens a makeshift tributary into his heroic lineage to incorporate his black peers. That is, our hybrid black-Arab hero mimics the actual historical process whereby early non-Arab converts were often concurrently Arabized and Islamized through the fabrication of *ansāb* that wove them in with Islam’s earliest members. In ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s conversion and fosterage of Abū-l-Hazāhiz, the stakes of deploying his lineage in order to establish the text’s black Muslim community are made acutely clear.

Abū-l-Hazāhiz, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, and Modeling Good Black-Muslim Behavior

When we first encounter Abū-l-Hazāhiz, he is at the helm of a battalion of blacks fighting the Byzantines on behalf of the self-proclaimed messianic figure, Maḥdī-l-Zamān, who is described in the text as a Kharijite agitator competing against Harūn al-Rashīd for the title of caliph. The Byzantines are immediately struck by the fact that Abū-l-Hazāhiz seems even more ferocious than the “black of the Banū Kilāb,” ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, and embark on a gambit to capture him and groom him as their own warrior in the cause of Christ. Implicit in this aim is that the Byzantines believe they must fight fire with fire: the only way to defeat a black adversary is to acquire one of their own. They manage to sway Abū-l-Hazāhiz quickly by offering material

succor—not unlike the effect of promised wealth upon Ghatrīf’s servants above—though Abū-l-Hazāhiz does initially express misgivings about having to entirely renounce Islam to gain this wealth; he asks, for example, whether it would be possible to pay his respects to the Prophet Muḥammad at least once a month while still identifying as Christian. Throughout the narrative, the holes in Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s understanding of Islamic doctrine and ritual will prove to be manifold, and it is often unclear whether this is because of Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s personal ignorance or a product of the maligned, heterodox sect under which he learned of the faith. Whatever the cause of his religious ignorance, the result is that when ‘Abd al-Wahhāb reconverts Abū-l-Hazāhiz to Islam, this process necessitates normativizing Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s engagement with the religion through undoing the ill effects not only of his brief dalliance with Christianity but also his prior, impoverished education in Islam itself. This process includes teaching Abū-l-Hazāhiz how to respect orthodox religious authority in the form of the caliph, as well as demonstrating to him how one prays with intention. That is, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb taking on Abū-l-Hazāhiz as his charge constitutes a mission not only of conversion (and hence of salvation), but also of civilization.

The story of Abū-l-Hazāhiz has a few parallels with the strange etiology of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, whereby he is born black to Arab parents because his father’s embryogenic *nuṭfa* (sperm-drop) was dyed dark by his mother’s menstrual blood. Rather than offering audiences a historicitous representation of the gradual conversion of black Africans to Islam via conquests in the African continent, the development of trade routes, or the religious and social influences of diaspora across the Islamic lands into which many blacks were ferried in the early period as a result of enslavement, we are here given a didactic narrative of a black man converting to Islam premised on the artifice of him exiting not Africa, but Byzantium. This fictive portrayal is not

unlike the fashioning of the black ‘Abd al-Wahhāb out of an improbable biochemical accident; in either case, black people are implanted into the narrative with an ahistorical and incongruous suddenness instead of in an “authentic” fashion that roots their blackness in Africa or their appearance in the text in Arab-African cross-cultural communication. Instead, the elaborate rationale for both ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s existence and Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s Christianity is expatiated in a lengthy side-plot. In general, it appears that the changeability of black soldiers—easily swayed to the Byzantine side and back again through offers of dignity, money, and women—does serve to heighten the drama of the text, but with Abū al-Hazāhiz this subplot is given space to breathe, with the result that we are presented with a rich and often poignant conversion narrative.

The respective genealogical and cultural dislocations of Abū-l-Hazāhiz and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb work to the disfavor of the former and the favor of the latter: ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is ensconced within an elite Arab lineage and is set up to become a champion of the Muslims, while Abū-l-Hazāhiz is prey to the persuasions of whoever happens to “own” him at a given time, be it a false Kharijite messiah or a Christian captor. We thus see that when the two meet on the battlefield, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb satirizes Abū-l-Hazāhiz on the grounds of his blackness, with the implication that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb has overcome his racial station while Abū-l-Hazāhiz has failed to do so. By the same token, though, Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s lack of firm ideological and genealogical roots eases his eventual path to inclusion in ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s clan.

Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s story also shares much with that of the slaves of the Banū Ṭayy. Like Jaffāl, Maymūn, and Jamrat, Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s body is defined by fearsome excesses, though this time they are of a weaponizable and coveted kind rather than gratuitous grotesquery: he is a musclebound giant with red, ember-like eyes and fanged teeth who uses entire trees as lances. Also like the three slaves, Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s character functions in part to critique doctrinal threats

to the *umma*—his personal *jahl* takes the form of “Kharijism”—here likely a generalized term for messianically-motivated separatism from caliphal allegiance—and the worldly seductions of the Christians. As with the prior vignette, Abū-l-Hazāhiz is led into perdition by pursuing material wealth and upward mobility out of slavishness, however, unlike the doomed men of the Banū Ṭayy, he is given the opportunity to be redeemed and to achieve incremental improvements to his status conditioned upon his faith, his service to the ‘Abbasid caliph, and the deployment of his racialized, superhuman talents on behalf of the Muslim cause.

The Conversion and Adoption of Abū-l-Hazāhiz

The Kharijite leader Maḥdī-l-Zamān is described as “hateful to behold, and though he were an agitated camel, and his voice was like clattering thunder. Jinn and devils fled from him, and the champions and men of valor feared him.” His army, as it approaches the Byzantines for battle, is divided into two factions along ethno-racial boundaries; led by the Ḥijāzī Arab Mayyās (a “powerful knight and valiant champion”) is a contingent of “Arabs and Daylamites,” and led by Abū-l-Hazāhiz is a group of blacks (*sūdān*); the division between the two is by color rather than kind, and indicates which identities are considered subsumable (the “blacks” are one, amorphous group that could include any range of sub-Saharan African peoples), and which categorical or discrete (*i.e.* Daylamites and Arabs).⁴⁵⁹ Having been introduced to Abū-l-Hazāhiz as the leader of the black faction of the military, the narrator adds,

وكان هذا أبو الهزاهز ما يقاتل الا بالاشجار وكان اذا ضرب الفارس يخلطه في بعضه البعض ويخلط فرسه معه فيعجن لحمه على عظمه والويل كل الويل لمن يقف قدامه

⁴⁵⁹ The army is elsewhere revealed to be even more multi-ethnic: the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd’s spies describe the Kharijite army approaching Baghdad as comprised of “Arabs and ‘Ajamīs, Turks and Daylamīs, blacks and much equipment for the knights [*shay’ kathīr min al-fursān*].” Mayyās and Abū-l-Hazāhiz are nonetheless the only two commanders said to helm the army, meaning that the Kharijite army’s many, here expanded ethnic variegations are able to be consolidated along a color line: only the blacks are kept distinct from their multifarious, whiter peers and given different leadership. See: *SDH* X:22.

This Abū-l-Hazāhiz never engaged in combat without wielding whole trees [as weapons] [*mā yuqātil illā bi-l-ashjār*], and if a knight struck him he would mash him together [*yakhlīṭuhu fī ba ‘dīhi al-ba ‘d*], and his horse along with him, so that his flesh became kneaded with his bone—woe, every woe, upon he who stood before him [in battle]!⁴⁶⁰

Though the Byzantines show up in every finery for battle, the Kharijite army is cast as significantly more rough-cut, stunning the Byzantines by being “unshod and naked, unmoved by [the prospect of] fighting and unhurried in their descent, for their object was a clash amongst the heroes,” which is to say that in true dramatic fashion, the army held back in anticipation of a preliminary skirmish amongst the best that each side had to offer; apropos of this, the Christians select five thousand men to press on. Mayyās moves to do likewise with a group of the Arabs, but Abū-l-Hazāhiz sends them back, saying, “By the protection of the Arabs [*wa-dhimmat al-‘arab*], we shall not bring forth but one,” then Abū-l-Hazāhiz,

ثم انه خلع من على جسده أظماره حتى بقى بالسروال وحمل على الروم كانه جمل من الجمال وهدر
وزمجر وطار من عينيه الشرر وعلى أنيابه كسر وحمل على الروم حملات منكراات فعلمت الروم انه
فارس الملتقى ولا يخشى من موت ولا شقا

Removed all his ragged clothing from his body [*khala ‘a min ‘alā jasadīhi aṭmārahu*], until he was stripped down to his trousers [*ḥattā baqiya bi-l-sirwāl*] and set forth against Rūm as if he were the lead camel of the herd [*jamal min al-jimāl*], and he roared and stormed and sparks flew from his eyes [*ṭāra min ‘aynayhi-l-sharar*], and there were breakage-points along his canines. He led a shocking campaign against Rūm. Thus Rūm learned that he was a seasoned knight [*fāris al-multaqā*] who feared neither death nor hardship.⁴⁶¹

There is a strong, implied overlap throughout these passages as well as in the tragicomedy of the three slaves above between the unpolished, tough nature of desert Arabs and the perceived primordiality of their black peers. Above, this was evident in the way that Jaffāl’s unkempt appearance and his withdrawal into the wasteland hearken to the quintessential figure of the *ṣa ‘ālīk* poet who keeps the company of *wuḥūsh*, or wild animals; here it is expressed through a

⁴⁶⁰ *SDH X:22*

⁴⁶¹ *ibid.*

doubled parallelism, with Abū-l-Hazāhiz simultaneously resembling his denuded fellow soldiers and the mounts on which they ride. The trope of African warriors fighting in little clothing or more generally wearing fewer garments than their peers appears elsewhere in Arabic chivalric and belletristic works;⁴⁶² in *Sīrat ‘Antar* and related *maghazī* texts, during the Muslims’ campaigns in Africa, they are said to encounter expert black warriors naked but for some animal skins tied around their waists, and H.T. Norris states that,

To add colour and excitement to the story telling [the *maghazī* compiler] al-Maqqarī [...] enhances his narrative with detailed descriptions of the Coptic and Byzantine attire of the Christian warriors on the one hand, and, on the other, the terrifying spectacle of wild men from the deserts of the Sūdān.⁴⁶³

Above, Abū-l-Hazāhiz presents the traits of the untamed wilderness-dweller brought to their apotheosis: his violence and size are shocking, and his anger implacable. He is described as a camel from amid the herd (*jamal min al-jimāl*), linking him both with animality and with the sort of chaotic mob behavior one might expect from an assemblage of agitated camels; the roaring sounds he emits deepen this impression. Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s eyes shed sparks (*sharar*), which supply a metonymy for the clichéd image of the black African with red or ember-like eyes, and

⁴⁶² This is a phenomenon that carries over into European representations of combined Arab-African fighting forces as well. Some 14th-century Spanish chronicles that represent the Almoravid siege of Valencia describe a contingent of black women who fought on the Muslim side with their heads uncovered, such that their top-knots were visible; see: Elena Lourie, “Black Women Warriors in the Muslim Army Besieging Valencia and the Cid’s Victory: A Problem of Interpretation,” *Traditio* 55 (2000), 181-209. Several testimonials about pious black men who lived at the time of the Prophet collected in Ibn al-Jawzī’s *Tanwīr al-Ghabash* relate that the men often wear scant clothing compared to their Arab peers. They are often said to wear “two garments,” with one piece of fabric wrapped at the waist and another piece of fabric draped across the chest. Imran Hamza Alawiye, “Ibn al-Jawzī’s Apologia on Behalf of the Black People and their Status in Islam: A Critical Edition and Translation of *Kitāb Tanwīr al-Ghabash fī Faḍl ‘l-Sūdān wa ‘l-Ḥabash*” (PhD diss., University of London SOAS, 1985), 180-189. Many early manuscript illuminations from the Islamic Middle East depicting black Africans similarly display them in relatively little garb, with their chests often bare. See: Robert Hillenbrand, “The Image of the Black in Islamic Art: The Case of Islamic Painting,” in *The Image of the Black in African and Asian Art*, David Bindman, Suzanne Preston Blier, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 215-253. These images likely depict an actual sartorial disparity between black Africans (especially those from territories in the Horn of Africa) and Arabs, however, the comparative nudity of black men quickly becomes an evocative trope indicating the difference and at times the bestiality of black people vis-à-vis their Arab counterparts, as suggested here in the depictions of Abū-l-Hazāhiz.

⁴⁶³ H.T. Norris, “The Futūḥ al-Bahnasā And its relation to pseudo-*Mağāzī* and *Futūḥ* literature, Arabic *Siyar* and Western Chanson de Geste in the Middle Ages,” *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 4 (1986): 78.

his canine teeth—the term for which is also used to mean “tusks” or “fangs”—are cracked (*‘alā anyābihi kasr*), presumably from gnashing (though it could be due to intentional modification through filing), giving the impression of an absurdly high tolerance for pain and even a feral unconcern for his bodily upkeep. His qualities of unbridled aggression and martial prowess are also generalizable to the entirety of the black battalion, who,

ما تركوا جواد الا وعرقبوه ولا انسان على الأرض الا طرحوه ولا رأس الا وطبروه وأبو الهزاهز فى
أوائلهم وفى يده سيف صقيل طويل عريض وكان ما يثبت قدامه انسان وكان اذا ضرب بحسامه الصخرة
قطعها نصفين واذا ضرب بطل تركه شطرين

[L]eave no steed without hamstringing it and no man upon the ground without having flung him there and no head without having sent it flying. At their front line was Abū-l-Hazāhiz, and in his hand was a long, broad, polished sword. And no person stood his ground against him; if a boulder was struck with his sword’s edge it cleaved in two, and if a champion were struck with it, it left him bisected [*tarakahu shaṭrayn*].⁴⁶⁴

After Abū-l-Hazāhiz succeeds in routing the Byzantines, the *sīra*’s narrator steps in to confirm the veracity of his own report, saying,

وقد ذكر لى القائل الذى رأى وعاین وهو من الثقة الاخيار أصحاب الروايات والخبار ان أبو الهزاهز هذا
عبد أسود كانه قطعة من حجر جلمد واسع ما بين المنكبين شديد الزندين كبير رأس واسع المنخرين غليظ
الشفنتين عميق سواد الجبهتين كانه نحت من جلمود وطوله كانه عامود وبه نال مياس ما اشتهاه

Indeed the speaker who saw this and bore eye-witness to it [*ra’ a wa- ‘ayāna*]—and he is one of the masters of narratives and reportage [*aṣḥāb al-riwāyāt wa-l-akhbār*], ones of superior trustworthiness—mentioned to me that this Abū-l-Hazāhiz was a black slave who looked like he was hewn from solid stone, broad-shouldered, with powerful forearms, a huge head, wide nostrils, thick lips, and a deeply black brow, as though it were in the shade of a boulder. His height was like that of a pillar, and by means of him Mayyās would be given that which he desired [*wa-bihi nāla Mayyās mā ashtahāhu*].⁴⁶⁵

The narrator’s insistence on the truth of Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s account indicates an attempt to mediate the audience’s *‘ajab*, or sense of amazement, in that the tale of this black giant is wondrous but perhaps too much so—lest the audience become incredulous, the narrator asserts his presence to

⁴⁶⁴ *SDH X:23-24*

⁴⁶⁵ *SDH X:24*

remind us that the greatest source of wonderment concerning this vignette is that it *actually happened*. The narrator will interrupt Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s narrative a few more times to reinforce this point, from which we may glean that this storyline may have seemed particularly hyperbolic to an audience to the already fantastical *sīra*. The narrator here also coaches the audience in a mimetic performance: like the Byzantines in the text, who are stunned by their first real-life encounter with Abū-l-Hazāhiz, so too is the audience prompted to marvel at the incredibility of his physique even as it is described to them bearing the imprimatur of a firsthand account.

After this initial clash against Byzantium, the Byzantine king is apprised of Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s heroics. While seated atop a jewel- and pearl-encrusted throne hewn in rose gold, the king’s generals tell him, “we have encountered ‘Abd-l-Wahhāb and his blacks, but these are not like them.” Thereupon, the king realizes, “By the truth of the Messiah, were this black man to enter into my religion and wield a blade before me, no country nor city could defeat him,” and the king offers the territory of Amorium up to the one who is able to deliver Abū-l-Hazāhiz to him. Upon hearing this, the Byzantine warriors’ faces become anguished (*ṣalabat*, a term used frequently to describe the Byzantines’ disquiet on the eve of battle because of its interplay with the word for cross, *ṣalīb*); only one giant of a man, Qirqiyāqis b. Aflātūn, steps forward to offer his services. He rides out with a Byzantine force bedecked in many-hued textiles and dripping with jewels, again striking a stark contrast to the pared-down wardrobe of their Arab and African counterparts,

وأقبلت الروم بابر اقها وعليهم الكسور المجليه من أصفر مثل شمس النهار وأسود كلون الاعتكار وذهبي
لون الدينار وازرق لون السماء وقت الاسحار ولازوردي مذهل العقول والابصار وبنفسجي كانه لون
المحب اذا عدم الاهل والديار وعلى صدر كل واحد صليب جوهر بياضه ساطع يأخذ بالبصر وقنطاريات
مذهبه وعلى رؤسهما تيجان نورهما يخطف الابصار وأنت الخيل بعدد الجولان وأطلقوا أعتتها الفرسان

The Byzantines advanced in their attire [*aqbalat al-Rūm bi-ibrāqihā*], and upon them were frocks of yellow like the daytime sun and black like the color of the depth of night and gold, the color of a *dīnār*, and blue the color of the twilight sky

and lapis that dazzles the mind and the eye, and violet like [the blush of] a lover deprived of kinsfolk and abodes [*ka'annahu lawn al-muḥibb idhā 'adama al-ahl wa-l-diyār*], and upon each one's chest was a cross of precious stone whose whiteness was luminous, with talents of gold [*wa-qanṭariyāt mudhahhaba*], drawing the gaze, and upon their heads were crowns, the light of which seized the eye. The horses kicked up a great quantity of dust, and the knights loosened their reins.⁴⁶⁶

The well-appointed Qirqiyāqis holds his own against Abū-l-Hazāhiz in combat in a protracted battle scene; they are described as colliding like head-butting rams, or two mountains towering over each other, or two seas clashing together. The disparity in their accoutrements strikes Abū-l-Hazāhiz while in combat—he is said to be wearing a wooden helmet wrapped in a cotton turban, a shirt of wool and tunic of raw linen—and he becomes “desirous [to defeat] Qirqiyāqis due to his lack of equipment [*li-qillat 'adatihī*], and so he put his soul into [the fight].”⁴⁶⁷ This is the first indication that Abū-l-Hazāhiz is ill-at-ease with his minimal material provisions. Qirqiyāqis uses a lasso to try to unsaddle Abū-l-Hazāhiz, only to find even after he has got the thing around his neck, Abū-l-Hazāhiz is immovable as a stone. By the time Qirqiyāqis' maneuvers with the rope have succeeded, it has become so taut and tangled that he cannot strike Abū-l-Hazāhiz through it, and Abū-l-Hazāhiz is able to escape unharmed and lift his opponent and his mount aloft. Here again, we are interrupted by the narrator,

ولما خبرني من أتق به واعتمد عليه في كلام الصدق انه قال لي يا نجد عددت لابو الهزاهز خمسة وثمانون
خطوة خطاها بالفارس والفرس وهما على أكتافه وهو سائر وقد زاد نشاطه

And when he in whom I have confidence and who is reliable with respect to trustworthy speech [*kalām ṣādiq*] informed me of this, indeed he said, ‘O, Najd [b. Hishām], I counted eighty-five steps taken by Abū-l-Hazāhiz with the knight and steed—and they were on his shoulders—and as he went his vigor and strength increased [*wa-qad zād nashāṭuhu wa-quwwatuhu*].⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁶ SDH X:24

⁴⁶⁷ SDH X:25

⁴⁶⁸ SDH X:26

Once again, the narrator's interruption to point out the truth of his account underscores its sheer implausibility in the same breath. Indeed, the rude shock of what transpires against their giant general impresses itself on the Byzantines as well, and the entire army mobilizes after seeing Qirqiyāqis' defeat; the blacks likewise advance to extricate Abū-l-Hazāhiz and fend off the attackers. Qirqiyāqis' son steps forward for another abortive tussle with Abū-l-Hazāhiz, who this time is wounded. Upon seeing the blood dyeing his garments, "his eyes became like blood clots and gave off thunder and lightening," and he slices Qirqiyāqis in half.⁴⁶⁹

From this encounter, it becomes clear that the Byzantines will need to rethink their strategy for capturing Abū-l-Hazāhiz, who has struck fear into all of the "giants" of Rūm. They dispatch 10,000 menials to dig a ditch large enough to house the Muslim army and then thatch it over. The next day, the Byzantines lure the Kharijite army into the trench, then light a ring of fire around it and tell the enemy combatants to cast off their arms or die in the flames. All but Abū-l-Hazāhiz surrender at this moment, and his resistance is held in high esteem by the Byzantine king, Manuel, as a mark of a strong, if misdirected, sense of honor and forbearance (*ṣabr*). Soon, though, this show of defiance gives way to second thoughts. Abū-l-Hazāhiz queries his comrade Mayyās, "If [Mahdī-l-Zamān] was the true messiah [*al-mahdī al-muḥaqqaq*], then why did you fall into this trench?" Abū-l-Hazāhiz surrenders his arms and is extracted from the trench, whereupon he is ceremoniously brought before the Byzantine king for his wooing to begin,

وأخذوه وبين يدين الملك أقفوه وأتوا بالمال فأروه إياه ثم أتوا بالماء فغسلوا بدنه وأمر له الملك بثياب فاخره فألبسوه إياها وأحضرت الخلع فخلع عليه وأتوا بالمال وقد أخرجوه من الصناديق فسكبوه عليه حتى انه وصل الى صدره ووضعوا بين يديه خزانه من خزائن الملك منويل وقدموا اليه عشر جوار نهد أكبار كأنهن الاقمار وقال له الملك تمنى علىّ أي بلد في بلاد الروم أعطيك إياها على شرط أن تدخل في ديننا وتقول بكلمتنا ثم تعقد على رأسك الرايات والاعلام والبنود وتركب لركوبك مائة ألف ويعطيهم الملك المال

They brought him into the presence of the king and stood him there, then they brought forth riches and showed them to him, then they brought water and washed his body. The king commanded that he be brought fine clothing, so they dressed

⁴⁶⁹ SDH X:28

him in [finery] and presented a cloak of honor in which they enrobed him, then they brought [more] riches and dumped them from their boxes, pouring them upon him until they reached his chest, and they placed a money-box from King Manuel's coffers in his hands. Then they presented ten slave girls with ample breasts to him, like full moons, and the king said to him, 'Name any province among the territories of Rūm and I shall give it to you on the condition that you enter my religion and speak our words. Then standards, banners, and flags shall be tied up over your head and you shall ride your mount with a hundred thousand [men], and the king shall give them all wealth.'⁴⁷⁰

Abū-l-Hazāhiz's first retort is to ask what will become of him if he does not convert, to which the king replies that all the finery he is wearing and holding in his hands will be taken back.

By now, the text has laboriously built up a case for Abū-l-Hazāhiz being animal-like in his unrestraint, desirous of worldly wealth, and on religiously shaky ground both due to his affiliation with the Kharijite false messiah, Maḥdī-l-Zamān, and his more recent disenchantment with him (if he was the real deal, how did we end up in the enemy's trap?). It can come as little surprise that he accedes to the Byzantine ruler, though not without first attempting to negotiate more spiritually favorable terms,

وقال لهم لا بد لي أفكر رفيقي محمد في كل شهر مرة وأقول لا إله الا الله محمد رسول الله فضحكوا من قوله وقالوا له يا ويلك لا ترجع تقول هذه الكلمة فان محمد ما يدخل في ديننا فقال لهم لما ذكرتم عيسى ما حددت فعند ذكر محمد صلى الله عليه وسلم حددتم وأنا دخلت في دينكم ولكن يكون معي رفيقا أفنقده في كل شهر مرة أو مرتين وأقول لا إله الا الله محمد رسول الله فضحك الملك منويل حتى وقع على قفاه وقال لهم دعوه حتى يعود وينظر الى عبادتكم ويدخل الى كنائسكم [...] وبعدها أمروا لايو الهزاهز أن يجلس فجلس لانه جاهل بالاديان فخافوا عليه أن يهرب وقدموا اليه أطيب المأكول من الطعام ونظر الى الأطعمة التي ما رأى مثلها ولا أكل شكلها فأكل أكل زائد لانه رجل بدوى وجاهل على كل حال [...] ونظر الى تلك الجوارى التي بين يديه لان نساء الروم بناتهم لا يحتجبون عن الرجال وتلك الجوارى كانهن الأقمار فطار عقل أبو الهزاهز ومال اليهن وقال ما على من بأس اذا كنت نصرانيا في النهار ومسلم في الليل فيوم القيامة من كان معه الحق تبعته

He said to them, 'I must recall my companion, Muḥammad, one time each month and say, 'There is no god but God and Muḥammad is his messenger,' so [the Byzantines] laughed at his words and said to him, 'Woe to you, you may not return to saying such words, for Muḥammad has not entered our religion,' then [Abū-l-Hazāhiz] said, 'When you all recalled Jesus I did not become angry, yet when one mentions Muḥammad, peace and blessings be upon him, you are incensed? Surely I have entered your religion, yet there remains with me a companion that I shall miss, [and shall recall] each month once or twice, and I

⁴⁷⁰ SDH X:32

shall say, ‘There is no god but God and Muḥammad is his messenger.’ At this, King Manuel laughed until he fell over backwards and said to them, ‘Proselytize to him so that he comes back and looks upon your worship rites and enters into your churches.’ [...] Then they ordered Abū-l-Hazāhiz to sit, and he sat because he is ignorant of religions [*jāhil al-adyān*]. They feared he might flee, so they presented him with the choicest of foodstuffs, and he looked upon the food, the likes of which he had never seen, and the variety of which he had never consumed, and ate much because he is a rustic and ignorant man [*rajul badawī wa-jāhil*] in every way [...] Then [Abū-l-Hazāhiz] looked at the slave women in his midst—because the women of Rūm do not veil their daughters before men, and these slave women were like full moons— and Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s reason took flight and he inclined to them and said, ‘It is not so bad for me [*mā ‘alayya min ba’s*] if I am Christian by day and Muslim by night, then on the Day of Judgment I shall follow whoever had the Truth [*man kān ma‘hu al-ḥaqq taba‘atuhu*].’⁴⁷¹

Soon enough, Abū-l-Hazāhiz is preaching the Christians’ open-handedness. He returns on the eve of their next battle to the black soldiers in the Kharijite army as a proselyte, saying,

يا آل حام يا آل حام من رغب فيكم في القماش المفتخر والأموال فليبادر الّى ويدخل في دين النصرانية والا
ضربته بالسيف اليماني فلما رأّت السودان ان أبو الهزاهز على تلك الصفة مالوا باسرههم اليه الا باقى العرب
فانهم قالوا الا كفر بعد الايمان ولا شك بعد ايقان ما لنا دين الأديان الا [ا]سلام ونجاهد في دين الملك العلام
ونموت كرام ولا نعيش لئام

O people of Hām! O people of Hām! Whoever among you wants first-rate clothes and cash [*al-qumāsh al-muftakhkhar wa-l-amwāl*], indeed hasten to me and enter into the Christian religion, and if not then I shall beat faith into [you] with a Yemeni sword! When the blacks saw Abū-l-Hazāhiz in that disposition, they all inclined toward him, unlike the remainder of the Arabs, who said, ‘There is no disbelieving after faith, and there is no doubt after certainty, and there is no religion for us save the religion of Islam, and we shall fight in [the cause of] the Most Knowing King, and die honorably and not live in ignominy!’⁴⁷²

The two points of emphasis used to justify Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s behavior in the text are his relationship with Bedouinism (he is described as a *rajul badawī*)— which is here related to his coarse etiquette and appetitive nature, leading him to devour large quantities of rich food and be enticed by wealth—and his more generalized ignorance, or *jahl*, which is tied to his lack of

⁴⁷¹ Malcolm Lyons offers his own, more lyrical translation of this line in his synopsis of the *sīra*: “It won’t be bad for me if I am a Christian by day and a Muslim by night, and then on the Day of Judgment I shall follow whoever is right.” *SDH* X:33; Cf. Lyons, *Arabian Epic* vol. 3, 336.

⁴⁷² *ibid.*

religious literacy (though he at least knows, if nothing else, that he is called upon to acknowledge Muḥammad and recite the *shahāda*, and he seems aware of Islam’s acknowledgement of Jesus as a prophet). Both of these traits recall the para-Islamic circumstances of the narrative of the three slaves of the Banū Ṭayy, wherein tribalism, appetitiveness, and religio-ethical turpitude drive black slaves to their demise in the pursuit of upward mobility in a hostile, genealogically restrictive social system.

‘Abd al-Wahhāb and Abū-l-Hazāhiz are fated to meet from the outset, and are subject to comparison from the latter’s earliest appearance. When Abū-l-Hazāhiz is fully converted over to Rūm’s side and has amassed a black legion behind him, a Muslim defector to the Byzantine side chimes in saying that there is no one knightlier among the blacks than him, but that nonetheless they must still destroy the so-called “black of the Banū Kilāb,” ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. Now, Rūm has just the man for the job. As the Byzantine army is marching toward the frontier—with Abū-l-Hazāhiz heading up the black contingent, while the “Christianized Arabs,” or *al-‘arab al-mutanaṣṣira*, are led by an Arab knight named Dayyāl—they hear that Constantinople has been invaded by ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s troops, and that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb has repaired with prisoners to Malatya. The Byzantines resolve to go and retrieve their stolen goods. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and his mother, Fāṭima, hear of their advance and begin to ready the army, at which point we are told ‘Abd al-Wahhāb begins to marshal his black forces. In the midst of a scene of hurried militarization, wherein the “coffers are opened and provisions and arms are divvied up,” and the squadrons are amassing behind their respective leaders, this interpolation is pregnant with foreshadowing of the fated encounter between the two black warriors,

وكان الامير اذا رأى أسود يفرح به وان كان رقيق يبالغ في شراه أو حر يحرص أن يجعله من أصحابه

When the prince [*amīr*] saw a black [person], he became joyous [*yafrāḥ bihi*] and if he were a slave, he would go to extremes to purchase him, or if he were free, he became intent on making him one of his companions [*aṣḥābihi*].⁴⁷³

The instinctual glee and affinity that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb feels when he comes upon a fellow black person, regardless of circumstance, echo theories of mutual identification and fellow-feeling espoused by the likes of the ‘Abbasid-era litterateur al-Jāḥiẓ, which alleged that members of a single racial group are preternaturally drawn together through various modes of attraction, particularly sexual preference. In this vein, al-Jāḥiẓ opens the body of his treatise, *Fakhr al-Sūdān ‘alā-l-Bīḍān* with a quote relayed through the 9th-century grammarian al-Aṣma‘ī averring that the essence of harmony lies in creatures remaining among their own kind in a state of *wi’ām*, or mutually agreed-upon concord, and not trespassing upon other groups,

Al-Aṣma‘ī said: al-Fazr, the slave of Fazāra, who had a hole in his ear, said, ‘indeed all beings are prone to concord [*wi’ām*]; the goat does not draw near the sheep when a she-goat has not been found, and the ewe flees the talons [of a beast of prey] and does not keep fellowship with the hoofed [camels],’ and Abū Zayd al-Naḥmī composed the following verse: ‘Were it not for concord [*wi’ām*], man would perish.’⁴⁷⁴

Likewise, the audience is explicitly told that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s ambition is to construct a black community around himself, and the deployment of this information here sets the stage for his engagement with Abū-l-Hazāhiz. Though this feeling first is fully articulated in his encounter with Abū al-Hazāhiz, the theme of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s affection for his fellow black men will persist throughout the text, at times even earning the derision or mockery of his non-black peers. Much later, when the Ethiopian armies of the king Hadlamūs make war against the Muslim troops, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is overjoyed at their approach,

وقدام الجيوش الملك هدموس وهو مثل الأسد الهدار ثم اقبلت الكرامة وبنى عققور ولاحت ابدانهم مثل
سواد الفار فلما نظر الأمير عبد الوهاب الى ذلك تهلل وجهه فرحا بالسودان الذين اقبلوا لقتاله رجاء ان

⁴⁷³ SDH X:39

⁴⁷⁴ Translation my own. Al-Jāḥiẓ and Tarif Khalidi, trans., “The Boasts of the Blacks over the Whites,” *Islamic Quarterly* 25 (1981): 27.

يكونوا من جملة اعوانه فقال الأمير أبو محمد ما زلت تحبهم حتى ارسل الله اليك كل السودان الذين في الدنيا
وانا اسأل الله تعالى يكفيننا شرهم

In front of the armies was the king Hadlamūs, and he was like a roaring lion, then the Kardamīs and the people of ‘Uqfūr advanced, their bodies shining gleaming like the blackness of musk. When the prince ‘Abd al-Wahhāb saw this, his face lit up with joy at the blacks who approached for combat with him, hoping that they might become part of his group of comrades. The prince Abū Muḥammad [al-Baṭṭāl] said to him, ‘You’ll love them until God has sent you every black man on earth, while I ask God Almighty to spare us their wickedness.’⁴⁷⁵

Returning to the tale of Abū al-Hazāhiz, as their respective forces fall to blows, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and Abū-l-Hazāhiz meet in dramatic fashion,

وإذا بصائح يقول خذ حذرک أيها الأمير فالتفت الأمير أسرع من البرق وإذا هو بشخص مثل الفيل وله هدير
وصهيل فصاح الأمير في وجه الفارس الذى مقبل عليه صوت مهول يفلق الحجر ويملخ الشجر فمن ذلك
الصرخة تقهقر الجواد تحت الفارس وكان ذلك أبو الهزاهز فترجل من عليه أسرع من البرق الخائف

Suddenly someone was shouting, ‘Look out, O prince,’ so [‘Abd al-Wahhāb] turned faster than a lightning flash, and behold there was man like an elephant, and he gave a roar and a bray, so the prince screamed in the face of the knight who had advanced upon him with a terrible shout that would split stones and uproot trees, and from this shriek the steed that was under the knight—who was Abū-l-Hazāhiz—reeled backward, so he dismounted faster than a dazzling lightning flash.⁴⁷⁶

The congruency of the two knights’ movements—each maneuvers faster than lightning, and each shouts loud enough to be heard above the fray—sets them up as mutually formidable opponents. However, when they finally confront one another to do battle, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb prefaces their combat with derisive verses that vividly reinforce the differences between the two men,

يبيد الاعادى بالسيف الصوارم
نبي الهدى فاق الورى والعوالم
ومثلى لا يخشى الوغا من ضراغم

أيا أرذل السودان دونك أسود
أنا ترس قبر الهاشمى محمد
ستعلم انى لا أبالى بجمعكم

⁴⁷⁵ SDH 36:2

⁴⁷⁶ SDH X:43

يروح اليها بعلمها بالغنائم
 ولا زالت تبرى الغلاصم
 اذا عثرت خيل الوغا بالجمام
 قتلت بسيفى حارث ثم ظالم
 لتركهم الدين الذى هو قائم
 معجلة من كف اسود ساجم
 ولا نابنى فى الله لومة لائم

وما أنت الا مثل أضعف حرمة
 فدونك منى ضربة لايردها دروع
 أما سمعت أذناك انى همامها
 أنا قاتل الاهلين فى الله عنوة
 وما أخذتنى رحمة عند قتلهم
 فدونك حربى سوف تلقى منية
 وما طابت نفسى على الدين رشوة

O, vilest of the blacks, look out for the black one! [*Ayā ardhā al-sūdān dūnak aswad*]
 The enemies shall be eliminated with swords and blades.
 I am the shield of the grave of Muḥammad, the Hashemite
 The Prophet of divine guidance,
 Exceeding mere mortals [*al-warā*] and worldly realms [*al-‘awālim*]
 You shall learn that I fret not over you mobilizing,
 And the likes of me does not fear battling amongst lions
 You are nothing but the weakest of sheltered wives [*aḍ‘af hurma*],
 Whose husband returns to her in the evening with the spoils of war [*yarūḥ ilayhā ba‘luhā bi-l-ghanā‘im*]
 So beware of me, and a blow that armor cannot withstand
 And which has as yet spent many a chief [in exhaustion]
 Has it not reached your two ears that I am their champion,
 When the horses on the battle-ground stumble over skulls?
 I am the killer of two kinsmen, out of compulsion, for God,
 I killed Ḥārith with my sword, then Zālīm
 And compassion did not move me when I killed them,
 For their departure had been from the religion that is enduring [*qā‘im*]
 So beware my war-making, you shall meet your fate swiftly
 From a black, munificent hand [*kaff aswad sājim*]
 And I have not sought for myself any bribe [*rashwa*] for religion,
 Nor has a censorious blamer supplanted me in God[’s cause]⁴⁷⁷

Notions of lineage and station loom large in these lines, especially as they relate to religiosity on the one hand and socioeconomic status on the other. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb begins by calling Abū-l-Hazāhiz the vilest of the blacks, implying there might be an offstage array of other

⁴⁷⁷ SDH X:47-48

vile black men, with Abū-l-Hazāhiz being superlative among them. In light of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s own blackness, which he also references, we may read this as a gesture towards ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s unlikely success in superseding his naturally base station. Abū-l-Hazāhiz, by contrast, has failed to do so. Even the first reference that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb makes to the Prophet Muḥammad is bound up with genealogy and the idea of rank as birthright; he specifically refers to Muḥammad as the Hashemite, evoking his clan’s moniker and thus Muḥammad’s august standing within the elite tribe of Quraysh, rather than spotlighting any number of his other positive and prophetic attributes. When ‘Abd al-Wahhāb boasts of men whom he has killed in the past, he highlights their chiefly status as if to say that such men are worthier, more powerful opponents than Abū-l-Hazāhiz; they are described as *ghalāṣim*, which also means throats or larynxes, the polysemy of which connects the figure of a tribal chief with the speech and vitality of his entire social unit.

And yet, there are moments in this poem in which social ranks and relations are shown to be flimsy vis-à-vis religious obligations, with religion being the primary thing that differentiates the two black men. For example, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb revisits his murder of his high-born father and grandfather, al-Ḥārith and Zālim, which was in reprisal for (among other things) their conversion to Christianity. Though ‘Abd al-Wahhāb describes them as two kin (*ahlayn*), using a term that recalls the entirety of a household or a people to evoke both their immediate family ties and their positions within the broader clan, he nonetheless avers that this gave him no pause in killing them after they defected from Islam. Moreover, Islam is described here as the faith of al-Qā‘im, a name for God meaning the one who maintains, stands, or remains steadfast. Implicit in this is that men can betray their peoples and lose social footing, while God is the only one who maintains a supreme and eternally stable station. The consequence of social standing among men

may also be obviated through sheer religious transcendence, as with the Prophet Muḥammad being designated not merely as a member of the earthly, Hashemite elite but also as the axial human figure within the cosmic order: he is said to rise above (*fāq*) the reaches of the world and its mortal inhabitants. The poem thus resolves society into a tripartite hierarchy: God, the Prophet, and the remainder of humankind. This last category is initially arrayed according to birth-given social standings, but one may exceed or fall short of these through one's actions. Unbelief and venality are two such shortcomings for which 'Abd al-Wahhāb promises to mete out judgment with his sword, and, as a black man, Abū-l-Hazāhiz— guilty of both of these sins—did not have much rank to lose to begin with. The fact of Abū-l-Hazāhiz's low rank and lack of social capital is enunciated not only through the aforementioned references to his "vile" blackness (as opposed to 'Abd al-Wahhāb's "munificent" and open-handed blackness that is literally in the act of "pouring forth water," *sājim*), but also through the emasculating remark that likens him to a cloistered woman waiting on her husband to bring home spoils.

Abū-l-Hazāhiz is incensed by 'Abd al-Wahhāb's statements, and offers a poetic rebuttal in which his best recourse against 'Abd al-Wahhāb's insults is to refer to his opponent as *ibn Marzūq*, or "son of Marzūq." Abū-l-Hazāhiz then adds that 'Abd al-Wahhāb is the one who is a *ḥurma*, a cloistered woman, awaiting the treasures her husband may bring, and concludes that "the likes of you cannot hope to defend against calamity, and cannot have expectations [of relief] on the day that the tyrant [*zālim*] encroaches," playing off of the name of 'Abd al-Wahhāb's slain grandfather and implying that he shall be his avenger. In these lines, one registers those features of the poem above which Abū-l-Hazāhiz found most offensive, namely insults against his low birth, emasculating jibes, and 'Abd al-Wahhāb's boasts of having killed his Christianized kin. The emasculation in particular is so offensive to him that it renders him nearly inarticulate, and

he is only able to throw the exact words of his opponent back in his face in a lame rebuke. We are reminded here of the fact that Abū-l-Hazāhiz's conversion to Christianity was clinched by the promise of being able to do what he construes 'Abd al-Wahhāb's alleged father, Marzūq, of having done: being able to assert sexual dominance over fair-skinned (Byzantine) women. The severity of 'Abd al-Wahhāb's attack on Abū-l-Hazāhiz's manhood is amplified by the structurally imposed obstacles to sexual access under which he has historically operated as a consequence of his race.

'Abd al-Wahhāb has a final, brief poetic word, during which he refers to Abū-l-Hazāhiz several more times as a slave (*'abd*) and concludes by saying, "By God, o slave of the blameworthy and their progeny, you shall learn that I am from honorable stock [*min sulāl al-akārim*]," effectively refuting Abū-l-Hazāhiz's claim about his bastardy and reminding the former of his lower-than-low rank as a mere slave to the ignoble. When the two fall to fighting, they go at it for several days with neither being able to best the other. Abū-l-Hazāhiz quickly becomes impressed by 'Abd al-Wahhāb's comportment on the battlefield; he switches to referring to him as *ibn Dhāt al-Himma*, or "son of Dhāt al-Himma," and states that "your virtues in combat have amazed me" (*'ajabatnī shamā'iluk 'ind al-nizāl*). Moreover, we are told that though the already giant 'Abd al-Wahhāb's bulk is equivalent to a mere one of Abū-l-Hazāhiz's thighs (*kān al-amīr [...] fī-l-qadd mithl fakhidh Abī-l-Hazāhiz*), the strength of his faith is so great (*inna quwwat al-taqwā wa-l-imān mā hiya qalīl*) that the two are of nearly equal caliber on the battlefield. In their final clash, the way in which 'Abd al-Wahhāb finally manages to overcome his foe is literally obscured from the audience's view, for the two kick up such a cloud of dust that nothing is visible until 'Abd al-Wahhāb emerges with Abū-l-Hazāhiz "captured in

his fist,” leaving the audience to wonder whether this victory was in fact an act of divine intervention.⁴⁷⁸

When the victorious ‘Abd al-Wahhāb returns to camp, a meal is prepared and he makes sure to give his captive the choicest meat from the platter. Afterward, before going to sleep, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb performs the *‘ishā*’ prayer in front of Abū-l-Hazāhiz, and is so overcome in his own recitation of Qur’ānic verses about the promise of imminent reward or threat of imminent punishment (*wa ‘d aw wa ‘īd*) that he weeps and swoons. Abū-l-Hazāhiz is once again duly impressed at first, and yet,

ويطيل السجود للملك المعبود وكان سيف الأمير معلق في عامود فوسوس الشيطان الى أبو الهزاهز فوثب قائما وكان مقيدا من غير كتاف فاخذ سيف من العامود وامتصاه من غمده وهزه الى ان سطع ولمع ودب الموت في حافته وتشعشع وشال يده بالسيف حتى بان سواد ابطيه وأراد أن يضرب الأمير وإذا بصوت مثل الرعد القاصف والريح العاصف وأخذ السيف منه وهو يقول يا عدو الله اما سمعت ما قال الله في كتابه العزيز الذين يوفون بعهد الله ولا ينقضون الميثاق ويليق بنا أو يكبر منا أن يكون عبدنا في خدمتنا ولا نحرسه بعين عنايتنا ونرعاه برعايتنا ممن عاداه فرفع أبو الهزاهز رأسه لينظر من القائل وإذا بشخص واقف على رأس عبد الوهاب ورأسه لاحقا بعنان السماء ورجلاه في تخوم الارض السفلى وقد نشر عليه جناحان ويده حربه تشعل نارا هذا وأبو الهزاهز صار حائر مما رأى وندم وقال والله ان لهذا منزلة عظيمة عند الله

[Prince ‘Abd al-Wahhāb] went on in prostration at length before the Venerated King [*al-malik al-ma ‘būd*] and the prince’s sword was hanging from the pillars, so the Devil whispered to Abū Hazāhiz [*waswasa-l-shayṭān*] and he jumped up, for he was not bound by shackles. He took it from the pillar, drew it from its scabbard and brandished it so that it shone and glittered and death snaked across its edges as it glinted, then he raised up his hand with the sword so high that the blackness of his armpits were exposed. He wanted to strike the prince, when suddenly there was a sound like clashing thunder and storming wind and [something] took the sword from him and said, ‘O enemy of God, did you not hear what God said in His great Book? Those who carry out the compact of God and do not violate the covenant, and who are worthy of us and exult about us are indeed a slave in our service [*‘abdanā fi khidmatinā*]. And we do not guard with our watchful eye nor guide under our protection he who is hostile towards it.’ Then Abū-l-Hazāhiz lifted his gaze to look upon the speaker and sure enough there was a person standing at ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s head, and his head was clung to by the clouds of the sky though his legs [reached] to the lowest bounds of the earth. Two wings spread out over him and had a lance in hand, aglow with light. Abū-l-Hazāhiz was stupefied by what he saw and grew regretful, saying, ‘truly

⁴⁷⁸ SDH X:52

this one is of great station with God [*wallāhi inna li-hadhā manzila ‘aẓīma ‘ind Allāh*].⁴⁷⁹

Thereupon, Abū-l-Hazāhiz repents and demands that everyone in the camp be awoken to witness his conversion. He recites the *shahāda* and rejoins the Muslim community, much to the delight of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, who shouts for joy and whose “chest expands and [whose heart] is gladdened.”

This narrative of Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s conversion continues to play off of the doubled resonance of images of earthly and cosmic status and authority. At the outset, the prince (*amīr*) ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s worship of God is refracted through a particular divine aspect, namely God’s kingship (*al-malik al-ma‘būd*). This serves to evoke the contrast between God’s supreme sovereignty and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s earthlier, lesser principedom. Abū-l-Hazāhiz is presented as susceptible to the affect of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s prayerful exaltations, but is moreover vulnerable to the whispers of the Devil (*wasāwis al-shayṭān*). Perhaps the most iconic reference to the Devil as one who whispers occurs in the final verse of the Qur’ān, *Sūrat al-Nās*, or the *sūra* of the people, which states,

Say, ‘I take refuge with the Lord of men, the King of men, the God of men, from the evil of the slinking whisperer [*al-waswās al-khannās*] who whispers [*yuwawwis*] in the breasts of men of jinn and men.’⁴⁸⁰

Indeed, each time that whispering is mentioned in the Qur’ān using the root *w-s-w-s*, it is in relation to a devilish or negative force whose direct object is human; twice the *shayṭān* whispers to Adam and/or Eve while they dwell in the garden (Q 7:20, Q 20:120), and once the verb is used reflexively when the Qur’ān warns that God is aware of what men whisper to their own souls (Q 50:16). Being vulnerable to these whispers is an inherently human condition; whereas ‘Abd al-

⁴⁷⁹ SDH X:53

⁴⁸⁰ Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, 354.

Wahhāb is shown to be transcending earthly and human societal modes in his worship of a heavenly king, Abū-l-Hazāhiz is still trapped in the human dimension and remains so until his conversion, at which point he simultaneously surpasses his earthly station and reaches its apotheosis by re-becoming a slave, only this time he is a slave to God. Emblematic of this, worship is represented in the narrative as a form of service (*khidma*) performed by a slave (‘*abd*). In a final reference to sacred rank and order, the angelic manifestation that appears to shield ‘Abd al-Wahhāb serves to prove to Abū-l-Hazāhiz not only the truth of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s religion, but also his “great rank” (*manzila ‘azīma*) in God’s esteem. In being the one to induct Abū-l-Hazāhiz into Islam, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb effectively inducts him both into a system of faith and of earthly political authority, embodied in his status as an *amīr* who has amply demonstrated his superiority of pedigree and etiquette both in battle and while presiding over Abū-l-Hazāhiz as his captive. However, Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s acculturation to Islam’s political world is not yet complete. Rather, his conversion narrative concludes with an encounter with the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd.

After converting the rest of his black contingent back to Islam, Abū-l-Hazāhiz merges armies with ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and the Muslim army are called back to Baghdad to help the caliph repel an imminent attack from the fire-worshipping peoples of Khorasan. Hārūn al-Rashīd expresses particular eagerness to meet Abū-l-Hazāhiz face to face, and so Abū-l-Hazāhiz is invited to travel with ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and his compatriots to the caliphal court. While preparing to set out, Abū-l-Hazāhiz asks ‘Abd al-Wahhāb,

فقال الى أين تمشى أيها الأمير فقال الى بغداد الى خليفة الزمان لأننا كلنا له خدم وغلما ن فقال أبو الهزاهز
أيها الأمير نحن والله ما نعرف لنا خليفة سواك ولا نريد يأمر علينا وينهى سواك ولم لا تأخذ أنت الخلافة
بالسيف ونحن نزل على كل من يعاديك الذل والحيف فضحك عبد الوهاب وقال له طب نفسا فما نحن عند
الرشيد الا في المنزلة العلباء وليست الخلافة باليد القوية لانها ورثها من محمد المصطفى فلما سمع أبو
الهزاهز هذا الكلام قال ها نحن بين يديك

‘Where are we going, o prince?’ So [‘Abd al-Wahhāb] replied, ‘To Baghdad, to the Caliph of the Age, for all of us are servants and slaves to him [*kullunā lahu khadam wa-ghilmān*],’ then Abū-l-Hazāhiz said, ‘O prince, we truly know no caliph except for you and we do not want anyone to command us and forbid us except for you. Why do you not take the caliphate with the sword and we shall send down humiliation and harm upon all who oppose you?’ ‘Abd al-Wahhāb laughed and said to him, ‘Be glad, for we are not in any but the highest position before al-Rashīd, and I will not be a caliph by means of force and strength because it is something inherited from Muḥammad the Chosen One. When Abū-l-Hazāhiz heard these words, he said, ‘Truly we are in your hands.’⁴⁸¹

Abū-l-Hazāhiz cannot imagine a man of greater fitness to lead than ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, and cannot envision a mandate of power given by God rather than taken by force, and these impressions culminate in his conclusion that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb should assume the caliphate. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is thus compelled to dole out his first lesson in conformity to the political structure of the Islamic realm, namely that all people are servants to the caliph, and in this way in turn serve the legacy of the Prophet. It is remarkable that even after hearing this, Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s response is one of assent predicated on being in ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s hands, suggesting that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is still an intercessional figure of more immediate consequence than the mighty caliph of whom he has just learned. This prior sense of affinity and deference to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb also impacts Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s interaction with al-Rashīd in his court, where he wrestles once more with the idea that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s political position is one of a subordinate actor within a heterogeneous sociopolitical structure rather than absolute command over an autonomous, homogenous black enclave,

ووصل الأمير الى الميدان هنالك لقاہ خليفة الزمان وحواله الفقهاء والعلماء والغلمان ولما وقعت عين عبد الوهاب على الرشيد ترجل وترجلت معه الناس جميعا الا أبو الهزاهز فانه لم يترجل الى الرشيد بل صاح يا صاحب العمامة الكبيره والادان الوسيعة لم لا تترجل لعبد الوهاب مثل ما ترجل اليك وتفعل في حقه مثل ما فعل في حقك فان كنت أنت خليفة البيضان فهو خليفة السودان فصاح عليه الأمير عمرو بن عبيد الله وقال له اسكت سكت حسك وبطل نصك تخاطب خليفة الزمان بهذا الخطاب ترجل وقبل التراب فلما سمع لامة انقلبت عيناه في أم راسه وهوى بيده الى قائم سيفه وقال ويلك يا عمرو تحبسنى مثل الرجل الاثقر الازرق العينين أعنى البطال تصيح عليه وتضربه بالمقرعة بين الرجال فلا بد لى ما أعلوك بهذا الحسام فانى لا أطيع لا خليفة ولا سلطان ولا ملك من ملوك الزمان الا الأمير عبد الوهاب الذى جاد على بروحى لما ان

⁴⁸¹ SDH X:61

أسرني في الميدان فقال عمرو في نفسه مليح وحق الرحمن نحن كنا باسود واحد ولا بنخلص كيف وقد صار هذا وتلك السودان وفيهم كل واحد شيطان فلا بد اني أعمل على تلافه وأسقيه كأس الردى لانه مجنون وما في عينه من أحد فناده الأمير عبد الوهاب يا أبا الهزاهز يا ولدي ما قال الأمير الا الصواب فترجل أبو الهزاهز حياء من الأمير عبد الوهاب

The prince arrived at the main square and there the Caliph of the Age met him, and he was surrounded by the jurists and the scholars and servants, and when ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s eye fell on al-Rashīd he knelt and all those who were with him knelt, except for Abū-l-Hazāhiz. Indeed, he did not kneel for al-Rashīd and instead yelled, ‘O you with the big turban and the wide ears, why do you not kneel for ‘Abd al-Wahhāb like he knelt for you and do right by him as he has done by you? For if you are the caliph of the whites, then he is caliph of the blacks!’ Then the general ‘Amr b. ‘Ubayd Allāh shouted at him and said to him, ‘Shut up! Shut your mouth and recant your statement, you talk to the Caliph of the Age in this way? Kneel and kiss the earth!’ When [Abū-l-Hazāhiz] heard his words, his eyes rolled backward in his head [*inqalabat ‘aynāhu fī umm ra’sihī*] and his hand felt for the hilt of his sword and he said, ‘Woe to you o ‘Amr, would you constrain me like you do the pale, blue-eyed man—I mean al-Baṭṭāl—yelling at him and beating him with a whip in front of the troops [*taṣīḥ ‘alayhi wa-tadribuhu bi-l-miqra ‘a bayn al-rijāl*]?’ Then there is nothing for me to do but hoist you up by this sword! I shall not obey any caliph, or any sultan, or any king among the kings of the age except for the prince ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, who dealt generously with my spirit [*jād ‘alayya bi-rūhī*] when he captured me in battle. So ‘Amr said to himself, ‘By the goodness and truth of the Merciful, there was no end of it for us when we had only one black man, and then came yet more blacks [*naḥnu kunnā bi-aswad wāḥid wa-lā bi-nakhlus kayf wa-qad ṣār hadhā wa-tilka-l-sūdān*], and each of them has a devil inside of him, and there is nothing for me to do but try to destroy him and pour him a glass of ruin, because he is mad, and there is not a single person in his view [other than ‘Abd al-Wahhāb].’ Then ‘Abd al-Wahhāb called to him, ‘O Abū-l-Hazāhiz, o my son [*yā waladī*], the general has spoken rightly,’ so Abū-l-Hazāhiz knelt, having been shamed by ‘Abd al-Wahhāb.⁴⁸²

There is much here to examine, but I will begin with the causes of Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s confusion over and rebellion against Hārūn al-Rashīd’s preeminence over ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and the what this intimates about Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s world. Above, we find that Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s world is ostensibly so segregated and hierarchized according to color that he assumes any black person who occupies a position of leadership must do so on parallel and equal footing with a white equivalent. This notion is supported both by the respect that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is visibly conferred

⁴⁸² SDH X:62

by his peers and by the vast wealth that he has seen ‘Abd al-Wahhāb reap, all of which is encoded into the phrase “he dealt generously with my soul,” which simultaneously echoes the gestures of material munificence that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb makes towards his new charge and the spiritual elevation his company conveys. Indeed, this passage departs from Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s prior characterization as a materialistic and appetitive figure, in that here Abū-l-Hazāhiz is shown to be interested above all else in emancipation from power structures that are not legitimated in some way through consanguinity, and is particularly incensed at the Arab general ‘Amr’s command that he kneel and kiss the earth before the white caliph. In conjuring the image of al-Baṭṭāl—whose paleness and blue eyes bear mention here perhaps in order to render him a more trenchant representative of the all-white aesthetics of al-Rashīd’s power as imagined by Abū-l-Hazāhiz—being beaten into subservience in a particularly humiliating way in front of his military peers, Abū-l-Hazāhiz vividly associates being coerced into silent submission to this dubious ruler with suffering violence and an injury to his ego and status.

The aspects of submission to authority against which Abū-l-Hazāhiz bristles arise not from the performance of obeisance as such, but rather from the manner in which authority is conveyed through certain chains of power and relation; when ‘Abd al-Wahhāb directs Abū-l-Hazāhiz in a disciplinary, fatherly fashion to kneel before al-Rashīd, he does so without further objection. Thus, Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s acknowledgment the political figurehead of the Muslim world and integration into the Muslim community is contingent on an intermediary relationship with ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. This relationship proves to be not only one of spiritual mentorship, but also one of pseudo-filiation, in that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb frees Abū-l-Hazāhiz from his prior ties of bondage among the followers of Maḥdī al-Zamān and the Byzantines—effectively creating a bond of clientage (*walā’*) between them, with ‘Abd al-Wahhāb the superior, Arab patron and

Abū-l-Hazāhiz the subordinate, non-Arab client—and then proceeds to refer to him as a son; that is, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb articulates his affiliation with Abū-l-Hazāhiz in terms of *nasab*. Though Abū-l-Hazāhiz has already converted to Islam, it is by means of an act of fosterage by ‘Abd al-Wahhāb that he is inducted fully into the social structures of Muslim society, rendering a profession of faith the access point for earthlier forms of community membership and belonging.

Though exemplary, Abū-l-Hazāhiz is not the first or only black man to come under ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s charge. Indeed, the first gift ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is given at caliphal behest—after his paternity case is resolved and he has proven his mettle before the court of public appeal—is twofold: he receives an ass from Nubia bearing a jewel-encrusted bridle and ten black slaves, two of whom are characterized as “giants.”⁴⁸³ This gesture of welcome into the ranks of the Arabo-Muslim warrior elite, which leaves ‘Abd al-Wahhāb custodian of two types of “beast of burden” of similar provenance, in turn leaves the audience with the question of how the superficially black ‘Abd al-Wahhāb may receive this bequest. How will this non-hereditarily black-skinned protagonist relate to the other black figures by whom he is consistently surrounded as head of the Muslim army’s black contingent, comprised mainly by slave soldiers of African lineage? Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s story gestures toward an answer to this question: ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is said to be fixed on the goal of accruing as many black men to his side as possible, purchasing and manumitting slaves and rendering them instead his “companions” and his “sons.”

As previously mentioned, this process essentially creates bonds of *walā’*, or clientage ties that “regulated the status of freedmen and converts in early Islamic society,” between ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and the black men under his command, which in turn confers them a pseudo-filial status. Indeed, many legal scholars aver that ties of *walā’* carry identical rights and status to ties

⁴⁸³ *SDH* VII:44

of *nasab*, and, as seen above, this form of relation is articulated in a familial—and at times even flesh-and-blood—idiom. A common refrain in *fiqh*, or positive law, concerning the status of *walā'* is that it is a form of kinship (*luḥma*) like unto hereditary kinship (*ka-luḥmat al-nasab*).⁴⁸⁴ The very use of *luḥma* as the *mot juste* for expressing this kinship has a corporeal resonance, in that the homonymic term *laḥma* with which it shares a root is literally a lump of meat or flesh. As seen in the excerpt above, this biologization of companionship between upper and lower *mawālī* renders society's power structures more intuitive through a commonplace language of authority: children are subordinate to parents, and all are subordinate to the state. Patricia Crone portrays this set of relationships in terms of private and public legal dependencies,

All non-Arab newcomers to Arab society, be they freeborn or freed, converted or unconverted, were thus affiliated to individual members of this society [through *walā'*], not directly to Arab tribes, let alone directly to the Arab state; and [...] the relationship in which they were placed was an unequal one: in public law freedmen and converts enjoyed the same rights and duties as other Muslims, but in private law they were dependents.⁴⁸⁵

Elsewhere, Crone refers to the institution of *walā'* as a form of “humiliation,” through which “newcomers to the faith [were] attached to the person ‘at whose hands’ they had converted,” however, as we see with Abū-l-Hazāhiz, a bond of *walā'* with a person whom he respects on grounds of personal intimacy and identity as well as of perceived piety actually mitigates the greater humiliation of serving a more remote, white caliph whose religious authority—unlike ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s—has not been proven before Abū al-Hazāhiz’s very eyes by an angelic

⁴⁸⁴ As late as the 1920s, this pseudo-*nasab* relationship between upper and lower *mawālī* could bring one great wealth, as in former Ottoman territories such as Egypt it became common practice among upper-class persons who died childless to open up endowments (*awqāf*) for the use of their *mawālī*, often comprised of their former slaves. Notably, though, of 26 entitlement disputes over *awqāf* in the early 20th-century surveyed by Ron Shaham, at least three attest a *waqf* whose distribution was ostensibly color-dependent, with black former slaves getting a smaller share than their white and Ethiopian peers (who were considered a distinct color-group from darker-skinned Africans). Ron Shaham, “Masters, Their Freed Slaves, and the Waqf in Egypt (Eighteenth-Twentieth Centuries),” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 43 (2000), 171-172.

⁴⁸⁵ Patricia Crone, *Roman, provincial and Islamic law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 36.

apparition.⁴⁸⁶ Tellingly, it is not until Abū-l-Hazāhiz has been prompted to recognize ‘Abd al-Wahhāb as a father figure that he is able to comprehend al-Rashīd’s sovereignty and comport himself accordingly; the latter type of assimilation into society is cast in the narrative as posterior to and contingent on the former, much as it was by law. This emergent cognizance of the social order also serves to sketch the boundaries of Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s world, for one of the significances of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb not in fact being the “caliph of the blacks” is that his authority is limited, and so because the black people under his command and incorporated into his clan through the para-genealogical structure of *walā’* cannot supersede the rank of their manumitter, they are kept in a lower social position than Abū-l-Hazāhiz had perhaps presumed. In this fashion, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s black comrades are made to remain a subordinated and enclavized black sphere within the broader Muslim community, even as they gain appreciable status through attachment to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s Kilābī Arab line. It is perhaps for this reason that, despite the protective pseudo-agnatic relationship implied in early definitions of *walā’*, scholars who examine the carryover of such systems of clientage into contemporary Muslim societies find that they appear disturbingly analogous to “modern slavery,” and moreover that they tend to disproportionately affect sub-Saharan peoples in the Muslim world who are made to “retain, because it is imposed upon them, the indelible traces of a servile past.”⁴⁸⁷ While affirming these troubling resonances with the contemporary world, I argue below that if we meet the *sīra* on its own terms, the socio-historical

⁴⁸⁶ Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 49.

⁴⁸⁷ While acknowledging the purpose served by ties of *walā’* in pre-modern Muslim societies, Inès Mrad Dali finds its endurance in contemporary Tunisia problematic, not least because though *walā’* is meant in positive law to simulate an agnatic relationship, this entails a relationship of—often financial as well as social—obligation to the patron and a dislocation for the client from his original, natal community, leading it to resemble a form of indenture. Inès Mrad Dali, “De l’esclavage à la servitude: Le cas des Noirs de Tunisie,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 45 (2005), 936, 947-949.

arc described by the two vignettes compared in this essay offers an account of racial uplift, grounded in the ideals and practices conveyed in the Qur'ān and its early interpretation.

Shifting *Ansāb* and the Project of Assimilation

To many, the Qur'ān takes a firm stance on the deprioritization of *nasab* vis-à-vis personal piety, or *taqwa*. This sentiment is articulated especially in the verse Q 49:13, and which states that the most ennobled of people is distinguished not by tribe or clan but by faith.⁴⁸⁸ In other instances, such as Q 25:54, God is attributed as the architect of all human relations of blood (*nasab*) and marital affinity (*ṣihr*), which both equilibrates between these forms of human relation on a cosmic scale and renders them ontologically contingent on a relationship between the human and the divine,

And it is He who created of water a mortal, and made him kindred of blood and marriage [*nasabān wa-ṣihrān*]; thy Lord is All-powerful.⁴⁸⁹

With respect to eschatology, the Qur'ān assures believers in the epigraphic verse above that human relationships will fall away on Judgment Day, and that men shall no longer be able to profit from or inquire into blood relations and inherited status (Q 23:101).⁴⁹⁰ Statements made by

⁴⁸⁸ For a more complete analysis of Q 49:13, see chapter 1.

⁴⁸⁹ Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, 61.

⁴⁹⁰ There is much debate about the precise meaning of this verse, both in early exegesis and in modern scholarship. Tarif Khalidi observes of this passage that, “There could hardly have been a more telling image to impress upon an Arab tribal audience the idea of a total breakdown of social relationships,” and he is preceded in this line of thinking by the 14th century exegete Ibn Kathīr, who reads this verse as warning that, “on that day, *ansāb* will benefit no one, and the child shall not inherit from his father, nor will he heed him.” In light of the seeming conflict between the clause “and they will not ask about one another,” in Q 23:101 and the phrase, “they will turn to each other and ask each other,” in Q 37:50, al-Qurṭubī adduces a number of different traditions debating when the inquiry into one another’s *ansāb* will begin and end and how this will be signaled. Ibn ‘Abbas is quoted as saying, “they will not boast over *ansāb* in the afterlife the way we boast over it in this world, and they will not ask about it as they do in this world: ‘what tribe are you from and what *nasab*?’ And they will not become mutually acquainted, for truly awe will have so distracted them [*la-hawl mā adhhalahum*].” That is, one of the afterlife’s rewards will be the abolishing of the practice of asking after one’s lineage, and this is produced through sheer awe of God muting such questions. Others purport that it is only at the first blast of the trumpet that inquiry into *ansāb* will not occur, and once the second blast has sounded, people will turn to one another and resume their questioning as foretold in Q 37:50. See: Khalidi, “History and Hadith,” 49; Ibn Kathīr, “Al-Mu’minūn, Āyat 101,” in *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, accessed 16 April 2018, <http://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/katheer/sura23-aya101.html#katheer>; al-Qurṭubī, “Al-Mu’minūn, Āyat 101,” in *Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī*, accessed 16 April, 2018, <http://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/qortobi/sura23-aya101.html#qortobi>.

the Prophet and companions declare one's *ḥasab* (the notion of “inherited merit,” usually twinned with *nasab*) to be one's level of religiosity or strength of personal character, in contrast to its *jāhili* connotation as a collection of ancestral feats and virtues. According to Louise Marlow, such sayings were, “frequently invoked in discussions of marriage equality (*kafā'a*),” as the genealogical parity of spouses was often regarded as desirable in the early Muslim community.⁴⁹¹

The increased association of merit, or *ḥasab*, with personal piety, with the effect of diminishing the relative importance of *nasab*, or blood prestige, has led some to declare that early Islam was a period in which this iconic conceptual pairing (*muzāwaja*)—with its roots in pre-Islamic tribal politics—became decoupled.⁴⁹² The Prophet even took pains to stigmatize the vaunting and satirization of individuals on the grounds of *nasab*. However, rather than rendering *nasab* obsolete, the early Islamic period saw an increased exploitation of the social flux that Arabian groups experienced due to their new religion and its expanding communal boundaries. Because the Prophet, his forebears, and his companions became the new social elite, many non-Arab actors saw an opportunity to weave themselves into esteemed genealogies through claiming a biological relation to pre-Islamic prophets or non-Arab companions of Muḥammad, thus sidestepping the traditionally coveted Arab lines while still privileging the use of *nasab* as a tool for gaining social purchase. In short, the indictment against satirizing one's peers on the basis of *ansāb* was often taken to mean not a moratorium on the scientific practice of tracing genealogy nor an undermining of genealogy's social value in this world, but instead a call to wield *nasab* to

⁴⁹¹ Louise Marlow, “Ḥasab o Nasab,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica* XII/1, accessed 16 April 2018, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hasab-o-nasab>.

⁴⁹² “Ḥasab wa-Nasab,” *EI II*.

illuminating rather than derogating ends. Thus opens Ibn Ḥazm's *Jamharat Ansāb al-'Arab*, a 10th-century genealogical register,

Indeed God, the praised and gloried, has said, 'Truly we created you male and female and made you into peoples and tribes in order that you may know each other [*li-tta 'ārafū*]. Verily the most honorable of you before God is the most righteous of you.' [...] We were told by Sa'īd b. Abī Sa'īd, who is al-Maqburī, via his father, via Abū Hurayra, that [they said], 'O messenger of God! Who is among the most honorable of people?' He responded, 'The most righteous of them!' They said, 'This is not what we are asking you about.' He said, 'Yūsuf, the prophet of God, son of the prophet of God, son of the comrade [*khalīl*] of God.' They replied, 'This is not what we are asking you about.' [The Prophet] said, 'Then, are you asking me about the origins of the Arabs? The best of them in the *jāhiliyya* is the best of them in the [age of] Islam, if they comprehend [it].' And indeed God Almighty has pronounced that the most honorable [individual] is the most righteous, even if he is the bastard son of a Negress [*ibn zanjīyya li-ghayya*], and indeed the most disobedient unbeliever is diminished in rank [*maḥṭūṭ al-darija*], even if he is the son of two prophets. Thus the mutual knowledge [*ta'āruf*] of people by means of their *nasab* is an objective that the Almighty had in creating us peoples and tribes, hence it must be the case that the science of *nasab* is a science of high regard [*jalīl raḥī*], for with it comes mutual knowledge [*ta'āruf*].⁴⁹³

Ibn Ḥazm justifies the exercise of '*ilm al-nasab*' as a means of generating mutual knowledge [*ta'āruf*] of other peoples, per the Qur'ān's instruction, outfitting the pre-Islamic practice with new, normative vestments. Nonetheless, the paradoxical crux of the ongoing interest in *nasab* among early Muslims is divulged in this apologetic overture: in continuing to care about *nasab*, those who are genealogically precarious or dispossessed—such as slaves, orphans, bastards, or exiles—are often left in the lurch. As the putative “worst case scenario” of the bastard child of a Zanjī woman suggests, this is going to inevitably disadvantage some populations more than others due to historical, cross-cultural dynamics of domination and exploitation. Even for those with intelligible genealogies, excavating such knowledge might unearth damning evidence of a protracted ancestral attachment to pagan belief systems or antagonistic stances vis-à-vis prior

⁴⁹³ Ibn Ḥazm, *Jamharat Ansāb al-'Arab* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1948), 1-2.

prophets and monotheisms that could perturb one's claims to an equal share in the Muslim faith community. Apropos of this, relations to figures such as the Ethiopian king Abraha who made war against the Meccans in the year of Muḥammad's birth, or the aforementioned recalcitrant Nimrod, who denied Abraham's message, are often shunned. Arabs themselves were sensitive to the political value of retrojecting their Muslim identity, with the result that the tracing of a shared North Arabian tribal lineage to the pagan ancestor Ma'add b. 'Adnān gave way to the even more distant originating figure of Ismā'īl, son of Ibrahīm, thus placing the former Ma'addites within one generation's reach of the father of monotheism. Some *ḥadīths*, such as that which opens Ibn al-Kalbī's *Jamharat al-Nasab* (the earliest extant genealogical register of the Arabs) attest to a syncretic view whereby Ismā'īl is rendered a forefather of Ma'add, and hence of the Arabs,

[...] The messenger of God, peace be upon him, had refrained until the completion of [reciting] the *nasab* up to Ma'add b. 'Adnān, then he said, 'The genealogists have lied [*kadhaba al-nassābūn*], God, praised be He, said, 'And many generations between them.'⁴⁹⁴ Ibn 'Abbās said, 'And had the Messenger of God desired to instruct him, surely he would have informed him,' and he said, 'between Ma'add b. 'Adnān and Isma'īl are thirty fathers.'⁴⁹⁵

Through such interventions, various Arab groups are able to fashion their sense of ethnic particularity around the figure of Ma'add while also embedding their genealogical *bona fides* within the more universal fabric of Muslim sacred history.

Just as Arabian tribes began to trace their lineage to Ismā'īl, or Ishmael, in the early centuries of Islam, some Persian Muslims began to claim descent from Ishāq, or Isaac—though this was received with skepticism on the part of many Arab historians. In so doing, Persians were quite literally claiming that they were the Arabs' cousins, and though this claim was used to

⁴⁹⁴ This passage is found in verse 38 *Sūrat al-Furqān*, in which it is said that God destroyed the pre-Islamic empires of 'Ād and Thamūd, the Companions of the Well, and many intervening generations.

⁴⁹⁵ Hishām ibn al-Kalbī, *Jamharat al-Nasab*, vol. I (Kuwait: Wizārat al-I'lām, 1983), 65.

polemical ends in certain strains of *shu 'ūbī* discourse, wherein Isaac's freeborn mother Sarah is vaunted over the slave concubine Hagar, Sarah Bowen Savant notes that,

At their core [these claims] were profoundly assimilationist in character and reflected an earnest effort to imagine for Persians a better place within an Islamic society still respectful of Arab norms.⁴⁹⁶

The *shu 'ūbī* satirizing of her status notwithstanding, Hagar also comes to constitute a central figure in a number of proof-texts that were of use to African groups that did not convert to Islam but nonetheless remained under Muslim rule and guardianship (*dhimma*) and better poised them to relate across an ethnic divide vis-à-vis a new local administrative power. This is evident, for example, in the *ḥadīth* tradition now known as the *waṣīyya bi-l-aqbāṭ* (exhortation concerning the Copts, or native Egyptian Christians), which makes it incumbent for Muslims to take Coptic populations into their care on grounds of bonds of protection (*dhimma*) and of agnatic ties, or literally “womb”-kinship (*raḥim*), issuing from Abraham's Egyptian slave woman.⁴⁹⁷ Other *ḥadīths* attest not only to Hagar's relation to Copts but also more generally to those people from “the black villages, with dark skin and wooly hair [*ahl al-madara al-sawdā' al-suḥm al-ji'ād*],” of whom it is said that they have common “lineage and matrilineal relation [*nasab wa-ṣihr*]” with the Arabs, with their linked lineage being via Hagar and their kinship being a product of these people's use as concubines by the Prophet (*wa-ṣihrum anna rasūl allāh [...] tasarrar fthim*).⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁶ Sarah Bowen Savant, “Isaac as the Persians' Ishmael: Pride and the Pre-Islamic Past in Ninth and Tenth-century Islam,” *Comparative Islamic Studies* 2.1 (2006): 6.

⁴⁹⁷ Nathaniel Miller, “Warrior Elites on the Verge of Islam: Between Court and Tribe in Arabic Poetry,” in *Cross-Cultural Studies in Near Eastern History and Literature* vol. 2, eds. Saana Svärd and Robert Rollinger (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2016), 145.

⁴⁹⁸ The phrase “black villages,” or *al-madara al-sawdā'*, is an interesting one, because it evokes not the nature of the people themselves or even a specific geographic location, but rather references a type of domicile, namely mud-brick houses. That this phrase replaces the more commonplace term *bilād al-sūdān* for the terrain in which blacks dwell is perhaps an indication that the *ḥadīth* relates specifically to settled, village-dwelling African peoples and not, for example, to more nomadic Berber groups. Cf. Ibn Hishām, *Sīrat Ibn Hishām*, Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā et al., eds. (Cairo: Maktaba wa-Maṭba'a Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa-Awlādihi bi-Miṣr, 1955), 6.

As explored in Xavier Luffin’s essay, “‘Nos Ancêtres les Arabes...’ Généalogies d’Afrique musulmane,” many black African peoples who identify as Muslims trace their lineage back to various Arab ancestors, from Ethiopians claiming to be the dispersed early converts from the Banū Makhzūm clan of the Quraysh who were taken in as refugees in the first *hijra* to Muslims in Chad who trace their heritage to the pre-Islamic Yemenite sovereign Sayf b. Dhī Yazan, himself the protagonist of a popular *sīra*.⁴⁹⁹ Luffin notes a preference for peninsular Arabs, through which one may assert a primordial tie not only to a non-black ethnic group but to the ancestral heartland of Islam, and thus “doubly [reinforce] the quality of this stated Arab origin.”⁵⁰⁰ It is further noteworthy that many of the catalogued groups trace their origin to South Arabian, Yemenite Arabs, who typically attributed their lineage not to Ma‘add b. ‘Adnān but to Qaḥṭān b. ‘Adnān. This perhaps bespeaks a form of conscious positioning similar to the Persians’ selection of Isaac as their ancestor, in correspondence to the Arabs’ forefather Ishmael; groups claiming Qaḥṭānī descent can claim to be close cousins to the earliest Arab Muslims rather than directly inserting themselves into the same ancestral line, which may have been regarded as more suspect or presumptuous.⁵⁰¹

Luffin notes a number of reasons for the salience of Arab heritage among African Muslims, including its political utility for Muslim dynasties in the region that stake their mandate

⁴⁹⁹ Xavier Luffin, “‘Nos ancêtres les Arabes...’ Généalogies d’Afrique musulmane,” *Civilisations* 53 (2006): 177-209.

⁵⁰⁰ Luffin writes, “Avoir un ancêtre venu de la Péninsule arabique renforce donc doublement la qualité de cette origine arab tant revendiquée.” *ibid.* 182

⁵⁰¹ Peter Webb ascribes the attribution of Qaḥṭān as the common ancestor among South Arabian groups in part to the way in which the so-called Qaḥṭānīs themselves entered Islam at a cultural disadvantage, temporally posterior and geographically displaced from their Ma‘addī peers in the Ḥijāz. Thus, “a collective sense of exclusion from Ma‘add prompted an array of groups into a separate line of novel ethnogenesis as the Yamāniyya/Qaḥṭān faction of ‘Yemenis.’” African groups who attach themselves to the Qaḥṭānī Arabs may have had in mind not only a geographic logic, with Yemen being more proximal to East Africa, but also an interest in apologetically upholding their distinctness through the distance from the original Arab Muslims that being identified with Qaḥṭān implied. Peter Webb, “Ethnicity, Power, and Umayyad Society: The Rise and Fall of the People of Ma‘add,” forthcoming in *The Umayyad World*, Andrew Marsham, ed. (London: Routledge, 2019), 26.

to rule on claims of descent from the *ashrāf* or the Quraysh, the melding of advantageous aspects of *‘ilm al-nasab* with indigenous, pre-Islamic practices of genealogical recordkeeping, rejection of the negative associations that have accreted to the *jāhili* figure Abraha and transitively to black Africans who were viewed as his descendants, a rejection through biological dissociation of the environmentally deterministic connection between Africaness and slavery encoded into much Arabo-Muslim discourse, and a rejection of Africaness itself. Luffin adds that, “Africaness, taken in the sense of ‘non-Arabness,’ is often used by a given people or community to discredit an other, to explain his status as a pariah.”⁵⁰² Among Muslim groups seeking belonging in a particular socio-historical network, supplanting one’s Africaness with Arabness may be used to help insulate people from socioeconomic disenfranchisement and prejudice, and this is understood by many of the groups surveyed not as coming at the cost of an underlying, authentic African heritage. Rather, it is a recuperation of an obscured, often elite Arab identity and an affirmation of Muslim belonging, an act of “voluntary forgetting” in order to make space for the “remembrance” of a more advantageous vision of the past.⁵⁰³ In view of this, early Islamic historiography presented converts with a rhizomic repertoire of relational pathways through which one could embed oneself into the community, which has historically been construed not only as a group of coreligionists bound together in faith, but also as a sort of family bound together through bonds of blood, marriage, clientage, and fosterage, some forged in a distant, mythic past and some from contemporary social and legal realities. As seen above, though, some of these familial relationships are brokered more readily than others.

⁵⁰² “[A]fricanité, prise dans le sens de ‘non-arabité,’ est quelquefois utilisée par un peuple ou une communauté pour en discréditer une autre, pour expliquer son statut de paria.” Luffin, “Nos Ancêtres,” 196.

⁵⁰³ On the notion of “voluntary forgetting” as a tool for identity construction in the Late Antique world, see: Sarah Bowen Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory, and Conversion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 24-25.

Conclusion

The question of how Muslim identity is genealogically legitimated by non-Arab groups brings us back to the politics and literary utility of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s character in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*. Though he is unable—due to both biological realities and the vicissitudes of legal fosterage in Islam—to bring his black peers thoroughly under the mantle of his elite *nasab* without committing some obvious act of fabrication, he brings them as close as possible through acts of conversion and manumission, mentorship, and ties of *walā’*. This project is one of definitional assimilation in that it initiates his black peers on a process of “making or becoming like,” against the backdrop of normative Muslim society and amongst each other.⁵⁰⁴ It also draws the black community in the text closer to Arabness, made possible due to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s improbable etiological circumstances. All processes of assimilation necessarily involve some kind of erasure, but that erasure is often a tool of survival. As is evident in the vignettes examined in this essay, the communal security and prospects of upward mobility to which black people in the *sīra* are granted access after the coming of Islam and the advent of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb are made to contrast sharply with the prevailing circumstances of the *jāhiliyya*, in which black people are represented as having no capacity to collectivize and are incapable of attaining the rights conveyed through filiation and affiliation with the people in their midst, that is, through *nasab* or its correlatives that—in the *sīra* as in reality—expand their contours as an integrating mechanism for foreign, converted populations. Such are the stakes of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s endeavor.

⁵⁰⁴ I borrow this language from the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition of the term “assimilation.” *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. “assimilation,” accessed April 16, 2018, <http://www.oed.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/11934?redirectedFrom=assimilation#eid>.

Though the *sīra* progresses from a pre-Islamic *milieu* in which the very survival of black persons seems untenable to one in which the Muslim faith is being safeguarded by a large contingent of black persons under the direction of a black hero, we need not receive this with starry-eyed racial utopianism. These black characters are frequently still trailed by alien and ambivalent connotations, embedded in ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s characterization from birth as well as in the outlandishly portrayed, giant forms of the warriors in his midst—whose bodies are such valued weapons in the Muslim army—and the barbaric tongues in which they murmur on the eve of war; the utility of black Muslims to the broader community is often predicated on the unique talents that their phenotype confers. Moreover, the high-born, Arab ‘Abd al-Wahhāb continues to occupy a superior status than the other blacks in his midst for reasons due seemingly not only to dynamics of clientage, but also to ongoing racial prejudices, to the extent that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb un-ironically derogates Abū-l-Hazāhiz as a “vile” black man upon their first encounter.

In a recent, excellent study of the history and preservation of traditional methodologies of Qur’ān study in Senegambia, Rudolph T. Ware III identifies the key trait of Qur’ān schooling as “embodiment,” and its learners thus became “Walking Qur’āns.”⁵⁰⁵ Well into the colonial era, these masters of religious study were so sought after that often so-called *bīḍān* (lighter-skinned African, lit. “white”) aspirants found themselves at the feet of black instructors. Even in the mid-1800s, “when a more virulent *bayḍān* racism had arisen, [...] a ‘white’ scholar such as Mukhtār wuld Būnah could still proclaim that he was ‘disgusted with the religion of the *bayḍān* [*sic*] and came to the blacks to learn their religion.”⁵⁰⁶ Such deference toward superior black religious authorities and disparagement of white ones leads to the conclusion that for the piously

⁵⁰⁵ Rudolph T. Ware III, *The Walking Qur’an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), *passim*.

⁵⁰⁶ *ibid.* 247

concerned, religiosity trumped race. That is, in an episteme in which anti-black racism was commonplace—“virulent,” to use Ware’s phrase—that racism largely targeted the common, unlettered folk, not the religious and scholarly elite.

The illegitimate or pseudo-illegitimate circumstances of many of the early *sīra* heroes’ births have prompted several scholars to remark that the *siyar sha‘biyya* offer a didactic plea in favor of better treatment of the children of slave concubinage within Arabo-Muslim society; less attention has been given to the prospect that the heroes themselves are not the primary target of the texts’ moral labors, but rather an instrument to a different and even more broadly integrative end.⁵⁰⁷ And yet, in the society of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s character may be seen as functioning similarly to Ware’s Walking Qur’āns, serving as a testament to his community’s worth by being its best, most pious, and most prominent, and thus acting as a bulwark against racial animus from the outside. This is attended, though, by a certain amount of self-policing on the part of the emergent black community in the text; ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s interactions with Abū-l-Hazāhiz make plain that in an environment in which the black race, despite improvements, is still widely reviled, religiosity can not only help one “overcome” one’s racial inferiority, but it can also legitimate one’s own perpetuation of racialized animus towards those who fail to do so, even within the same racial group. When Abū-l-Hazāhiz, feeling mistreated by the Kharijites, strays from his religion, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is tasked with dealing with him for no other apparent reason than that he is his only racially congruent foil.⁵⁰⁸ The text hypes their impending encounter as a battle for the ages, one of a pious black hero against a faithless black antihero. In his pre-battle

⁵⁰⁷ Cf. Peter Heath, *The Thirsty Sword: Sirat ‘Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996), 70; R. Brunschvig, “‘Abd,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman, et al. Leiden: Brill, 2012.

⁵⁰⁸ This propensity towards pairing like with like in battle is found throughout the *sīra*: pale Byzantine giants will often fight against black giants in the Muslim army, and women are often set against women. On occasion, proving the importance of such congruencies, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is pitted against a woman that his mother, Fāṭima, must come and rescue him from because he proves unable to defeat her. On this, see: Kruk, *Warrior Women*, 77-78.

satire, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s anger and indignation at Abū-l-Hazāhiz’s blackness is patent, and he touts his noble lineage and piety as a way of breaking the superficial symmetry between them.

It can therefore not be said that black people as such have been vindicated by the transition out of the *jāhiliyya* in the *sīra*. Instead, a Muslim identity has arisen that—unlike *jāhilī* tribal identity—much more readily accepts black people on the condition of their profession of faith and fidelity to the political order; though this acceptance is far from fully integrative, it nonetheless is premised upon an egalitarian notion of what makes a Muslim a Muslim. The didactic implications of this portrayal are ambivalent, in that for a predominantly Arab audience, Black-Muslim identity and communality in the *sīra* is effectively rendered as something anodyne and even constructive for the broader Muslim community, while if we presume a black reading public then ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and his confreres may be seen as modeling their ideal comportment. In either case, the formulation of identity and the conditions of social belonging presented in the *sīra* hold space for figures such as ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and his black companions, and may also do so for those other faithful characters who ascend to greatness throughout the *sīra* despite their alterity, including the eponymous Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma herself.

Into Africa: Passing, Traveling, and Fantasy⁵⁰⁹

The king Hadlamūs was fearsome like a buffalo, long-limbed and foam-mouthed, with a lion's face. He had big ears, powerful arms, huge palms, and tall stature like a pillar. He sat upon an ebony litter, and beneath him lay lion skins. [...] Men from the tribe of 'Uqfūr guarded him [...]. There were locked apparatuses over their mouths, and they were like lions on the hunt, they roared and raged, and their voices were like the braying of donkeys. –Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma⁵¹⁰

"We saw the whole earth darkened by the quantity of blacks with them, like buffalo, at least a million of them clad in coats of mail." King Michael's face hardened, and he said, "Woe upon you! I've not seen the likes of this save in a dream [...]." –Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma⁵¹¹

Though the effects of black be painful originally, we must not think they always continue so. Custom reconciles us to every thing. After we have been used to the sight of black objects, the terror abates, and the smoothness and glossiness or some agreeable accident of bodies so coloured, softens in some measure the horror and sternness of their original nature; yet the nature of the original impression still continues. –Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry, 135⁵¹²

Many of the *siyar sha'biyya* contain some form of sustained African expedition: *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* chronicles the conquest of present-day Tunisia, *Sīrat 'Antar* takes us into Egypt and the Horn of Africa, and *Sīrat Sayf b. Dhī Yazan* draws its battle lines between Yemen and Abyssinia. *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* transports audiences to Abyssinia as well, in hot pursuit of the villainous *qādī*-turned-Christian, 'Uqba; there the Kilābī Arabs and 'Uqba battle for various Africans' souls in their respective attempts to convert and curry favor with the native populace. In the process, they encounter a variety of African peoples, from the above-mentioned Ethiopian king Hadlamūs, who converts almost immediately over to the Muslim side, to the cannibals of the tribes of 'Uqfūr and people of Lamlam, many of whom wear locked grates over their mouths to keep them from eating the flesh of their own brethren.

Among studies of Arabic literature, many analyses of such texts' depictions of Africa and Africans have taken aim at these passages' penchants for exoticism, exaggeration, and ultimately

⁵⁰⁹ This title is inspired by Ron Mallon's article, "Passing, Traveling, and Reality," which I discuss below. Ron Mallon, "Passing, Traveling, and Reality: Social Constructionism and the Metaphysics of Race," *Noûs* 38 (2004): 644-673.

⁵¹⁰ *SDH XXXV:54*

⁵¹¹ *SDH XXXVIII:53*

⁵¹² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 135.

racism. In examining ‘Antara b. Shaddād’s African adventures, Harry Norris declares that the text’s pronounced interest in cultural curiosities that provide titillation for the text’s audience is a defining feature of the *sīra*’s genre and motivation:

[In *Sīrat ‘Antar*, s]ubjects are selected that appear to show a fascination for literary landscapes wherein are to be found the heroic and the enigmatic, the exotic and the unexpected. As a composition, parts of the *Sīra* may be viewed as an attempt to transform the ‘books of marvels’ into a genre that expands such marvels into a narrative about the human endeavor.⁵¹³

Even more significant for our present study, in the same essay Norris persuasively identifies a portion of *Sīrat ‘Antar* concerned with the African king Humām as having been borrowed from sections of the travelogue of Abū Ḥāmid al-Gharnāṭī, the *Tuḥfat al-Albāb*, that are concerned with the Dagestan region of the Caucasus.⁵¹⁴ In other words, the depiction of one type of exotic locale is readily interpolated into a description of another region entirely, suggesting that what is essential is fidelity not to the image of a particular place, but rather to a general impression of outsiders vis-à-vis the text’s Arabian center.

Where authors have identified depictions of Africa as particular and distinct from other representations of far-flung lands, it is often through the relative negativity and aversion with which its denizens are discussed. In the first volume of his compendious work on the *sīras*, Malcolm Lyons devotes several sections to the various minorities of note (which he designates “racial groups”) featured across the *sīra* corpus: Kurds, Jews, Blacks, Persians, and so on.⁵¹⁵

Though Lyons notes that the *sīras* must have held some appeal for black audiences, and that they admit a certain amount of ambiguity around their depiction of black actors within the realm of

⁵¹³ H.T. Norris, “From Asia to Africa: The ‘Tuḥfat al-Albāb’ by Abū Ḥāmid al-Gharnāṭī (473/1080-565/1169) as a Source for the Chronology and Content of the ‘Sīrat ‘Antar B. Shaddād,’” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 57 (1994): 183.

⁵¹⁴ *ibid.* 182.

⁵¹⁵ Malcolm Lyons, *The Arabian Epic: Heroic and Oral Storytelling, Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 21-29.

Islam (provided they conform to certain acceptable archetypes, such as the noble *mujāhid*, or pious warrior, or the docile slave), he adds that, “Outside the bounds of the Muslim state, there is what seems to be a natural antagonism between Arabs and the blacks, ‘amongst whom no white could stay.’”⁵¹⁶ With respect to other popular works, such as the *1001 Nights* or the most recent of his translation endeavors, the *Ḥikāyāt al-‘Ajā’ib wa-Akhhbār al-Gharā’ib* (*Tales of the Marvelous and News of the Strange*), Lyons and his colleagues take a dimmer view; though Robert Irwin’s introduction to Lyons’ translation of *Tales of the Marvelous* features a section on “racism” devoted entirely to anti-blackness, there is no preceding analysis of racial difference in the text as distinct from racism, nor does he discuss racism targeting non-black groups.⁵¹⁷ The urgency of redressing the issue of racism in such texts is repeated compellingly by Irwin in his essay, “The Dark Side of the Arabian Nights,” in which he argues that racism in the pre-modern world—and particularly in Arabic literature—is a “crime without a history.”⁵¹⁸ Meanwhile, though, the historicization of race itself in such works remains an as yet incomplete initiative.

The second and third chapters of this dissertation addressed the assumption common to much critical race theory that pre-modern ideas of human difference were so divergent from modern, “scientifically”-grounded ones as to require distinct nomenclature, status, and tools for analysis; in other words, pre-modern “race” is not race at all, but rather something else. Contrary to this argument, I have contended that “science,” as it was understood at any given moment, has been the common idiom through which human difference has been explained since antiquity, and that this discursive mode carries through the medieval period in the Muslim world in both

⁵¹⁶ *ibid.* 26.

⁵¹⁷ Malcolm Lyons and Robert Irwin, *Tales of the Marvelous and News of the Strange* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), xxiv-xxv.

⁵¹⁸ Robert Irwin, “The Dark Side of the Arabian Nights,” *Critical Muslim* 13 (2015), <https://www.criticalmuslim.io/the-dark-side-of-the-arabian-nights/>.

mannered and popular sources, thus encouraging us to read racial logic in pre-modern societies as continuous with and germane to modern racial thinking, and moreover to identify in its scientific articulation a form of authority claim that was held to be persuasive across social classes and literary forms.

The present chapter will turn to address another argumentative pole through which conversations on pre-modern race have been guided, and which I have sketched above, namely, that pre-modern societies exhibit a near-ubiquitous tendency toward racism, with “others” depicted solely in unsympathetic and unfavorable terms; often in studies of the Arabic sources, this posture is likened to that of the Greeks towards “barbarians,” with ‘*ajam*, or non-Arabs, standing in for the *barbaroi*.⁵¹⁹ This description not only takes for granted the fixity of concepts of ‘*arab* and ‘*ajam*, but also of the operations of ethnocentrism itself, flattening it into an inchoate, jingoistic attitude that “Arabs” in all pre-modern times and places would have received as their cultural inheritance.⁵²⁰ Using the African cycle of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, I argue that depictions of Africa and Africans serve numerous functions, and that though portions of the text parrot or adapt what were likely common and unquestioned anti-black prejudices, still others represent certain black Africans as proto-Muslims and allies to the Arabs’ cause.⁵²¹ The text toes the line between reveling in exoticism and bearing forward the *sīra*’s previously discussed ethic

⁵¹⁹ In many cases, the primary rationale given for this is the shared linguistic implications of *barbaroi*—that is, those who do not speak Greek—and ‘*ajam*, or those who do not speak Arabic. Cf. C.E. Bosworth, “‘Ajam,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica* V/7, 700-701, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ajam>.

⁵²⁰ As has been explored in the previous chapters, Arabness itself is a concept that is particularly in flux in the formative centuries of Islam. This is reflected especially in the early portions of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, during which tribal factionalisms between the Banū Sulaym, Banū Kilāb, and Banū Ṭayy reign as some of the most predominant forms of social affinity and dis-affinity in the work. On the evolution of “Arabness” as a self-conscious ethno-political construct, see: Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

⁵²¹ I use the term “African cycle” to connote the portion of the *sīra* in which the majority of the action takes place in Africa and/or is directed by African actors moving between Africa and parts of Arabia or Byzantium. This “cycle” occupies approximately four *ajzā*’, or roughly 270 pages of the *sīra*, spanning parts 35-39 in the fourth volume of the text.

of furthering the Muslim world's reach and incorporating non-Arab actors into the *umma*, effectively rendering Africa simultaneously as a source of entertainment and as a venue of socio-political aspiration. The project of African recruitment is lent particular significance when considering the alarmed reactions of the Byzantines to the Muslims' growing numbers of black troops, as exhibited in the epigraph above. In assigning black soldiers a unique capacity to intimidate and effectively war against the Byzantines, we could say that the *sīra* restores what Kwame Anthony Appiah might term some degree of "horizontal" to its otherwise vertically-organized scheme of human difference—Africans possess a particular signifying value that Arabs do not.⁵²² Or, perhaps more fittingly, it shows the ineluctable link between *philia* and *phobia* when portraying the other—Africans fascinate because they are fearsome. The fact that Africans' qualities become racialized in different ways when in different situations, moreover, demonstrates an awareness on the part of the text that race's meanings—to paraphrase Michael Root's iconic statement—do not necessarily "travel," but rather are contextually particular.⁵²³ The text's awareness that race is not identical in all times and places, by extension, implies an awareness of how to *use* race in a fashion that is tailored to specific situations and aims.

Related to the theme of travelling, the *sīra* displays a multilayered engagement with the domains in which racial difference is conventionally produced, namely, other climes and corners of the earth. That is, race and travel interact in the text both conceptually and physically. Despite the truth in Norris' and Lyons' observations that Africa is often represented in the *sīras* in monolithic terms that not only consolidate Africans into one sweeping category (*al-sūdān*) and also at times amalgamate features of the African continent with other faraway places in an exotic

⁵²² Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument," in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 36.

⁵²³ Michael Root, "How We Divide the World," *Philosophy of Science* 67 (1998): S631.

pastiche, I find that many of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*'s imaginings of Africa hew closely to the vocabulary and motifs found in a number of medieval geographies of the region. Moreover, in sharing in the language of such works, the *sīra* once again evinces an interest in scientific accuracy and verisimilitude similar to what is seen in 'Abd al-Wahhāb's birth narrative, even as the plot unfolds as a series of fictional events.

At times, the direction of influence between the *sīras* and these geographies becomes very ambiguous, with sources such as the adventures contained in the Alexander Romance clearly interpreted as carrying geographic data about some of the earth's most remote regions. As such, it is perhaps best to look at *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* as discursively situated in the same global imaginary as these geographies, rather than being directly derived from them. As Zayde Antrim notes of such geographies, this discourse functions through an economy of reference and intertextuality, making imitation part of its art and its ethos:

They used similar vocabulary to talk about land; they invoked similar historical and religious sources; and they represented territory at similar scales and in similar forms. In particular, they tended to envision plots of land as homes, cities, or regions, each of which associated some notion of attachment or belonging with land.⁵²⁴

To sketch this ongoing medieval conversation about the nature of the world and Africa's place within it, I compare the *sīra*'s contents with anecdotes found in works by authors on Sub-Saharan Africa such as al-Mas'ūdī and al-Idrīsī. Throughout the *sīra*, the territories of Abyssinia are represented as being situated in the fifth clime, the names of various African tribes and leaders reflect the nomenclature used in geographic works, and even the grotesque images of the Lamlamī cannibals bear some relation to attestations in works such as Ibn Sa'īd al-Maghribī's *Kitāb al-Jughrāfiyā* or al-Bakrī's *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik*. Such similarities indicate the

⁵²⁴ Zayde Antrim, *Routes and Realms: The Power of Place in the Early Islamic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 2.

wide circulation of particular ideas about the specific nature of Africa's otherness that distinguish it from the myriad foreign locales described in the *sīras*.

Below, I will begin by examining the terms in which Abyssinia and its peoples are discussed at the early stages of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*'s African cycle, assessing both the religious and cultural implications of the text's depiction. I will then address the way in which 'Abd al-Wahhāb's racial blackness travels or fails to travel in the narrative, particularly in relation to his African love interest, the black princess Maymūna. I then turn to a re-assessment of Maymūna's character that attends to her multiple axes of identification, such as her gender (the import of which has been discussed at length previously in the work of Remke Kruk), religious identity, and race, by way of indicating the complexity with which one of the text's most prominent African figures is portrayed.⁵²⁵ Through this, I trouble both Kruk's own race-free analysis of Maymūna's importance and the countervailing portrayal by some scholars of blackness in Arabic literature as monolithic. Because, as indicated by Antrim's claims above, land and identity were often looked at as mutually constitutive, I find that 'Abd al-Wahhāb's exceptionality as a black-skinned Arab registers in African territory as ambiguity over his affinity or disaffinity with the

⁵²⁵ Remke Kruk's detailed discussion of Maymūna originally appears in the following piece: Remke Kruk, "The Princess Maymūnah: Maiden, Mother, Monster," *Oriente Moderno* 22 (2003): 425-442. She also appears more briefly in: Remke Kruk, "Warrior Women in Arabic Popular Romance: Qannāṣa Bint Muzāḥim and Other Valliant Ladies, Part One," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 24 (1993): 213-230. Much of the content of these two essays is synthesized and developed further in Kruk's most recent work, *The Warrior Women of Islam: Female Empowerment in Arabic Popular Literature*, the arguments of which have been discussed throughout this dissertation. As a general rule, Kruk's tendency is to use warrior women such as Qannāṣa and Maymūna as counterpoints to the trope of Arabic women in popular literature as either coquettes or crones, demonstrating the unique strength and martial involvement that these figures embody. However, as shall be explored below, this does run the risk of ironing out the particular roles played by each individual warrior woman by subsuming them into a single archetype. In the case of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, this becomes particularly problematic with regards to Maymūna, whom Kruk classes amongst the Christian warrior women with whom 'Abd al-Wahhāb becomes romantically entangled in her "Warrior Women" essay. There is, however, no explicit indication that Maymūna is in fact Christian prior to converting to Islam in the text (though she has a sense of piety, her father and tribe are declaratively pagan), and, as shall be seen, her irreligiosity becomes a main point of polemic when 'Abd al-Wahhāb is trying to resist her advances. For more on patterns of warrior woman behavior in Arabic popular literature, see: Remke Kruk, *The Warrior Women of Islam: Female Empowerment in Arabic Popular Literature* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

region's residents. This is in contrast to how it manifests among the diasporic black warriors discussed in the previous chapter, wherein his status becomes that of a role model for assimilating Africans into Arab client relationships. Maymūna's embeddedness within an imagined Africa, meanwhile, structures 'Abd al-Wahhāb's initial reception of her romantic overtures, while her removal from Africa—the seat of her royal status and her pagan past—visibly restructures the ways in which she interacts with other figures in the text. All of this points to the fact that racial identity in the *sīra* is multi-functional, socially situated, and perceptually contingent. In view of this, I close with a brief consideration of the socio-political aims of the African portion of the text, which crystallize when the Kilābīs return from Africa to resume their warring with the Byzantines, with a fresh force of African troops in tow.

Staging Boundaries: King Hadlamūs and His Dark Domain

The *sīra*'s earliest incursion into Abyssinia is filtered through the eyes of the turncoat 'Uqba, who at the time is fleeing the clutches of 'Abd al-Wahhāb's men. He arrives at the court of the Ethiopian ruler Hadlamūs, and, upon seeing the retinue of 'Uqfūrī troops stationed around him, declares, “these are the *zabāniya* described by Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh, prophet of the Muslims [...] on the day of judgment they drag people to Hell.”⁵²⁶ In designating the people of 'Uqfūr as the demons who guard the passage to hell, 'Uqba's character instantly points to several elements endemic to descriptions of certain Africans throughout the text: their demonic natures and appearances, their lack of free will and volition, and their fatal power over other men. Moreover, he taps into a robust iconographic register with which the audience would have been familiar: in art throughout the medieval period, the *zabāniya* are depicted as hulking, dark-colored demons with exaggerated facial features. Though extant depictions of such creatures

⁵²⁶ *SDH XXXV*:54. Cf. *Q* 66:6, 74:30.

mostly arrive to us from Timurid territories in the 14th and 15th centuries, they are prefigured by various *ḥadīths* of Muḥammad and his companions that speak of the *zabāniya* as having hulking, terror-inducing bodies, or as being “black-faced and fanged.”⁵²⁷ Though color is not discussed in the earliest descriptions of these creatures, already in the *tafsīr* of Muqātil b. Sulaymān to verse 30 of *Sūrat al-Muddaththir*, in which God reveals that he has assigned nineteen angels to guard Hell, an elaborate portrait of the *zabāniya* has emerged,

Their eyes are like dazzling lightning, their canines like spurs—meaning [shaped] like the horns of a cow—and their hair reaches down to their feet. Flames of hellfire emerge from their mouths, and traveling between their two shoulders requires a seventy-year journey. The extent of one of their palms spans [the territory of] Rabī‘a and Muḍar, and any of their mercy and kindness is replaced by rage. One of them can drive seventy thousand [souls to hell]. [...] The hellfire does not harm them because their fire [from which they are fashioned] is even harsher than the hellfire’s heat.⁵²⁸

That the *zabāniya* come to be popularly understood as black could relate to the preceding verse, in which it is said that the fires of hell are “scorchers of the skins” (*lawwāḥatun li-l-bashar*), which led many exegetes to conclude that the fires of hell blacken the bodies of its occupants due to the relationship between burning and charring, or it could simply be another manifestation of the previously discussed artistic proclivity to iconize the demonic using darker colors.⁵²⁹ All of this is to say that in one brief reference, the *sīra* links Hadlamūs’ court with a terrifying iconography that removes the audience to a different, dangerous, and non-human realm. Once again, nomenclature deepens this resonance, for the name ‘Uqfūr itself likely comes from the term *‘aqfara*, meaning to destroy or bring overwhelming calamity upon something.

⁵²⁷ On Timurid depictions of demons in the *Siyāh Qalam* (“Black Pen”) style, see: Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 61-63.

⁵²⁸ Muqātil b. Sulaymān, “Q 74:30,” *al-tafsir.com*, accessed 18 March 2019, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=2&tTafsirNo=67&tSoraNo=74&tAyahNo=30&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

⁵²⁹ On depictions of demons as black or dark-skinned in Islamic art, see: Robert Hillenbrand, “The Image of the Black in Islamic Art: The Case of Painting,” in *The Image of the Black in African and Asian Art*, ed. D. Bindman, S.P. Blier, and H.L. Gates (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 216-253.

There are a number of other ways in which Hadlamūs' character—who is designated as a *Najāshī*, or Negus⁵³⁰—is portrayed as presiding over a kingdom of darkness both aesthetically and ideologically. The Abyssinia encountered by 'Uqba and the Kilābīs, far from being depicted as the Christian polity and historic seat of Biblical and patristic writings that it had become by the time of Ma'mūn's caliphate, is presented as being plunged into ignorant paganism. When 'Uqba articulates an appeal to Hadlamūs in Christian terms, the king appears never to have heard of the faith or its tenets,

فقال له عقبه {...} يا ملك الزمان انا ادلك على دين الملوك الكبار وأصحاب الأقطار والامصار ويكون صاحبه في امان من الاضطار وينجيه من عذاب النار ولكن ما اقدر ابوح بشيء من ذلك حتى آخذ عليك العهد والميثاق انك اذا عجبك هذا الدين تكتمه ولا تظهره الى احد غيرك لانني شيخ كبير وقد فنى عمري ودب ظهري من كثرة قراءة الكتب القديمة والمذاهب المستقيمة حتى رضيت لنفسي دين من تكلم في المهدي صبا واحيي الموتى من القبور وأرا الأكمه والابرص وخلق من الطين طيورواتانا من الله القديم بالانجيل وبين لنا فيه التحريم والتحليل وصار عقبه يصف دين النصرانية {...} فاجابه الملك الهدلموس الى ذلك وقال له علمني كيف أقول حتى اصير نصرانيا

'Uqba said to him [...] "O king of the age, I shall guide you to the religion of great kings, possessors of lands and metropolises, it guards its practitioner from dangers and saves him from the punishment of hellfire, but I cannot reveal anything [about it] until I receive your pledge and compact that if you are pleased with this religion, you will hide it and not expose it to anyone, for I am an old man, and my life has waned and my energy been drained from reading overmuch from old books and righteous [Islamic] discourses, until my soul became desirous of the one who spoke from the cradle while an infant (Q 5:110), and as he who resurrected the dead from their graves and cured the blind and leprous, and fashioned birds from clay and brought us the Gospel from God the Eternal and clarified the forbidden and licit for us within it," and 'Uqba began to describe Christianity [...]. King Hadlamūs assented, saying, "Teach me what to say in order to become a Christian."⁵³¹

⁵³⁰ In light of the *sīrat al-nabī* genre's tradition of depicting the Negus of Ethiopia's favorable treatment of Muḥammad's followers who participated in the first *hijra*, the term *najāshī* may conjure positive associations with Hadlamūs' character, and is remarkably a term applied only to him, while other African political elites in the text are typically described simply as *malik* or *amīr*. Like the Negus of the *mukhaḍram* period, Hadlamūs ultimately comes to the aid of the Muslims and develops deep ties with the Muslim power structure, and so this usage may be more than coincidental. On the Negus as a figure in Islamic thought, see: E. van Donzel, "al-Nadījāshī," in *Encyclopedia of Islam II*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, accessed 18 March 2019, http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_5718.

⁵³¹ *SDH XXXV:55*

Hadlamūs’ curiosity about God and desire for religious empowerment will prove felicitous later on, when Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma succeeds in converting him to Islam. In battle, Fāṭima grabs hold of Hadlamūs’ head and squeezes so hard he nearly dies. Astonished by her strength, Hadlamūs exclaims, “when she grabbed hold of my head, I felt as though the sky had fallen to the earth,” and Fāṭima then explained the source of her strength,

اني لما وضعت يدي على رأسك قرأت هذه الآية الشريفة قوله تعالى وما قدروا الله حق قدره والأرض جميعا قبضته يوم القيامة والسموات مطويات بيمينه سبحانه وتعالى عما يشركون والآن قد أشركت يا ملعون ومن هو بجهله مفتون ومغرور

When I placed my hands on your head, I recited this sacred verse [*hādhihi al-āya al-sharīfa*], the word of the Almighty: “They have not appraised God with true appraisal, while the earth entirely will be in His grip on the Day of Resurrection, and the heavens will be folded in His right hand. Exalted is He and high above what they associate with Him.” And you have lately committed *shirk* (=assigning partners to God), o cursed one who is deceived and confused in his ignorance!⁵³²

As with many of the *sīra*’s conversion narratives, Hadlamūs’ tale gives occasion not only for plot advancement, but also for a pious exhortation to the *sīra*’s audience. Moved by both her Qur’ānic recitation and by her later sincerity in prayer—Fāṭima tearfully performs 100 *rak‘as* each night with ‘Abd al-Wahhāb—the captive Hadlamūs asks, “who is this God of yours?” Fāṭima duly replies,

ربنا الذي يرانا حين نجلس ونقوم ورفع سرادق الغيوم ويعلم عدد النجوم وأبرم القضاء المحتوم وهو الله الذي لا اله الا هو الحي القيوم

Our God is the One who sees when we sit and stand, and who has raised up the canopies of clouds, who knows the number of the stars and who seals fates. He is God, and there is no God except for him, the eternally living.⁵³³

Unlike ‘Uqba’s appeal—grounded in notions of sovereignty and conquest—Fāṭima couches the might of God in transcendental and cosmic terms. Instantly, Hadlamūs recognizes that ‘Uqba has hoodwinked him, and curses him as a “blind, ignorant, lying old man.” He then

⁵³² *SDH XXXVI*: 7-8.

⁵³³ *ibid.* Cf. Q 2:255, Q 3:2, etc.

adds “I was not brought up in a religious tradition [*kunt anā lā atadayyan bi-l-dīn*] and did not know the words of the Christians, nor of the Muslims,” but that he now sees the Muslims as possessing the true faith.⁵³⁴

Hadlamūs’ religious awakening is not the only indication of Africa’s perceived lack of religious understanding. Later, when encountering Hadlamūs’ territorial rival, the king Damdamān, he is described in brief as being “a man of great esteem, little religion, and much pomp” (*rajul ‘azīm al-sha’n qalīl al-dīn kathīr al-mawākib*), and presides over his own legion of cannibals from the people of Lamlam.⁵³⁵ All of this serves to both heighten the stakes of the Muslims’ engagement with Africa vis-à-vis the villainous ‘Uqba, as they each vie to convert the peoples of the region over to their religion. Moreover, it underscores Africa’s status as foreign and potentially hostile territory—like the lands of Byzantium, it is made to constitute another portion of the defiantly non-Muslim world, in which conflict is considered both legitimate and anticipated. What few religious actors that are encountered in Damdamān’s domain occupy a status that maintains the distinction between the Christian landscape of the Anatolian frontier and the non-Christian, African realm; while wounded and captured by Damdamān, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is ministered to by a Jewish physician.⁵³⁶ This is one of the few instances of a Jew cropping up in the text of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, and it seems less a commentary on the region’s demographics and more a tokenistic way of suggesting that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb was in competent hands, for in much the way that Africans were often associated with skill in war, so too were Jews with skill in the medical profession, though there were certain African peoples associated with Judaism in various geographies, as I shall discuss below. Another indication of some religious substrate

⁵³⁴ *ibid.*

⁵³⁵ *SDH XXXVI*: 41.

⁵³⁶ *SDH XXXVI*: 40.

persisting in parts of Ethiopia is given, briefly, when Hadlamūs goes to proselytize to his land's governors (*al-muqaddimīn wa-arbāb dawlatih*), of whom there are ten total. After hearing his description of Islam, four convert, while the remaining six say, "We have not known anything but the religion of the Messiah [i.e. Christianity] for all the years of our lives," however the nature of their religious commitments is not otherwise discussed and one gets the impression from Hadlamūs' general ignorance of Christianity that its presence in his own life is incidental.⁵³⁷ The collection of these references forms a portrait of Africans' engagement with religion of any kind that is ambiguous, situational, and often superficial.

In accoutering his African kingship, prior to converting and joining the Arabs' ranks, Hadlamūs makes an almost obsessive point of ornamenting his environment with items associated with Africa and blackness. Above, we found him kneeling on an ebony litter covered with lion skins. Perhaps in light of the striking appointment of his court, when 'Uqba attempts to broker an alliance with Hadlamūs, he does so with reference to the meeting not merely of black and white men, but of the metaphorical and aesthetic beauty of combining black and white materials, likening himself to ivory and Hadlamūs to ebony. Later, when 'Uqba instigates Hadlamūs to take his armies to Iraq and attempt to unseat the caliph Ma'mūn, Hadlamūs encounters yet another dark material that he comes to covet:

وسودان الهدلموس يتعجبون من سواد حجارة صور آمد والطبع يميل الى الطبع فقال لهم الهدلموس اذا رجعنا الى بلادنا أخذنا معنا هذه الحجارة نعملها بيونا⁵³⁸ لنا وهي على ألواننا فبلغ ذلك الى المأمون فضحك عجا واهتز طربا وقال هؤلاء رجال الحرب

Hadlamūs' black [soldiers] were entranced by the blackness of the stone of Āmid's structures, and nature inclined toward nature, so Hadlamūs said to them, 'When we return to our country, let's take this stone with us and fashion our buildings from it, for it is the same color as us.' News of this reached [the Caliph]

⁵³⁷ *SDH XXXVI*: 16-17.

⁵³⁸ *sic*.

Maʾmūn, and he laughed with amazement and shook with mirth and said, ‘These are men of war.’⁵³⁹

The notion that nature inclines inevitably towards nature appears elsewhere throughout the *sīra* in the context of race and birth station, as with ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s joy upon seeing other black men, and with Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma sensing deeply that she is freeborn despite growing up in bondage.⁵⁴⁰ It also seems to be axiomatic in the writings of various *udabāʾ* in the early medieval period.⁵⁴¹ Previously, in the context of *Alf Layla*, we have also encountered the literary technique of layering darkness upon darkness, with the bodies of black slaves becoming associated symbolically with hiddenness, secrecy, and shadow.⁵⁴² However, rarely has the concept of natural affinity applied so explicitly to the lived relationships between humans and material objects; the Byzantines are not shown to be enamored of white stone, for example. That this occurs here could in fact be a remark not on the nature of the black objects at hand, but on the African soldiers of Hadlamūs who fixate on them. Recurrently, the African cannibal tribes are described as being bereft of *ʿaql*, which renders them particularly fearsome in the Arab forces’ views, as expressed in the experience of al-Baṭṭāl:

⁵³⁹ *SDH XXXVI*: 2-3.

⁵⁴⁰ Recently, Melanie Magidow translated what might be termed Fāṭima’s “coming of age” story, in which she is rejected by her parents, who had wanted a son, and taken in by a nursemaid only to be captured during a tribal raid and enslaved to the Banū Ṭayy. As Magidow notes, Fāṭima consistently demonstrates her superiority with statements such as, *mā anā jāriyya wa-lā khādima*, or “I am no slave-girl,” and many are unsurprised when they ultimately discover her elite birth; this discovery is made when, on the battlefield, Fāṭima faces her estranged father and “blood inclines toward blood.” See: Melanie Magidow, “Epic of the Commander Dhat al-Himma,” *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 9 (2018): 19-20.

⁵⁴¹ In the first chapter, we examined al-Jāḥiẓ’s quotation of al-Aṣmaʿī in *Fakhr al-Sūdān ‘alā-l-Bīdān* to the effect that species are most convivial when they stay with their own kind, however, this principle also comes into evidence in common adages such as, “were it not for harmony, man would surely perish” (*law lā al-wiʿām la-halak al-insān*) that insist on the necessity of humans living in groups that enforce common values. In *Lisān al-ʿArab*, Ibn Manẓūr cites al-Sīrāfi expounding on this phrase by explaining that the reason humans need to live in harmony is because they are guided to emulate the best in one another on the basis of mutual identification, saying, “Were it not that [an individual] found a model to emulate, and to comport himself like, he would surely die.” See: Ibn al-Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1981), 4749.

⁵⁴² See chapter 1. Also: Ferial Ghazoul, *Nocturnal Poetics: The Arabian Nights in Comparative Context* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1996), 30-32.

فوجد العساكر كالليل الحالك نازلة هنالك فقال البطال لقد رأيت الجيوش فما فزعت الا من هذه على شرط
ان الانسان ما يقاتل خصمه الا اذا كان له عقل وأما هؤلاء كالحمير يرمون أنفسهم الى الموت

He found the troops [of Hadlamūs] encamped there, like the pitch-dark night, so al-Baṭṭāl remarked, “I have seen armies, and none have struck fear into me but these, for a man ought only to engage an adversary of right mind, yet these people are like donkeys who fling themselves into death.”⁵⁴³

The encounter between Hadlamūs’ men and the black-walled structures of Āmid is turned on its head here by another form of encounter, namely, that of al-Baṭṭāl witnessing the arrival of Hadlamūs’ battalions; each meeting evokes a form of fascination, one positive and the other negative, one in which men come upon stone and see in it something uncannily similar to themselves, and the other in which a man comes upon people and yet struggles to find any human link between himself and the other. We may note, following Daniel Beaumont’s analysis of symbolic objects in popular Arabic literature through the Lacanian concept of “extimacy,” whereby “the subject finds his very identity somehow bound up in some uncanny object outside himself,” that not only are the black stones of Āmid that earn so much interest from the ‘Uqfūrī troops pitch-dark like the skin of their admirers, but they are also impervious and inert like the soldiers who, in al-Baṭṭāl’s estimation, serve as Hadlamūs’ unthinking or “irrational” bulwark against destruction.⁵⁴⁴ Nature inclining towards nature in this scenario could signal something more expansive than color inclining toward color, suggesting also the non- or sub-human inclining toward objects and away from other living beings. This is at variance with, say, the treatment of Byzantines in the text, who have no special taste for white objects despite their pale natures.

⁵⁴³ *SDH XXXV*: 59. Malcolm Lyons was also struck by al-Baṭṭāl’s expression here, and analyzes it as an expression of black people’s perceived sub-humanity vis-à-vis Muslims’ “superhuman contempt for danger,” whereby their faithfulness makes them ambivalent towards death because of their sense of honor and anticipation of the afterlife. Lyons, *Arabian Epic, Volume I*, 54.

⁵⁴⁴ Daniel Beaumont, “*Min Jumlat al-Jamādāt*. The Inanimate in Fictional and *Adab* Narrative,” in *On Fiction and Adab in Medieval Arabic Literature*, ed. Philip F. Kennedy (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 55-68.

Moments such as these place *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*'s African characters not merely outside the cultural realm of the Arabs, but also outside of the realm of normative human behavior, positioning them instead in the domain of marvels, or '*ajā'ib*. Proximity to normality is predicated in large part on affinity for Islam, but even so, a perceived civilizational gulf between the Africans and Christians emerges in the above passages. Africa is represented as denuded of all religion, and the conversion of Hadlamūs is prefigured by his first being exposed to Christianity. Moreover, it is explicitly stated that Hadlamūs' native context is so far removed from the geopolitics of the rest of the known world that he has encountered neither of the two faiths in a thoroughgoing fashion. Implicitly, Hadlamūs' precepts are sufficiently distant from Islam that in order to approach the ultimate truth, he must first come to understand an intermediary half-truth, not unlike the gradual administering of food to a starving person.

Many of the geographers and ethnographers discussed below predicate African cultures' relative goodness (with respect to civility, subjugation in war, or at times even physical beauty) on whether they follow a non-idolatrous religion, which most often is Christianity. The sort of moral training that religion implies in this case is often not merely a matter of likeability, but also suggests the way in which Muslims can engage with and make use of these peoples. In *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*'s conversion arc for Hadlamūs, one can perhaps detect an echo of what Ibn Buṭlān says of Nubian women and Christianity in his essay on slaves and their purchase (*Risāla Jāmi'at al-Funūn al-Nāfi'a fī Shirā al-Raqīq wa-Taqlīb al-'Abīd*). There, he positions Nubians' faith as an essential component of their natural servility vis-à-vis irreligious Zanj women, who, in his view, have gross manners and are prone to running away, making them the lowliest of slaves.⁵⁴⁵ Of the Nubians, he says, "they have religion and goodness, and virtue and chastity, and

⁵⁴⁵ Ibn Buṭlān, *Risāla Jāmi'at al-Funūn al-Nāfi'a fī Shirā al-Raqīq wa-Taqlīb al-'Abīd*, in *Nawādir al-Makhṭū'āt* vol. 2, ed. 'Abd al-Salām Hārūn (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Ḥalabī, 1973), 374.

their obedience to a master is as if they've been made for worship/servitude (*wa-idh 'ān li-l-mawlā ka-annahunnu fuṭirna 'alā-l- 'ubūdiyya*).⁵⁴⁶ In this double entendre tying religion with a less benighted form of natural servility than that which prevails amongst other African groups there lies the premise that being accustomed to worship and to earthly servitude can be linked for certain peoples and groups. This also structures Hadlamūs' own acceptance into Fāṭima's ranks. His experience of finding religion in turn leads him to submit himself willingly into the Muslim social hierarchy as Fāṭima's servant and soldier, where once he was a sovereign.

The African Landscape in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* and Related Works

But what is the broader literary context foregrounding the *sīra*'s conception of Africa as this religio-politically estranged terrain? As Michael A. Gomez mentions in his book, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa*, beginning in the ninth century a number of Arab geographers wrote of Africa, but at least for points in the continent's west, they often did so from secondhand reports given by the likes of traders and pilgrims. Not until the *Rihla* of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa do we have a known author who gives eyewitness account of central-west African polities such as Gao.⁵⁴⁷ Though the geography is muddled, the *sīra* seems to at least share in the nomenclature used to designate various African peoples described by the early geographers, which formed a common idiom through which Africa was described in an array of other *adab* sources and in popular works.

In some of these early geographies, Sub-Saharan Africa is looked at as a realm desolated of civilization or possessing strange creatures, an endemic feature of the world's farthest regions since the fabled dog-headed men of the globe's southwest reaches in the writings of

⁵⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 376.

⁵⁴⁷ Michael A. Gomez, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 19.

Herodotus.⁵⁴⁸ Despite actually supplying a quite detailed account of aspects of Sub-Saharan Africa, in his 10th-century geography, *Ṣūrat al-Arḍ*, or the *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik*, Ibn Ḥawqal introduces these regions in his prolegomenon as follows:⁵⁴⁹

I have not mentioned the territories of the blacks [*al-sūdān*] in the Maghrib, nor the Beja, nor the Zanj, and what nations lie in their span, because the social organization of kingdoms rests on religions and ethical disciplines, and on wisdom and the ordering of institutions [*‘imārāt*] through sound politics [*al-siyāsa al-mustaqīma*], and these places are have failed in hitting this mark, and have no fortune in anything of the like. The people of their kingdoms do not merit mention along with what we have discussed of the remainder of nations, save some of the blacks who are close to these [other] known kingdoms, and who return to religion, rationality, and wisdom, and who approach [the nature of] the people in these nations, such as the Nubians and Ethiopians, for they are Christian, and take their lead from the theologies of Byzantium [*yartasimūn madhāhib al-Rūm*]. [...] ⁵⁵⁰

It is true that much of the evidence Ibn Ḥawqal gives concerning southwest Africa is done “sideways,” through discussions of trade in the Maghrib, though this results in his project being “much more engaged with land outside the “Realm of Islam” than his original divisions might suggest.”⁵⁵¹ Ibn Ḥawqal is said to ultimately have traveled at least as far south as Awdaghūst, in present-day Mauritania. Following in Ibn Ḥawqal’s stead, the 11th-century author al-Bakrī gives an even more extensive portrait of the lands of the blacks, occupying one chapter of his masterwork, the *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik*; of the Zanj, whom he places to the south of the Ethiopians (*al-Ḥabasha*) who reside adjacent to the Persian Gulf on the coast, he claims

⁵⁴⁸ Depictions of dog-headed men take on a new life in the European Middle Ages, during which time it is commonplace to represent one’s enemies as “cynocephali,” or dog-headed humans. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen dubs these representations “culturally expedient forms in which to embody the enemies of Christendom,” noting that Muslims, especially, feature as dog-headed masses in manuscript illuminations of romances and histories. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 132.

⁵⁴⁹ The edition of *Ṣūrat al-Arḍ* consulted here is compiled under the work’s other title, *al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik*. I have used both the former and latter names above to designate Ibn Ḥawqal’s text in order to differentiate his work from al-Bakrī’s *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik*, which is also discussed here. Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik* (Leiden: Brill, 1872).

⁵⁵⁰ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb al-Masālik*, 9-10.

⁵⁵¹ Antrim, *Routes and Realms*, 119.

that they clad themselves in the skins of red tigers (*wa-‘indahum julūd al-numūr al-ḥumr wa-ḥiya libāsuhum*), and likewise the Nubians fashion clothing with giraffe leather, using it for soling their shoes.⁵⁵² Hadlamūs’ lion skins appear in good company alongside this menagerie, and moreover they cohere with previously discussed accounts in *maghazī* texts of Africans riding into battle wearing only animal skins on the lower halves of their bodies.⁵⁵³ Al-Bakrī then adds that all of the peoples who dwell on the Nile, save the Egyptians and Nubians, are combatants against the Muslims (*wa-jamī‘ man sakan ‘alā-l-Nīl muḥārib li-l-Muslimīn illā al-Qibṭ wa-l-Nūba*).⁵⁵⁴

The semi-nomadic Beja in particular are presented by al-Bakrī as a highly syncretic people, situated between the Nile and Red Sea and known for their monumental architecture (*lahum qilā‘ kathīra*). They are ethnically a subset of the *ḥabash*, and they worship stone idols in the forms of young men, yet they abide by the laws of the Torah (*aḥkāmuhum aḥkām al-tawrāh*).⁵⁵⁵ This account is disputed in other sources; Mas‘ūdī, for example, claims that the Beja are mostly idol-worshippers (*kuffār*) but have a population of Muslims among them, while numerous other geographers claim they are at least partially composed of Christians.⁵⁵⁶ This contradictory report of a people that dwell close to the lands of the Christians but nonetheless persist in idol worship, even as they appear versed in the law code of yet another monotheism,

⁵⁵² Al-Bakrī, *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik* (Tunis: Dār al-‘Arabiyya li-l-Kitāb, 1992), 321.

⁵⁵³ See chapter 3.

⁵⁵⁴ Al-Bakrī, *Kitāb al-Masālik*, 323.

⁵⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 324-325.

⁵⁵⁶ Adding further ambiguity is the fact that there is a distinction between Beja territory and the Beja people proper. For example, Al-Idrīsī identifies a nomadic group who claim to have been Christian since the time of the Copts’ conversion, and who are itinerant between the “land of the Beja and the Ethiopians,” though al-Idrīsī argues they are in fact Jacobites. Al-Idrīsī, *Kitāb Nuzhat al-Mushtāq fī Ikhtirāq al-Āfāq* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, 2002), 40. See also: al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab wa-Ma‘ādin al-Jawhar*, volume 2 (Beirut: Maktaba al-‘Aṣriyya, 2005), 15.

perhaps offers added perspective on how the *sīra*'s Africans can likewise simultaneously be identified as Ethiopian, utilize Jewish medicine, and yet be profoundly irreligious.

It appears that the way in which the *sīra* colludes most with pervasive, fictive narratives about Africa is in its account of the cannibalistic peoples under the charge of the king Damdamān, who themselves are called the *banū lamlam*, or Lamlam people. Damdamān's name links him visibly with the people of Lamlam, in that the two terms (both nonsense words)⁵⁵⁷ were often used interchangeably. Geographers also relate the existence of Dahdam people, and elsewhere Namnam and Tamtam are attested.⁵⁵⁸ As with the terms Berber and 'Ajam, Damdam can relate to unclearness of speech, with *damdama* meaning to snarl or growl, and as we've previously seen, the speech of Africans is described in Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist* using these terms.⁵⁵⁹ As Gomez puts it, Damdam appears in many geographic sources as a "mere permutation" of other regional groups, though a strong seam of folklore runs through others, in which the Damdam/Lamlam peoples are said to eat the flesh of men. In his *Nuzhat al-Mushtāq fī Ikhtiyār al-Āfāq*, al-Idrīsī has only this to say of Damdam:

The remainder of the land of Gao [*Kawkaw*] and Damdam lies in the south of this portion [of the second clime], and there is the rest of the [range of] the Lūniyā mountains, and its earth is white and soft, and it is said that there are short creatures there, and all of them have two horns on their heads. It is also said that there are creatures with two heads [in this region].⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁷ Some have proposed that one iteration of these usages, Nam-nam (or Niam-niam or Nyam-nyam) has its origins in the Dinka language of southern Sudan, in which nyam-nyam means "great eater." This also is substantiated by the fact that the term is often used for cannibal peoples, specifically. Others differentiate amongst these many designations, relating "lam" in Arabic to nothingness, "dam" to blood or to masses, and so on. On this, see Gomez, *African Dominion*, 386 n. 15; S.H.F. Capenny, "The Khedivic possessions in the basin of the Upper Ubangi," in *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 15 (1899): 309-316.

⁵⁵⁸ Gomez, *African Dominion*, 45; R. Mauny, "Lamlam," in *Encyclopedia of Islam II*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, accessed 20 March 2019, http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_4636.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist* (Tehran: Amīr-i Kabīr, 1964), 21.

⁵⁶⁰ Al-Idrīsī, *Nuzhat al-Mushtāq*, 116.

Other authors take a far less clinical and environmentally-inclined view. According to Gomez, a narrative of the people of Lamdam/Damdam as eaters of men occurs in the works of various eleventh- and twelfth-century authors, culminating in the conclusion that these cannibals eat virtually anyone who falls into their hands, with Ibn Khaldūn adding “even each other.”⁵⁶¹ John Hunwick takes the persistence of such myths about these “naked pagans” dwelling in lands west of the Niger River as evidence that the informants of Arabic geographers did not venture further than trading with the peoples to the river’s immediate east, the reason for which Hunwick ascribes to the concerns about traveling in pagan country, which is “dangerous [...] for both body and soul.”⁵⁶²

West Africa is not the only portion of the earth known for its man-eaters in the pre-modern Muslim worldview. The eleventh-century Andalusī Jewish author, Judah Halevi, speaks of the Indian subcontinent as a paradoxical portion of the earth in which the climate simultaneously encourages some people to incline towards vegetarianism and others to crave feasting on humans.⁵⁶³ In his at times highly speculative geography, al-Idrīsī speaks of a portion of the third clime comprised of many islands—roughly situated in the western Atlantic, and thus “off the map,” in terms of the *terra cognita* of his time—and that is rife with humanoid creatures and mega-fauna that prey upon mankind, from sea-monsters who war with the ogre-like creatures of the island of Sāwa to dragons battled by Alexander the Great (Dhū-l-Qarnayn) scattered throughout the archipelago.⁵⁶⁴ Once again, this clime conduces to vegetarianism as well, with the dark-skinned and broad-featured pygmies of the island of Ḥasrān eating only from

⁵⁶¹ Gomez, *African Dominion*, 45.

⁵⁶² John O. Hunwick, “A Region of the Mind: Medieval Arab Views of African Geography and Ethnography and Their Legacy,” *Sudanic Africa* 16 (2005): 114.

⁵⁶³ Alexander Altmann, “The Treasure Trove: Judah Halevi’s Theory of Climates,” *Aleph* 5 (2005): 224.

⁵⁶⁴ Al-Idrīsī, *Nuzhat al-Mushtāq*, 217.

the plants that flourish in their midst.⁵⁶⁵ In the humoristic estimation of medieval thinkers, each of these climes share the commonality of being hot, though with variable degrees of wetness or dryness, and therefore it follows that they produce people on a similar spectrum of qualities.

Perhaps the most changeable element across these various geographies that is of import to the *sīra* is where, exactly, East Africa—and therefore the Abyssinian territory visited by the *sīra*'s characters—is situated within the scheme of *aqālīm* (climes) established in each work, the demarcation of which was typically determined by “its position on the terrestrial globe,” as well as being “defined by the astral context under whose specific influence it comes.”⁵⁶⁶ Not coincidentally the Arab world was thought to lie in the most temperate—which is to say, the most physically and intellectually favorable—zone, much as is found of Greek notions of their position in the globe in earlier geographies. True to this, al-Idrīsī places the lands of West and Central Asia mostly in the fourth of his seven climes, though some portions of the Arabian Peninsula lie as far south as the upper edge of the second clime. Of the harsher, southern climes, he says,

[T]he people of this first clime, as well as those of the second and some of those in the third, have black coloring and crinkly hair because of the severity of the heat and burning effect of the sun, as opposed to the people of the sixth and seventh clime.⁵⁶⁷

The land of the *ḥabash*, meanwhile, is in the fifth portion of the first clime. Many described the climes as proceeding roughly latitudinally from the first, southernmost clime that reached from the west coast of Sub-Saharan Africa to the south-easterly portions of China, placing the central Islamic lands in the temperate zone. Those authors who depart from the seven-clime convention,

⁵⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 218.

⁵⁶⁶ A. Miquel, “Iklīm,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam II*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, accessed 20 March 2019, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_3519.

⁵⁶⁷ Al-Idrīsī, *Nuzhat al-Mushtāq*, 18.

envisioning instead sixteen or even twenty climes, or who have a non-radial scheme, jostle the land of the *ḥabash* around accordingly, even as they maintain that the lands of the blacks lie at the earth's extremes. Accordingly, in Mas'ūdī's abridged universal history, the *Kitāb al-Tanbīh wa-l-Ishrāf*, the Hijaz and Ethiopia comprise the second of seven circular climes, while in Ibn Sa'īd al-Maghribī's layout, which accommodates polar regions (beyond the southern equator and beyond the habitable north) in addition to seven central climes, the areas in the province of, among others, the Damdam people, the Nubians, and the Ethiopians lie in the fourth subdivision of the first habitable clime of the earth.⁵⁶⁸

In *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, for reasons that are not explained, the lands inhabited by Hadlamūs and Damdamān are said to be situated in the fifth clime. Despite being made to numerically approach the more temperate zone, the conditions of the weather and terrain are nonetheless described as being inhospitable to the text's Arab warriors. This becomes particularly pronounced during physical exertion, as emerges in a vignette in which 'Abd al-Wahhāb is battling an African foe named Ghāsiq.⁵⁶⁹ As the narrator relates:

يا سادة وكانت تلك الأرض كثيرة الحر لانها الإقليم الخامس وهي مثل الليل الدامس {...} واقبل الأمير عبد الوهاب على الغسق وقد عظم قلقه وجرى عرقه وطلع لسان كل واحد منهما على صدره من شدة العطش فقال يا هذا معلون ان كل واحد منا ما يقصر عن قتال صاحبه ولكن دع هذا الامر الى ان يبرد النهار فقال الغسق هذا ما يكون أبدا أيها الرجل الجبان المعود بالنوم بين الجدران وملاعبة النسوان ولولا معك صنعة من الدفاف وخفة الانعطاف لكنت أخذت روحك من بين الاكتاف

O sirs, that land was extremely hot because it is in the fifth clime, and was like the pitch black night [...] the prince 'Abd al-Wahhāb approached al-Ghāsiq, and his nervousness was increasing and his sweat running, and each of their tongues was hanging down to their chests from the intensity of their thirst, so ['Abd al-Wahhāb] said, "Hey, accursed one! It is obvious that neither of us would shy away from fighting his adversary, but let's postpone this matter until the day cools." Ghāsiq replied, "Never, o cowardly one, used to sleeping in walled rooms

⁵⁶⁸ Antrim, *Routes and Realms*, 92; Ibn Sa'īd al-Maghribī, *Kitāb al-Jughrāfiyā* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Tijāriyya li-l-Tabā'a wa-l-Nashar wa-l-Tawzī', 1980), 81.

⁵⁶⁹ His name is also rendered within the text as Ghasiq with a *fatha* rather than an *alif*, with the *alif* often reappearing in poetry for the sake of meter. For the sake of consistency, I have written his name as Ghāsiq throughout.

and playing around with ladies! And were you not gifted with such agility and lightness, I could have already removed your soul from your body [by now]!”⁵⁷⁰

For Ghāsiq, hardiness and a capacity to withstand the conditions of his clime is a badge of honor in battle, and moreover something to lord over his Arab foe, who is used to the luxuries afforded not by his clime so much as by the infrastructure erected in it to protect one from the elements. In phrasing the differences between himself and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb as ones of lifestyle rather than of constitution emanating solely from the environment, Ghāsiq also points up the difference between his more spartan existence and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s comparatively urbane customs, thus indicating another axis—in addition to that of relative climatic factors—that was instrumental to how Arabo-Muslim geographers ordered the peoples of the globe. Joshua Olsson goes so far as to hypothesize that the reason that—despite their respective situations at the earth’s extremes—white Europeans earn more esteem than black Africans in Arabic geographies is on the grounds of perceived urbanity. As Europe became better understood by Muslims throughout the eleventh and twelfth century, African exploration lagged behind, meaning that,

Medieval Muslim scholars found it harder to maintain blanket assertions of the north as a wholly savage and barbarous environment, as the theories of humoral pathology and the climes stipulated, in the face of a greater awareness of the cities and kingdoms of this region.⁵⁷¹

In the geographical works discussed above, though, we might add that extremes of dietary difference in either direction combine with geopolitical marginality and a perceived lack of advanced political structures to connote radical otherness. Despite both a plant-based and a human-based diet being anathematized, cannibalism clearly produces greater shock and disturbance than the pacific ways vegetarians like the islanders of Ḥasrān. For Gomez, the utter

⁵⁷⁰ *SDH XXXVII*: 30.

⁵⁷¹ J.T. Olsson, “The world in Arab eyes: A reassessment of the climes in medieval Islamic scholarship,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77 (2014): 507.

moral degradation implied in the descriptions of Damdam/Lamlam as bestial man-eaters “begins a process of categorization critical to the machinery of enslavement,” implying that the irredeemable paganism of these people renders them subject to continuous capture and slavery.⁵⁷² According to some accounts, such habits persisted even after enslavement by Muslims, with Tha‘ālabī providing an anecdote in his *Yatimat al-Dahr* about the Zanjī troops employed by the Qarmatians who were routed in the Buyid occupation of Oman as delighting in the consumption of human palms.⁵⁷³ The fact that this anecdote is situated in a triumphal conquest narrative against a maligned sect suggests that such representations of the persistence of cannibalism under Muslim jurisdiction could be a means of differentiating righteous, civilizing Muslim rule from the decadence of other powers. To wit, in another report by Buzurg b. Shahriyār, discussed alongside Tha‘ālabī’s account in Zoltán Szombathy’s essay, “Eating People is Wrong: Some Eyewitness Reports of Cannibalism in Arabic Sources,” the cannibal peoples of the Mozambique coast give up eating people due to the enlightening influence of “a king who had been ‘civilized’ by a stint in Baghdad as a slave.”⁵⁷⁴ Szombathy argues that the “ultimate” significance of cannibal stories is that, through them, “norms and boundaries of civilization are stressed and reaffirmed,” and it is worth noting that this conclusion nests nicely in Gomez’s point about the naturalization of slavery for peoples thought to lie outside these limits.⁵⁷⁵

All of these significances come together in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* as well, in which the cannibal peoples of Lamlam, working originally under the king Damdamān, are brought into the

⁵⁷² Gomez, *African Dominion*, 45.

⁵⁷³ Zoltán Szombathy, “Eating People is Wrong: Some Eyewitness Reports of Cannibalism in Arabic Sources,” in *Violence in Islamic Thought from the Qur’ān to the Mongols*, ed. Robert Gleave and István T. Kristó-Nagy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 222.

⁵⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 211.

⁵⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 224.

Muslim fold by his daughter Maymūna, who is represented as a proto-Muslim figure and will be discussed further below. In many ways, the *sīra*'s representation of these peoples is “accurate” in light of the common knowledge of its era. That the cannibals of the destructive, demonic Banū ‘Uqfūr and Lamlam have ended up residing in Abyssinia and serving the Negus and his competitors should likely be understood less as a flight of fancy or geographical conflation on the part of the *sīra* and more as a remark on the perceived fluidity of African peoples’ migration and slaving amongst themselves, for, as al-Idrīsī reminds us,

The people of Salā and Takrūr and Ghāna are envious of the land of Lamlam and revile its people. They remove them to their country then sell them amongst the traders who enter the region, so the traders bring them to the other regions [of the world].⁵⁷⁶

It is perhaps little wonder, then, that by the end of the Kilābīs’ stint in Africa, they, too, will have transported the people of Lamlam into their own realm. In order to do so, though, they must first be compelled to join the Muslim side through the rearrangement of both royal and racial affinities ushered in by Maymūna’s endeavors and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s ambitions.

Does Race Travel? ‘Abd al-Wahhāb in Africa

In his essay, “How We Divide the World,” the above-mentioned philosopher Michael Root makes a claim that has become axiomatic of how race is discussed in the “constructionist” model, that is, the set of theories that argue race is a social construct rather than a natural kind: “race does not travel.”⁵⁷⁷ Concepts of race vary in accordance with one’s context, and as such, one does not carry one’s racial identity across special, temporal, and social boundaries. As Root puts it, “Some men who are black in New Orleans now would have been octoroons there some years ago or would be white in Brazil today.”⁵⁷⁸ Ron Mallon complicates this point by

⁵⁷⁶ Al-Idrīsī, *Nuzhat al-Mushtāq*, 26.

⁵⁷⁷ Root, “How We Divide the World,” S631.

⁵⁷⁸ *ibid.*, S631-S632.

referencing the impact of subjective experience on one's perception of race; he argues for the importance of the act of *labelling* in explicating Root's "no-travel constraint," saying that in order for a local race-concept to exert a causal effect on an individual's racial identity, "[o]ne must see oneself, or be seen by others, as falling under the concept."⁵⁷⁹ Put differently, the "no-travel constraint" is a principle that only exerts an influence on the individual's sense of identity through the act of having one's race named and re-named as one moves through space and time; unless thus confronted and labelled, one may carry one's prior racial identity along through new locales. For Frantz Fanon, this is especially liable to happen when the person moving through a given space does so under the privileges and protections of hegemony, such that white people moving through a colonial domain impose their whiteness and its definition upon the local populace, rather than having their mode of racial self-identification shaped by the colonized culture.⁵⁸⁰ Sara Ahmed articulates this idea in her work, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," by using the metaphor of members of the hegemonic race "trailing" racial identity behind themselves and thus spreading it, as opposed to racial "others," who are constantly confronted with and constrained by their racial identity:

Whiteness would be what lags behind; white bodies do not have to face their whiteness; they are not orientated 'towards' it, and this 'not' is what allows whiteness to cohere, as that which bodies are orientated around. When bodies 'lag behind', then they extend their reach.⁵⁸¹

When 'Abd al-Wahhāb enters Ethiopia, he does so as an ethnic outsider and a member of an antagonistic culture vis-à-vis the Africans that views itself as having numerous civilizational advantages over them. Put differently, he arrives as a would-be conqueror. Nonetheless, as has been seen in his Arabian milieu, 'Abd al-Wahhāb has the capacity to "pass" in certain contexts

⁵⁷⁹ Ron Mallon, "Passing, Traveling, and Reality," 659.

⁵⁸⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), *passim*.

⁵⁸¹ Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8 (2007): 156.

as a black, presumably African man. Rather than his race simply *not* traveling while in Africa, it becomes caught between these multiple locales and cultural contexts, and this is evident in the way in which ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is labeled by those around him; ‘Uqba, now also in Africa, continues to refer to him as the “black of the Banū Kilāb,” while the king Damdamān refers to him ambiguously as kin, perhaps implying a sense of shared identity. Most prominently, when the Ethiopian princess Maymūna, Damdamān’s daughter, takes a romantic interest in ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, her various other suitors take to referring to him as an Arab by way of polemic. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s race while in Africa thus seems to become conditioned not only on his appearance or his traveling companions, but also on the threat he is viewed as constituting toward local values and ideals. The level and nature of influence ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is able to exert as a social outsider is discursively constrained or enlarged by the way in which his race is referenced among the region’s cultural insiders.

At the inception of his travels in East Africa, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is nursing wounds from his battles and becoming increasingly emaciated and infirm. It is in this condition that he falls into the hands of his captor, the king Damdamān. He remains sick for a full year, until,

حضره طبيب من اليهود وطرح عليه دواء فأكل اللحم الخبيث الميت واكتسى لحما طريا وبقي شهر كامل
يداويه الى ان برئ مما كان فيه وعاد الى احسن مما كان عليه

A physician from among the Jews attended to him, applying medication to him, and the rotten, dead flesh was consumed and fresh flesh developed [in its place]. [The doctor] continued medicating him for a whole month until he was healed and returned to an even better [condition] than before.⁵⁸²

When Damdamān sees that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is now well enough to be a proper prisoner, he lowers him into a deep pit, saying, “O cousin [*yā ibn khāla*]⁵⁸³, you won’t be leaving here for any

⁵⁸² *SDH XXXVI*: 40.

⁵⁸³ It is perhaps worthy of note that Damdamān refers to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb specifically as a *maternal* cousin, rather than the more common and generic address, *ibn ‘ammī*, which refers to paternal kin.

less than one thousand *qintars* of gold,” whereupon ‘Abd al-Wahhāb realizes “these people are mad.”⁵⁸⁴ Damdamān referring to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb as a cousin in this context is puzzling at first; it strangely echoes ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s fatherly call to the newly converted Abū-l-Hazāhiz (“O my son!”), and yet it is clearly not meant to be a gesture of tenderness.⁵⁸⁵ Rather, Damdamān simply seems to be expressing a perceptual fact; he sees ‘Abd al-Wahhāb as a somewhat close relation to himself, perhaps because of the ostensible physical similarities between the two. Damdamān’s expression of intimacy with ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is unique vis-à-vis his African brethren, though, who mostly reject him and refer to him as an Arab after hearing word that he has won the heart of the beloved Ethiopian princess, Damdamān’s daughter Maymūna, who upon seeing ‘Abd al-Wahhāb while under in father’s capture, “longs for him like Zulaykha longed for Yūsuf.”⁵⁸⁶ Maymūna, meanwhile, is presented as a princess who is worthy of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb despite her blackness, for her traits defy her race and her upbringing inclines her toward Islam,

وكانت ذات عقل معروف وجمال موصوف وقد ذكر الذي نظرها انه ما كان في السودان مثلها ولا أحسن منها لانها كانت بصاصة السواد كبيرة الحدق قاعدة النهد ثقيلة الردف مكحولة المقل وهذا يخلاف السودان {...} وقد وصل اليهم رجل من اليمن من أرض زبيد وعدن وكان ذا عقل وفضل وأدب وانها تعلمت منه الخط بالقلم وأحاديث العرب والعجم وتعلمت بلسان العرب وكانت كريمة الأصل والنسب

She was possessed of a well-known intellect and much-described beauty, and those who saw her recalled that there was none like her amongst the blacks, nor anyone better than her, for she was resplendently dark, with large, black eyes, pert breasts, a thick rear, and kohl-rimmed lids, and this was in contrast to [other] blacks [*wa-hādha bi-khilāf al-sūdān*]. [...] A man from the land of Zabīd and Aden in Yemen arrived to them, and he had intellection and virtue and moral discipline, and from him she had learned calligraphy and the histories of the Arabs and Persians, and had studied the Arabic language. She was of honorable roots and lineage [*wa-kānat karīmat al-aṣl wa-l-nasab*].⁵⁸⁷

⁵⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁸⁵ See chapter 4.

⁵⁸⁶ *SDH XXXVI*: 46.

⁵⁸⁷ *ibid.*

Though her appearance, education, and pedigree poise Maymūna to be a fitting partner for the black-Arab hero ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, with both of them having transcended their race and Arabized in different ways, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s Arabness is nonetheless used by her other would-be prospects to underscore the scandal of such a desirable woman falling in love with a man who is not of the same ethnicity and culture. This case is presented in particular by the warriors ‘Anqush and the aforementioned Ghāsiq, who is seen above deriding ‘Abd al-Wahhāb for his poor acclimation to the harsh African weather. When ‘Anqush arrives home from a military expedition, he resolved to betroth himself to Maymūna, who, upon hearing this, tells her father she wants no man and rides off. ‘Uqba, knowing of Maymūna’s love for ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, dispatches a slave to convey to ‘Anqush that she has “become besotted with an Arab man of clear coloring and beautiful form [*naqī al-lawn malīh al-kawn*].”⁵⁸⁸ Upon hearing this, ‘Anqush joins several thousand men with Damdamān’s armies and marches out against ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and Maymūna. When Maymūna and ‘Anqush meet on the battlefield, ‘Anqush recites satirical verse at her, picking a bone with ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s lack of social standing in the local milieu:

فكيف رضييتي بالكلابي صاحباً وليس له أصل نبيل ولا فضل

How could you be pleased with a Kilābī as your man,
When he has no noble lineage and no favor?⁵⁸⁹

As has been discussed previously, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is indeed from a well-known line of tribal leaders and heroes, and his virtue is amply demonstrated in his recurrent designation as the “shield of the Prophet’s grave” (*turs qabr al-nabī*). However, all of this only confers clout in an Arab social context, and as such ‘Anqush suggests that he will not bring Maymūna any *local* glory or esteem in marriage. This reference to disparate and non-transferable forms of social

⁵⁸⁸ *SDH XXXVII*: 3.

⁵⁸⁹ *SDH XXXVII*: 4.

capital indicates that the *sīra* composers had an awareness that Arab superiority is a culturally relative phenomenon, rather than a universal truth. In an ironic twist, Damdamān also denigrates ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s lineage when the two meet again in battle, though he does so in a way that is far more reminiscent of the insults leveled at him amongst his Arab peers because of his black skin being associated with bastardy,

اذ رأى الأمير المفضل فناداه يا ابن العواهر ويا تربية الاندال أنت الذي كنت سبب هذه الفتنة وجلبت لنا هذه المحنة

When [Damdamān] saw the favored prince [‘Abd al-Wahhāb] amidst the chaos, he called to him, “O son of whores, o you of vile rearing! You’re the one who has caused this strife and brought this ordeal upon us!”⁵⁹⁰

Later, though, Damdamān seemingly modulates his attack against ‘Abd al-Wahhāb by once again harkening to their common ground:

| | |
|------------------------|----------------------------|
| واطلب ديارك ثم ارحل | أيا اسود الجلد عد سالما |
| فعلت فعد سالما واعقل | فلو شئت قتلك في ساعة |
| تناصل لاجلك بالمنصل | فميمونة وسط هيجائها |
| عد مناه من مجمع الجحفل | وان عدوك من بيننا |
| الى ربع دارك والمنزل | فعد نحو أرضك أو في وجد |
| فتلقى حمامك بالمنصل | ولا تبغي لبنتي ميمونة |
| فهذا لعمرى لا يحمل | ولا تسمع الناس بهذا الكلام |

O black-skinned one, return in peace—
 Seek your encampments, then take leave
 For had I wanted to kill you, I would have done so just now.
 Go back in peace, and have reason!
 Maymūna is embroiled in battle,
 Wielding a sword for your sake
 And should you have an enemy among us,
 We’ll expel him from our army’s ranks
 So, lovesick or not, go back to your land,

⁵⁹⁰ SDH XXXVII: 6.

And the vicinity of your abode,
 And don't covet my daughter, Maymūna,
 For you'll meet your fate by the sword!
 And tell no one of these words, for by my life,
 That shall not do.⁵⁹¹

The overall tone of the above verses is one of conciliatory exhortation, with “o black-skinned one” appearing to be an overture that conveys respect and camaraderie rather than insult. Thus, Damdamān once again makes use of the language of racial affinity when he desires something from ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, suggesting the tenuousness and superficiality of their connection through physical likeness. Meanwhile, Maymūna’s second jilted ex-fiancé, Ghāsiq, refutes the very premise that he and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb share any likeness, instead choosing to highlight his own similarities with Maymūna as though they are exclusive. When he first meets the Muslims on the battlefield, vying to retain Maymūna as his betrothed, Ghāsiq and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s deputy, Tāriq al-Ḥijāzī exchange verses, with Ghāsiq saying:

| | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| ولا كنت بالاسود الادهم | نفيت من العنصر الاكرم |
| ولا عشت في لذه المطعم | ولا ذقت طعم السكرى ثانيا |
| وجسمك في حلة من دم | اذا لم أحليك في أرضها |
| اميرك في حالة المعدم | ومن قبل ذلك اني أرى |
| من العيش والوطن الاكرم | وتبكي على ما مضى سالفاً |
| وأنعم بالصدر والمعصم | وأخذ ميمونة عاجلاً |
| كلانا يشبهه بالاسحم | فلوني على لونها مشبه |
| اذا عضت الخيل على الالجم | وفي معرك الخيل أبطالها |
| وأتيك بالعرب والاعجم | وترى لنا الحرب مشعولة |
| وقلبه من الوجد لم يفهم | أيا طارق جاءك غاسق |

⁵⁹¹ SDH XXXVII: 7.

عدمت الرشاد ولم تعلم
محمد والركن مع زمزم
على قتله الرجل المسلم
يبارزني ان شئت ان تسلم

ألا دونك الآن حربي فقد
والا وحق نبي الهدى
لقد أشفق اليوم من رحمة
وان شئت فارجع وقل للامير

I've repelled those of noblest stock,
Not doing it in the darkness of night,
I've not tasted intoxication for one moment,
Nor lived on fine, fancy foods.
Before I route you from her land
And leave your body emptied of blood,
I surely shall see your prince
Brought to a low state,
And you'll cry over what has elapsed
Of life, and the most honorable homeland,
And I'll take Maymūna speedily
And enjoy the comforts of [her] wrist and breast
For my color is the same as hers,
We two are alike in darkness
And in battle, when the horses chomp at their bridles
[My] knights are her champions
You shall see the fires of war ignited
And I shall bring you Arabs and non-Arabs
O Tāriq, Ghāsiq has come before you
And his heart shall heed nothing, out of love
O, beware my war-making now,
For I've become bereft of reason, and you know not
And lo, by the truth of the Prophet of guidance, Muḥammad,
And by the pillar and Zamzam,
I seek mercy today for killing a Muslim man
And should you will it, then go back and tell the prince
To come confront me, if you want to surrender.⁵⁹²

Above, Ghāsiq notes color as one of the most prominent traits that he and Maymūna share, and in so doing he implicitly denies that 'Abd al-Wahhāb can share this as well. However, there is some ambiguity over whether Ghāsiq was yet fully aware of 'Abd al-Wahhāb's appearance at this moment; both due to the ways in which the elite Arab generals clothe themselves and due to

⁵⁹² SDH XXXVII: 26.

Ghāsiq’s assumption about Arabs’ appearance, he seems unable to conceive of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb as dark skinned. This emerges prominently when the Ethiopian king Hadlamūs comes to face him in battle, clad in the garb gifted to him by ‘Abd al-Wahhāb after his conversion:

فلما نظر الغسق الى الهدلموس قد برز اليه في ذلك الزي ظن انه الأمير عبد الوهاب لانه ما كان يبان منه
الا حماليق الحدق أو تداوير الامق فقال الغسق هذا عبد الوهاب والله ما هذا الا ملك عظيم والا ما كان عليه
هذه العدة في مثل هذه الأراضي الواسعة والبلاد البعيدة

When Ghāsiq looked at Hadlamūs coming before him in that uniform, he assumed he was the prince ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, because nothing of him was visible save the skin around his eyes and the corners of the lids, so Ghāsiq said, “This ‘Abd al-Wahhāb can really only be a great king, for were he not, he would not be equipped in this way in this far-flung, distant land [...]”⁵⁹³

Ghāsiq then muses that perhaps Maymūna has fallen for this man because he is wealthy, for “blacks love wealth” (*al-sūdān yurīdūn al-māl*).⁵⁹⁴ He is simultaneously impressed with and threatened by the Arabs’ elaborate provisioning. The recurrent theme that black Africans lust after finery—seen in the prior chapter with the comportment of Abū-l-Hazāhiz when confronted with the temptation of Byzantine lucre and compelled to convert—is here restated in the voice of an Ethiopian man, lending the idea a veneer of authenticity and propounding the belief that the Africans are lacking in resources and urbanity, which is also reinforced by Ghāsiq’s prior mockery of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb for being accustomed to residing in permanent dwellings. In assuming that Maymūna could only be interested in ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s money, Ghāsiq also rejects the potential for there to be any substantive attraction between the two, and thus upholds his own logic that races are not naturally inclined to mix.

As a further indication that Ghāsiq may not have anticipated ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s likeness to himself, when the two finally do meet in combat Ghāsiq’s *fakhr* changes markedly from being focused on color to centering instead on genealogy, with him declaring, “we are the people of

⁵⁹³ *SDH XXXVII*: 27.

⁵⁹⁴ *ibid.*

Ḥām, who have no equal, and to us may be traced enduring and honorable [qualities].” That is, both Ghāsiq and ‘Anqush seek recourse against ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s relationship with Maymūna in genealogical claims, with ‘Anqush noting ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s lack of (African) nobility and Ghāsiq distancing himself from ‘Abd al-Wahhāb as a son of Ḥām. By contrast, appeals to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s likeness to his African peers are grounded in his color, with Damdamān referring to him as the “black-skinned one.” Though, in this sense, racial identity travels superficially insofar as it is distinguished through somatic features, the webs of relation and community that it connotes—here indicated by ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s lack of ideal *nasab*, or pedigree, in Ethiopian territory—does not. This is reflected in other *siyar* as well, as with ‘Antar b. Shaddād’s mother, who is of royal Abyssinian heritage and comports herself “like a free woman,” but nonetheless is a mere black slave in Arabia; consequently, ‘Antar’s doubled nobility remains secret for much of his story.⁵⁹⁵ The phenomenon of carrying one’s identity across different spaces and societies is also reflected in the converse by ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s love interest, Maymūna, who transforms from being a princess in her own right to the heroic ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s foreign companion.

Maymūna, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s African Princess

Despite her apparent seamliness as a romantic interest, from the outset, Maymūna and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb have a fraught courtship for reasons that rest in no small part on the Arabs’ perceptions of African culture. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb assumes that all of Maymūna’s advances are attempts to lead him into committing *zinā* with a pagan woman, rather than being born out of a sincere desire to convert to Islam and have a legitimate relationship with him. Moreover, Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma is unimpressed with Maymūna’s appearance, and cautions ‘Abd al-Wahhāb to

⁵⁹⁵ For a discussion of ‘Antar’s birth rank and the implications of his hidden, noble identity, see chapter 2. Cf. Peter Heath, *The Thirsty Sword: Sirat Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996), 207.

reject her affections because her like does not belong among the ranks of heroes (*abṭāl*). As discussed above, Maymūna is beleaguered on all sides, with her suitors also taking issue with her choice of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb because of his immutable differences of culture and inferiority of race.

The status of Maymūna as a “foreign heroine,” in league thematically with ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s wife al-Qannāṣa (the Huntress) and his paramour Nūrā, both of whom are from Byzantium, has been discussed by Remke Kruk across multiple works. However, perhaps to center Maymūna’s comparability with these other “foreign” women, and perhaps because of the focus placed on Maymūna’s role as ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s wife, which also removes her from her African homeland, Kruk does not address the particular ways in which Maymūna’s Ethiopian ethnicity inform her courtship and her reception among ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s peers. With the exception of its use in a recognition scene—when Maymūna is reunited with her and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s long-lost son Baḥrūn, who has become a Byzantine warrior—Maymūna’s blackness also goes unmentioned in Kruk’s projects; the reason that Maymūna hesitates to kill Baḥrūn in a heated moment is because she sees that he shares her color, which precipitates the two realizing their blood relation.⁵⁹⁶ The arc from the inception of Maymūna’s romantic entanglement with ‘Abd al-Wahhāb to her re-acquaintance with their son Baḥrūn takes place in what Kruk regards as the first two segments of a three-part cycle in which Maymūna goes from being a pagan African to the Muslim wife of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb to a Byzantine operative working on her son’s behalf. I will mainly focus here on the earliest portion of Maymūna’s cycle, prior to her becoming ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s wife, as the majority of the action in this portion takes place either in Abyssinian territory or immediately after departing it, and as Kruk’s work mostly addresses

⁵⁹⁶ Kruk, “The Princess Maymūnah,” 432.

the segments that concern her marriage and motherhood, rather than her initial romantic involvement with the hero.

Kruk categorizes Maymūna's relationship with 'Abd al-Wahhāb as in keeping with the established pattern of other heroic courtships typical to *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* and to the *siyar* in general, saying,

A foreign princess appears, and after a certain number of vicissitudes she marries one of the Muslim heroes, joins the Muslim cause, and becomes the mother of a son.⁵⁹⁷

And yet, Kruk does also acknowledge that Maymūna is exceptional in some ways vis-à-vis her peer foreign heroines, in that she—unlike most figures in the *siyar*—undergoes “a total, and lasting, change of character.”⁵⁹⁸ I would argue that another significant point of divergence is that, unlike the Byzantine women for whom 'Abd al-Wahhāb and his peers have an innate fondness, Maymūna also has several unique barriers to entry into hero-wifedom. The emergent culture clash suggested in vignettes such as Maymūna's first meeting with Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma can only deepen our understanding of how Maymūna navigates her peripherality later on in her cycle, which is to say, it reinstates her particular type of “foreign” identity as a factor in the roles Maymūna performs throughout the text as a lover, warrior, wife, and mother. Attending to how Maymūna's blackness and femininity are imbricated enables us to envision Maymūna's character in greater detail than characterizing her as yet another “warrior woman” allows. Instead, her character may be seen as a complex assemblage of co-determinant attributes that do not form a constant and stable subject, but rather configure and reconfigure in relation to her social situation, and therefore—in the words of Jasbir Puar— “cannot be seamlessly

⁵⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 429.

⁵⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 428.

disaggregated into identity formations” like woman, heterosexual, black, and so on.⁵⁹⁹ As such, below I will aim to discuss Maymūna not simply as an African character and not simply as a female character, but as a figure whose composite elements take on a variety of significances that are contingent on the spaces through which she moves and the people whom she encounters within the text, much as we have seen above with regard to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s racialization. I will do this by highlighting a few critical points of encounter between Maymūna and other key figures who have a hand in shaping her fate.

When Maymūna attempts to initiate a courtship with ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, she does so with pure, if lovelorn, intentions—she expresses that she is attracted to his honorable bearing and she vows to protect him from the evil ‘Uqba and even her own father’s aggressions. However, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s initial reaction to her is one of pearl-clutching indignation: “God forbid that I should seek out any relief [/vagina] save in Him” (*ma ‘ādih Allāh an aṭlub al-faraj/al-farj illā minhu*).⁶⁰⁰ In punning on the homonymous relationship between relief and the company of a woman, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb draws a line dividing the frivolous interest in worldly pleasure from the true pleasure that can be found in piety. He then recites poetry declaring that he will not be led into sin and calling Maymūna’s love unsound and inappropriate (*kayfa yarā ḥubbī lā ṣawāb [...]* *mā laki fī ḥubbī ṣalāh*).⁶⁰¹ Stunned by his rebuke, Maymūna replies in a letter,

| | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| فأنت لعمري من رجال أطايب | ألا أيها العبد الذي صح دينه |
| وعرفك الارشاد يا ابن الاناسب | وحق الذي أعطاك كل فضيلة |
| ولست أريد الفحش مثل الكواعب | سأمحك ودي ليس أبغي قبيحة |
| اليك محب صادق غير كاذب | ولكن رأيت القلب قد مال ميلا |

⁵⁹⁹ Jasbir K. Puar, “‘I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory,” *philoSOPHIA* 2 (2012): 56.

⁶⁰⁰ *SDH XXXVI*: 48.

⁶⁰¹ *ibid.*

O servant [of God], who is meticulous in his religion,
 By my life, you are among the best of men
 And by the truth of He who gave you every virtue,
 And who taught you right guidance, o son of great lines,
 My affection leads me to forgive you, I want no ugly act,
 Nor do I want to do an immoral thing, like buxom women⁶⁰²
 But I saw that my heart had inclined toward you
 With an honest love, not a false one
 I'll send you the shaykh 'Uqba's head, speedily,
 And pour out a glass of death for him!⁶⁰³

Moved by this testimony, 'Abd al-Wahhāb then recognizes that Maymūna did not desire him in an adulterous way (*mā raghibat fīhi min ṭarīq al-zinā*), but he nonetheless continues to repel her advances out of fear of God. After losing patience with his avoidance, Maymūna goes to visit him, whereupon 'Abd al-Wahhāb lowers his eyes and refuses to look at her out of a sense of modesty. Hurt by this gesture, Maymūna proclaims, "Lo, people of honor comport [themselves] honorably, so raise your head and look at she who is bound up in love, and whom great strain [*jahd*] has struck, and over whom unrest prevails. Relieve me of my pretext and pleading, and speak to me in a suitable way [...]." ⁶⁰⁴ 'Abd al-Wahhāb then admits that his mind has changed, and that his gaze is not lowered because he fears her immodesty but because he fears his own passions, especially in his old age, when he cannot afford to do anything that might anger God.

Yet we might question why 'Abd al-Wahhāb had assumed that her desires were perfidious in the first place—is it perhaps because, as a pagan, he could not expect her values to align with his (and yet she swears by God's truth in the poem)? Is it because she pursued him, while in most of his other romantic experiences 'Abd al-Wahhāb had been the initiator? Or, is it

⁶⁰² I assume here she means women who either inappropriately expose their bodies or who are otherwise publicly sexual.

⁶⁰³ *SDH XXXVI:48*

⁶⁰⁴ *SDH XXXVI: 50.*

because he is primed to view her in a certain way as a black woman? An indication is given when, a short while later, Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma and Maymūna encounter one another for the first time.

Upon arriving at Maymūna’s fort, Fāṭima and her companions are greeted by five thousand blacks and Ethiopians, clad in multi-colored fabrics that make them appear “like flowers in a garden,” with Maymūna at the fore. Upon seeing her, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s heart soars, and he turns to his mother, saying,

يا أماه هذه التي وصفت لكي وصفتها وهي قد خرجت في هؤلاء السودان الذين كانهم جن سليمان وقد
انضاف اليها سائر السودان من أصحاب الملك الدمدمان وصارت في هذا العسكر العظيم الذي مثل الليل
البهيم

O mother, this is the woman I described to you, and she went out [to the battlefield] with these black men, like the jinn of Sulaymān, and to her [army] were added the remaining blacks from the companions of King Damdamān, and she continued on with this great army like the jet-black night.⁶⁰⁵

Seeing how dark Maymūna is (*naẓarat ilā Maymūna wa-sawādihā*) Fāṭima cuts in, saying, “This is Maymūna?” ‘Abd al-Wahhāb replies, “Yes, o princess, this one with the night-like face who battles on horseback.” Fāṭima then says, “Know, o my son, that this woman’s characteristics are not like those of heroes [*mā sīmatuhā sīmat al-abṭāl*].”⁶⁰⁶ She then tells her son to write Maymūna a letter apologizing for stringing her along and breaking off their relationship.

On the surface, there is a glaring irony in Fāṭima’s reaction to Maymūna’s black skin and its preclusion of her heroic status. Fāṭima’s son is, after all, a black-skinned hero who has distinguished himself in combat. Moreover, some of history and myth’s greatest figures that would have been known to Fāṭima—from ‘Antar b. Shaddād to the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Manṣūr to

⁶⁰⁵ *SDH XXXVII*: 33.

⁶⁰⁶ *ibid.*

a number of imams⁶⁰⁷—had mothers who were of African descent. So whence Fāṭima’s resistance to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s romantic interest in Maymūna? Rather than reading this as a straightforward case of bald-faced racism, this scenario gives occasion for exploring the relationship between blackness, femininity, and heroic predisposition as it may have been conceived of at the time; in doing so, we unearth not only stereotypes about the nature of black women as such, but also about their social class. This indicates that not only does race not travel, but neither do notions of power structure in which racialization is implicated, represented most often in heroic literature in the language of *nasab*. Most significant for the reception of Maymūna amongst the Arabs, her kingly genealogy and elite pedigree do not follow her as she comes under their purview.

Typically, when African women are found in Arabic sources from the early medieval period, they appear as slaves of various kinds. Many texts adumbrate that though East African women were ideal as domestic servants, they were often less coveted than their fairer or rarer counterparts, such as Persians and Berbers, for the purposes of concubinage and the familial and romantic responsibilities that it entails. This emerges particularly starkly in the infamous exordium of Ibn Buṭlān’s aforementioned epistle, *Jāmi‘at al-Funūn al-Nāfi‘a fī Shirā al-Raqīq wa-Taqlīb al-‘Abīd* (“The Collected Arts of Use in Buying and Inspecting Slaves”), in which he declares that one ought to purchase Berber women for pleasure, Byzantine women for caregiving, Persian women for childbearing, Zanj women as wet-nurses, and Meccan women as singers.⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰⁷ On the ethnic composition of the imams’ ancestry and its perception among Twelver Shī‘īs, see: Amina Inloes, “Racial ‘Othering’ in Shi‘i Sacred History: Jawn ibn Huwayy ‘the African Slave’, and the Ethnicities of the Twelve Imams,” *Journal of Shi‘a Islamic Studies* 7 (2014): 411-440.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibn Buṭlān, *Jāmi‘at al-Funūn al-Nāfi‘a*, 352.

The fourth part of this epistle is devoted to an account of the uses of slaves and slave women by country, and there again only a very limited cross section of black-skinned African women are described as being sufficiently noble, strong-bodied, or physically desirable for being taken as romantic partners; Ethiopian women are thought to be too feeble for most uses, and though, as seen above, Nubian women are described as extremely solicitous, and Beja women as attractive, by contrast the Zanj women and women of Zaghawa are described as categorically unfit for sexual enjoyment (*mut'a*).⁶⁰⁹ Perhaps the most telling set of remarks with respect to Fāṭima's reaction above is delivered in the section on Zanjīyyāt, or Zanj women, which states that "whenever their blackness is increased, their countenances are uglier, their teeth sharper, and their utility is decreased."⁶¹⁰ Elsewhere, when discussing the schemes used by slave-sellers (*nakhkhāsūn*) to make slaves more appealing, Ibn Buṭlān notes some tips and tricks for altering aspects of skin color that are less-than-desirable; black skin can be made to appear golden (*dhahabiyya*) if drenched a few times a day with water containing caraway oil (*wuḍi'at fī abzan fīh mā' al-karāwiyā*); implicitly, lightening or burnishing the skin in this way made it appear healthier and more appealing.⁶¹¹ In reacting in particular to Maymūna's extreme blackness (*sawāduhā*), Fāṭima is perhaps expressing an instinctive aversion that results from the internalization of some of these tropes: the darker the person, the more morally corrupt and less desirable.

Fāṭima could also be responding to an intractable class disparity that inheres between black and Arab women but is slightly more fluid between black and Arab men. As has been seen time and again in the *sīra*, black men are shown to be capable of distinguishing themselves as

⁶⁰⁹ *ibid.*, 374-375.

⁶¹⁰ *ibid.*, 374.

⁶¹¹ *ibid.*, 379.

heroes by championing the Muslims in war. As Remke Kruk has noticed with other women throughout the *sīra*, such as Nūrā, Fāṭima is generally skeptical at best of the credentials of virago-heroines who emerge throughout the text to either challenge her son or to pitch him and his cohort into *fitna* over their beauty, and this suggests less space at the top for female heroes than for male ones, even when they are presided over by a heroine’s leadership. Moreover, in point of historical fact, the way that women typically could climb the social ranks was not through military heroics but through elite courtship—some of the most high-ranking black women known to us from the early ‘Abbasid period, during which this portion of the *sīra* is set, were the courtesans to caliphs and potentates; that is, they were elite slaves.⁶¹² Such relationships troubled lines of class in a fashion that was relatively commonplace and predictable—many courtiers had a favorite courtesan who was there under conditions of bondage, whereas the male courtiers were typically free but contracted into structures of patronage. And yet, the tension points in these courtly relationships often get articulated in terms of racial difference rather than in the language of freedom and unfreedom. That negative connotations carried by color tended to be the locus of invective energy in relations between courtiers and courtesans emerges in various corners of the poetic corpus, as in a poem directed at the Almohad secretary Abū Ja‘far after he has become smitten with a black courtesan, translated by Arie Schippers:

O you, who were the most elegant of all people before Fortune dropped you;
 You are in love with a negress who is equal to a night which conceals the miracles
 of beauty;
 In whose darkness cannot be seen splendour of face nor blushing redness.

⁶¹² To be sure, at times the places in which this phenomenon emerges most visibly lie outside the ‘Abbasid heartland, but during the ‘Abbasid period. On the ethnic identities of slave courtesans in Umayyad al-Andalus, see: Cristina de la Puente, “The Ethnic Origins of Female Slaves in al-Andalus,” in *Concubines and Courtesans: Women and Slavery in Islamic History*, ed. Matthew S. Gordon and Kathryn A. Hain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 124-143. On poetry elegizing black women at the ‘Abbasid court, see: F. Matthew Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad: The Qiyān of the Early Abbasid Era* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 221-223. See also: Kristina Richardson, “Singing Slave Girls (*Qiyān*) of the ‘Abbasid Court in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries,” in *Children in Slavery Through the Ages*, ed. Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers and Joseph C. Miller (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009), 105-118.

By God! Tell me, because you know best the ones who praise beautiful women;
By God, who falls in love with a garden in which there are no roses or orange
blossoms?⁶¹³

Earlier, we also saw Ibn al-Rūmī “elegize” a black courtesan in verse for her hot-blooded exoticism, whereas the most laudatory portraits of caliphal consorts often dwelled not on their sexuality but on the more decorous aspects of their roles: their poetic capacity, their wits, or the more modest elements of their beauty.⁶¹⁴ I also discussed a vignette in the *1001 Nights* that humorously reconstructs a polemical debate at court between fair and dark women.⁶¹⁵ In other words, Maymūna’s blackness in Fāṭima’s eyes may suggest not only slavishness but also a form of slavishness that is particularly salacious. This, of course, commits the same omission that *Sīrat ‘Antar*’s social world inflicts upon ‘Antar’s mother by ignoring a critical feature of Maymūna’s identity, namely that she is a princess born to a royal line and possessed of all the decorum that this implies. This fact is raised, though, by al-Baṭṭāl, who is tasked with using his skills as a polyglot to convey ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s parting missive to Maymūna after Fāṭima commands him to end their relationship. Maymūna had recently killed another Muslim messenger sent her way, and so the stakes of al-Baṭṭāl’s rhetorical tact are particularly high in this delicate instance:

ثم ناداها أيتها الملكة قال الله تعالى ما على الرسول الا البلاغ {...} وأنا قد جئت اليكي مخاطر بروحي الا
انني واثق بجميل ظرفك وطيب عنصرك وهذا كتاب الأمير عبد الوهاب اليكي فان أجبتي بالاحسان فلربي
الشكر والامتنان وهو المعهود منه بالاحسان وان كان غير ذلك فأنا أرجع اليه وأعد القصة عليه وأنا أعلم
انه يموت أسفا ويعض أنامله لهفا

Then [Al-Baṭṭāl] called to her, “O princess, God Almighty said that there is no task upon the Messenger save to give notice (Q 5:99, Q 24:54, Q 29:18, etc.) [...] I have come to you risking my soul, though I am indeed confident in the favor of your elegance and goodness of your lineage. This is a letter addressed to you from

⁶¹³ Arie Schippers, “The Role of Women in Medieval Andalusian Arabic Story-Telling,” in *Verse and the Fair Sex: Studies in Arabic Poetry and the Representation of Woman in Arabic Literature*, ed. F. de Jong (Utrecht: M. Th. Houtsma Stichting, 1993), 150.

⁶¹⁴ On this, see chapter 1.

⁶¹⁵ On this, see chapter 2.

the prince ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, and should you reply with kindness then I shall give thanks and favors to my Lord, for he is famed for kindness. And if not, then I shall return to him and relay the story to him, and I know he shall surely die of sorrow and bite his fingertips with worry.⁶¹⁶

In appealing to her better nature, the culturally sensitive and linguistically proficient al-Baṭṭāl takes care to flatter Maymūna’s noble mien, addressing her as a princess and remarking on her elegance (*ẓarf*) and high pedigree (*‘unṣur*). In so doing, though, he draws attention to a central difference between Maymūna’s life as a heretofore unattached woman and her prospective future as ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s wife in the lands of Islam, namely that this will be staked upon an assimilatory structure that gives no regard to Maymūna’s elite standing in her home society, and that favors instead those who are able to tie their lineages to an Arab tribe or to a prophetic line. As was seen in the prior chapter, this emphasis on particular permutations of genealogy is what renders ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s status as a black hero imaginable, for though he is black-skinned he is born to a purely Arab, heroic line that has high standing in the tribe of Kilāb; so too with his analogues in other sources, such as Abū Zayd al-Hilālī. Moreover, the assimilation of the black Muslim community can only proceed in the text via ties of *walā’*, a foster-like structure of clientage that hinges on what Sarah Bowen Savant calls the “essential human practice” of forgetting one’s prior genealogical affinities in order to embed in a new social order that is premised on “an ideology of election” that serves to elevate the Arab ethnic core of the Muslim *umma*.⁶¹⁷

When Maymūna does ultimately convert to Islam and ride into battle against the Byzantines in their cause, Fāṭima is proven wrong in at least one sense about the linkage between her race and her heroism. Maymūna brings the entirety of her large, “jet-black” army with her

⁶¹⁶ *SDH XXXVII*: 33.

⁶¹⁷ Sarah Bowen Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory, and Conversion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 22, 50.

into her new faith's fold to fight under Arab auspices. And, *because* of the fearsomeness and savagery it connotes, Maymūna's blackness and that of her troops transforms into an instrumental feature of her martial achievements. In one of her premier battles against the Byzantines, Maymūna savvily tells her armies,

إذا ترجلوا وحملوا كشفوا رؤسكم واحملوا وأنا أقسم بمن حرك الحواس كل من رأيت منكم مغطي الرأس
أخمدت من الانفاس وأنا ما قصدي بذلك إلا أنهم إذا رأوا رؤسكم كأنها روس العفاريت فيجل بهم الموت
المميت وأول من يكشف رأسه أنا وأقتحم قسطل الغبار ولا على في ذلك فضيحة ولا عار إذا كان ذلك في
طاعة العزيز الغفار فلم تكن يا سادة إلا ساعة حتى ترجلت الروم وأقبلوا كالغيث إذا انصب من العتوم فعند
ذلك كشفت ميمونة رأسها فلاح لها شعر أسود مثل الغسق وفعلت السودان مثل فعالها

“When you go out on campaign, uncover your heads and go forth; I swear by He who compels the senses, I will snuff out the breath of anyone I see with a covered head! I want nothing from this except that when [the Byzantines] see your countenances, they'll think they're the faces of demons, and death will overtake them. I shall be the first to expose my head, and I'll dive into the battle's dust and murk, for there's no transgression and no shame in me doing that if it is done in obeisance to the Great and All-Forgiving [God].” Not a moment later (o sirs!) the Byzantines marched forward, approaching like a deluge released from a milk-camel's teat, at which point Maymūna uncovered her head, her black hair gleaming like the dusk, and the other blacks did the same [...]⁶¹⁸

Maymūna's move proves to have been prescient, for, as the narrator of the text explains to us,

وكان في أصحاب الملك قراقونا أقوام عمرهم ما رأوا سودان ولا خطر ببالهم على طول الزمان أحد لونه
اسود فلما نظروا في ذلك اليوم الى السودان أخذهم الفزع والرجفان فهجمت السودان على الصفوف
وضربوهم بالسيف

Among [the Byzantine general Qarāqūnā's] companions, there were peoples who had never before seen blacks, nor had anyone whose color was black even once entered their thoughts, so when they looked that day upon the black [soldiers], terror and trembling overcame them, and the blacks attacked their ranks with sword-blows.⁶¹⁹

Maymūna's blackness is here shown not only to be a source of strategic advantage in battle, but moreover its use in intimidating the Muslims' foes acts as a pathway to godliness that

⁶¹⁸ SDH XXXVIII: 19.

⁶¹⁹ *ibid.*

defies religio-legal convention and that is accessible in particular to those who share her racial identity. By emphasizing the unique capacity that her blackness confers to perform acts that are simultaneously supportive of her new community and premised on her outlandish and fear-inducing coloring, *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* preserves the impression of Africans and Africanness as paradoxically dangerous and domesticable: when used to serve the Muslims in their own realm, blackness exerts a positive power, where previously, when in the domain of African dominion, it had connoted an existential threat. When race travels, it becomes subsumed into new power structures and acquires different significances, and Maymūna is aware of this. In evoking a discrete set of uses and a contingently discrete set of rules for their behavior, Maymūna is complicit in enclavizing the black, newly Muslim soldiers in her charge, reifying their difference not only in color but in dress and social role. Like ‘Abd al-Wahhāb socializing his black soldiers as *mawālī*, Maymūna ushers her black soldiers into their new identities not only as Muslims, but also as racialized others operating vis-à-vis Arab norms and command. In so doing, she serves the intra-textual, ethical interests of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, expanding Islam’s reach and advancing its aims while simultaneously adhering to the core society’s preexisting boundaries and reticulations, maintaining a position of self-conscious difference for herself and her brethren.

Conclusion

This chapter represents a very preliminary step in teasing out the shape and scope of the ways in which racial language is deployed in constructing and reifying visions of black Africans, their governance, and their lands in pre-modern popular Arabic literature, particularly in light of the at times conflicting stakes that audiences and composers appear to have had in these depictions. I have used the African cycle of the *sīra* to argue two main points, the first being that racist language can serve multiple social and discursive functions that are contextually

dependent, and that the way in which racial signifiers travel or fail to do so in narratives that span large geographic sweeps occasions an exploration of these functions; in the *sīra*, we have encountered scenarios in which racialized language targeting black Africans is used to conjure fear, imply the difficulty of the Muslims' proselytizing endeavors, to create romantic tension, to deepen irony, and ultimately to valorize an underdog heroine's success. Second, I have demonstrated through close attention to the foregoing passages that between explicitly racist and anti-racist discourse, there lies a vast spectrum of ambiguous—and even ambivalent—racial language that is no less othering for the fact that it is subtler.

Scholars of modern race and racism have long been capable of discussing racism as having several cousins—tokenism, fetishism, exoticism—while not losing sight of the fundamentally racial, prejudicial nature of these other phenomena, which result in the differential treatment of whole groups on grounds primarily of appearance and secondarily of culture. It is through this that the admiration professed for black soldiers and for the black female valiance embodied in the figure of Maymūna in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* should be understood. Previous scholarly discourses on anti-blackness in Arabic literature have often taken a turn for the perfunctory, decrying straightforward cases of grossly racist language that bear an uncanny and uncomfortable similarity to modern stereotypes, such as the description of Africans as having swollen lips, kinky hair, and defective intellects in Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddima*, black slaves being represented as priapic and threatening to female purity in *Alf Layla wa-Layla*, or the painfully grotesque description of a black wet nurse in *Hikāyāt al-'Ajā'ib wa-Akhhbār al-Gharā'ib*.⁶²⁰ By comparison, cases in which admiration for black people is expressed *qua* the same features that earn derision elsewhere—as when al-Jāhīz extols Zanjī musicality in his

⁶²⁰ Lyons, *Tales of the Marvelous*, 355.

Fakhr al-Sūdān ‘alā-l-Bīdān as being a unique talent, perhaps in response to the oft-repeated adage, “if a Zanj fell from the sky, he’d hit the ground on the beat”—have at times been read as clarion, anti-racist vindications.⁶²¹ As we have seen, neither of these views fully captures the range and functions of racial language in these texts.

Within this range, certain norms of discourse prevail. In particular, the first recourse in explicating the reasoning behind the racial stereotypes examined above is the science of the time, be it medical (as with the birth narratives explored in the second and third chapters) or, in the cases here examined, geographic and climatological. Thus we find, for example, that the heat of the “fifth clime” is more than a civilized person—one used to living in walled buildings—can be expected to bear; common terms for tribes residing at the edges of the known world, such as Damdam and Lamlam, are appropriated into popular narrative with a view toward ethnographic verisimilitude; even the language in which Fāṭima denies Maymūna’s heroism (*lā sīmatuhā sīmat al-abṭāl*) bears the undertone of physiognomic discourse, with the term *sīma*, literally a mark or characteristic, often used to describe aspects of the face. That is, these clinical usages typify a jargon through which the use of stereotype is legitimated in narrative.

Though such stereotypes have a pernicious root (as all do), what emerges starkly above is that the *sīra* does not always leverage them to what are perceived within the textual imaginary as negative ends. However, to call vignettes such as Maymūna’s bare-headed battle against the Byzantines vindictory or anti-racist would be a misreading tantamount to regarding, say, expressions of philosemitism as a form of authentic homage, rather than as a re-outfitting of anti-Semitic tropes such as Jewish predispositions towards legalism or monetary success to suit new

⁶²¹ On this adage and the broader stereotype it connotes, see: Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Inquiry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 93-94; for the relevant passage in al-Jāhīz: al-Jāhīz, “*Fakhr al-Sūdān ‘alā-l-Bīdān*,” in *Rasā’il al-Jāhīz* vol. 1, ed. Muḥammad Bāsil ‘Ayūn al-Sūd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2000), 138.

needs and desires; the association between black people and demons is likewise re-outfitted above in positive garb because it is serving Arabo-Muslim desires, but it is not being deconstructed or critiqued.⁶²² In order to evolve a nuanced way of talking about such usages in pre-modern literature, the task of future research will be to further tailor understandings of racism's aforementioned cousins to fruitfully describe the complex racial imaginaries folded into sources that, while at times insipidly racist, are often so much more.

⁶²² For a discussion of the history of the term philosemitism, as well as some of its manifestations and problematics, see: Adam Sutcliffe and Jonathan Karp, "Introduction: A Brief History of Philosemitism," in *Philosemitism in History*, ed. Adam Sutcliffe and Jonathan Karp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1-26

Conclusion

This project began as an attempt to draw together, critique, and contribute to the existing account of racial language generally, and blackness in particular, as it manifests in Arabic popular literature from the medieval period. This topic had been explored previously in an uneven fashion that reflects some of the dominant interests of Arabic literary scholarship in the West: race—or more appropriately, blackness—in the *1001 Nights* has received significantly more attention than in the entire corpus of Arabic chivalric legends comprised by the popular *sīra* tradition, in the scope of which the tale of ‘Antar has held particular sway in discourses on race; portrayals of slaves, and especially “white” slaves, often from Central Asia and the Caucasus, have drawn as much if not more curiosity than those of black people either free or unfree, and only recently—especially in the work of Bruce Hall—has there been some acknowledgment that color-categories such as “black” and “white” have not been historically fixed or even necessarily physically delimited;⁶²³ scholarship that centers the blackness of figures in Arabic works is largely focused on historical rather than literary actors, often with an interest in asserting the presence of African people who had influence in Islam’s formative period, from the time of Muḥammad.⁶²⁴ Moreover, as we have seen especially in the final chapter, the distinctions drawn in scholarship between prejudice on grounds of race, religion, culture, and other social factors often are imprecise, reflecting not only the messiness of these markers of identity but also the lack of a theoretical apparatus that describes the workings of pre-modern, non-European racial thought in detail.

⁶²³ To pull a particularly useful phrase from Hall’s work, he states, “Racial thinking is not the same as perceptions of difference;” in particular, he describes the way in which objective, physical differences do not always correspond directly with terms used for color or racial differentiation in the Sahel region. See: Bruce Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 36-38.

⁶²⁴ One of the most recent products of this is Ahmad Mubarak and Dawud Walid’s brief, traditionist history detailing the lives of a number of mostly Ethiopian companions of Muḥammad: Ahmad Mubarak and Dawud Walid, *Centering Black Narrative: Black Muslim Nobles Among the Early Pious Muslims* (Rockford, IL: Itrah Press, 2016).

Implications

This dissertation has staged two main interventions with respect to how we read race in pre-modern Arabic sources, the first a matter of theory and the second a matter of method. It has troubled two countervailing sets of theoretical assumptions that have described the poles of a debate about the pre-modern status of the concept of race: first, that pre-modern “race” is not race at all, but rather something else onto which modern theories of race can only be grafted anachronistically. Second, that pre-modern cultures were ubiquitously ethnocentric, and therefore racist in ways that placed themselves uncritically and unconsciously at the top rung of a (known) global hierarchy. Concerning the method of reading of Arabic popular literature, I have endeavored to parse the significances of several discrete black heroes—both major, like Abū Zayd al-Hilālī, and minor, like Maymūna bt. Damdamān—who appear across the *sīra* corpus, and in so doing to complicate the prevailing approach to all such figures as embellished ‘Antars and ‘Unaytiras. I find instead that each individual character has the capacity to serve distinct textual functions tailored to their works’ respective trajectories and motivations. This runs counter to the comparative folkloric dispositions of many studies of popular works that insist on the texts’ tendencies to use and reuse a relatively narrow repertoire of character-types, and is complementary in this regard to the endeavors of other recent authors on the *sīra* corpus such as Amanda Hannoosh Steinberg, whose dissertation addresses the diversity of women portrayed in the texts outside of the warrior-woman type, and Melanie Magidow, who emphasizes several of the unique elements of Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma’s story within the heroic tradition.⁶²⁵

⁶²⁵ Amanda Hannoosh Steinberg, “Wives, Witches, and Warriors: Women in Arabic Popular Epic” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2018); Melanie Magidow, “Epic of the Commander Dhat al-Himma,” *Medieval Feminist Forum*, Subsidia Series no. 9, *Medieval Texts in Translation* 6 (2019): 1-21.

Throughout, I have focused primarily on the case of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*'s non-hereditarily black hero 'Abd al-Wahhāb, who operates in a text in which black militias are of particular use against the Muslim nemesis du jour—here the Byzantines—to demonstrate the ways in which black characters come to orchestrate processes of assimilation, to propound didactic myths about ritual and social purities, and ultimately to stake out what Arabness itself can mean across different contexts that reflect the text's cognizance of the various non-Arab communities being introduced into the Muslim world as a result of the conflicts and adventures that the *sīra* lionizes. Though I have asserted frequently (and even just above) that representations of black and African figures do not always conform to a fixed array of stock characters and tropes, certain repeated features have nonetheless appeared throughout this study that bear itemization here: the hybrid hero who consists, paradoxically, of two purities, being both purely Arab by lineage and purely black in color; the ambitious slave, who is often the object of ridicule; the proto-Muslim elite warrior, often a leader or sovereign in their prior milieu; the bestial or cannibal slave-soldier, whose grotesqueness is salutary so long as the Muslims' foe is intimidated by it, but which otherwise poses a cultural and physical threat. The length of this list, though it is indeed a list of "types," is remarkable.

When I began this dissertation, I had assumed that I would mostly be conducting a literary history of *racism*, excavating anti-black representations in medieval popular sources that were uncomplicatedly so, with my task being to theorize the "why" behind them. What has instead emerged—and what I hope to have demonstrated—is a multifarious register of *racial language* and moments of *racialization* focused primarily around epidermal blackness and secondarily around geo-cultural and/or genealogical Africanness that serve a number of uses in these texts, not all of them explicitly negative; that is, I have had first to grapple with a much

more elaborate “what” than anticipated, before even getting to the “why.” I have found that, much as it does today, the racial language in these works comprises an emotive spectrum from the admiring to the denigrating, as well as a spectrum of reasoning from the self-consciously “scientific” to the unthinkingly stereotyping, with each usage reflecting a particular set of literary commitments and prevailing ideas that bear imprints of a given text’s context. With respect to the *sīra* corpus, the idea of any single “text” is itself a slippery one, and thus this dissertation has made use of a few strategies to track how race travels and morphs within traveling, morphing narratives, from working across several manuscripts to considering the themes of travel and racial passing within the narratives themselves.

Future Directions

In a few instances throughout this dissertation, I have gestured toward directions for further research in areas related to race and blackness in the *siyar sha‘biyya*, racial others in popular Arabic literature, and the study of pre-modern race more broadly. More work remains to be done, in particular, on the manuscript traditions around the *sīra* literature in which black heroes figure prominently in order to further pursue the question of how race morphs across the tradition and movements of a single text. As previously discussed, rich, important work has been done on the ways in which Abū Zayd al-Hilālī’s tale in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* undergoes other changes across recitational and textual contexts, and so the groundwork is laid for similar work focused on the hero’s racialization;⁶²⁶ similarly, work remains to be done on creating a broader record of patterns of racial language across various *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* manuscripts as well as among later exponents of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, such as the 15th-century Ottoman Turkish *Baṭṭālnāmeḥ*, or modern re-imaginings of the *sīra* as a Ramadan *musalsal* (early 1990s), or even as an

⁶²⁶ On the story of Abū Zayd and scholarship thereon, see chapter 2 (*passim*).

installment in the “Rejected Princess” cartoon series.⁶²⁷ Other aspects of race in the *sīra*, and particularly the racialization of Byzantines and Armenians (whom al-Baṭṭāl tends to prefer in his retinue of spies) vis-à-vis Arabs also hold many possibilities for exploration.

As stated previously—and by others as well—race in the *1001 Nights* is a topic that could open onto multiple venues that have not yet been explored. In the foregoing work, I have suggested that there are significant differences between the treatment of Africans in the *siyar* and in the *1001 Nights*, and that these may gesture towards the texts’ respective ethics, that is, their aims, intended audiences, and pursuant to this, their parameters for what is possible or impossible for certain kinds of actors within the imaginary at hand. However, the extent to which the *1001 Nights* shares a common imaginary with respect to its approach to race with other types of popular literature outside the *sīra* corpus that span the region’s languages and storytelling traditions—particularly in Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman—remains to be explored in detail. Moreover, I would contend, based on my argument in the final chapter, that our understanding of race in the *1001 Nights* bears revisiting, as arguments about the text’s grotesque and extreme racism have—to again paraphrase Robert Irwin—not been fully mined for their historical and social meanings.⁶²⁸

Finally, much of the most provocative and pioneering theorization of race is tailored to and/or conceived in a Euro-American context, and this is true of both pre-modern and modern frameworks. The unique urgency of the question of race in an American context has, in

⁶²⁷ Several clips of the Ramadan series are now available on YouTube via numerous different users, e.g. Baghdad Salam, “Musalsal Dhāt al-Himma, j. 1... Ikhraj ‘alā-l-Anṣārī... ‘Ām 1993” YouTube (Dec. 14, 2013), 7:25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Xsw981tb60>. On the *Baṭṭālnāmeḥ*, see: Georgios S. Dedes, “The Battalname, An Ottoman Turkish Frontier Epic Wondertale: Introduction, Turkish Transcription, Translation and Commentary” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1995); Jason Porath, *Rejected Princesses: Tales of History’s Boldest Heroines* (New York: Dey St., 2016), 212-215.

⁶²⁸ Robert Irwin, “The Dark Side of the Arabian Nights,” *Critical Muslim* 13 (2015), <https://www.criticalmuslim.io/the-dark-side-of-the-arabian-nights/>.

particular, generated a fascinating and deep body of work that I have drawn on extensively throughout this dissertation. At the same time, the nature of this corpus points to a central concern in future endeavors. Indeed, the final and most large-scale terrain for further research that I wish to discuss is the very groundwork from which this project began, namely, the need to create models and conduct analyses of race in the Islamic world that participate discursively with—while also maintaining their distinctness from—preexisting Euro-American theories that are not necessarily adequate to the task of engaging a more global set of questions. Not only should our working definitions of race be constantly phrased and rephrased, tested and retested in different milieus throughout the Islamic world and across different registers and genres of literature and documentary evidence, but we should also continue to work towards figuring out race’s “place” in the literary and social structures under our consideration; is race—as some might have it—predominantly a naturalizing abstraction that supplements and magnifies constructions of difference originating from religion?⁶²⁹ What, then, do we make of the stark responses to differences of somatic—and especially epidermal—race evidenced across the Arabic literary corpus that is not religiously contingent? How do race and gender go hand in hand, and what ideas might this indicate about such things as marriage, reproduction, childrearing, conversion, labor, and so on? How, within the great expanse of the pre-modern Islamic world, does race travel—does it move in particular ways that the Euro-American theoretical apparatus cannot account for? How do we talk productively about the similarities and continuities between pre-modern racial thought and modern racial ideologies without enforcing

⁶²⁹ Geraldine Heng, for example, notes that religion is “the paramount source of authority in the Middle Ages,” and that it has historically acquired biopolitical significances that manifest in race-making along religious lines. Heng terms this “religious race,” and her construal of religion as the main lens through which self and other were understood in the pre-modern world leads one to think that religious race, more than other forms, is particularly salient and powerful. See: Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 27-31.

what scholars such as David Nirenberg describe apprehensively as a “teleological” portrait that takes racial prejudice as something inevitable, and 19th- and 20th-century (Western) scientific racism as its clear logical extreme?⁶³⁰ Throughout this project, I have waded tentatively into responding to many of these questions, and have aimed—beginning with a broad survey in the first chapter and homing in on specific examples in the ensuing sections—to chart a course for how to go about seeking out and reading representations of racial difference in Arabic works. And yet, as our medieval geographers in the final chapter show with their great skill and meticulousness, one course does not a full map make.

⁶³⁰ David Nirenberg, “Was there race before modernity? The example of ‘Jewish’ blood in late medieval Spain,” in *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 264.

Appendix A: The Birth of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, Manuscript Variations

This appendix is a supplement to chapter 3, “Conceiving ‘Abd al-Wahhāb,” and offers transcribed and translated versions of the adjudication of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s paternity as it appears in four editions, both handwritten and printed, in addition to the definitive 1909 Cairene text. I reproduce them here in the order of their appearance in the third chapter of this dissertation.

BNF MS Arabe 3855, ff. 173

فهم كذلك اذا اقبل عليهم وقال اما الاسود من الأبيض فانه ليس بصعب على الله عز وجل اذ كل ما يبلغ {؟} ⁶³¹ يقدر يصنع في صنعته الأبيض والأسود ولا يقدر يصنع الأبيض اسودا ولا الأسود ابیضا الا الله فقال والله عز وجل قادر ان يقول للشيء كن فيكون انما امره بين الكاف والنون خلق عيسى بن مريم من غير اب ومع هذا ان الرجل اذا جامع زوجته وهي حايض جا الولد اما اسود واما ناقصا واما معتوها لاجل فساد دم الحيض لان الله تبارك وتعلي خلق الانفس على جلالتها من قطرات النطفة كما بدع الأشجار على منابتها من لطايف المواهب والتحف وركب هذا الجسم الأبيض الوسيم الكريم من تلك النطفة الحقيمة في ظلمات الاحشا وهو يدبرها كيف يشا قال فضجو الناس بالتهليل والتكبير والصلاه على البشير النذير ثم انه اقبل على الحارث وقال له يا حارث أقول شي تصدقني فيه فقال أي وذمة العرب وشهر رجب ومن اذا طلب غلب قال لما دنوت من زوجتك هذه والله هل كانت حايض فقال نعم وذمة العرب قال فتبسم جعفر وضرب بيد على يد ثم ...

They were like this when [Ja‘far] turned to them and said, “As for black from white, such a thing is not hard for God, mighty and exalted. Behold—all that exists, he is capable of [bringing into being]. With his creative skill, he fashions the white and black, and no one can make the white black nor the black white save God.” He said, “For God, mighty and exalted, is able to say to a thing ‘be’ [kun] and it will be, commanding it between the *kaf* and the *nūn*.⁶³² He created

⁶³¹ This word is unclear, except for the final letter (*ghayn*).

⁶³² The Arabic command “be,” is “*kun*,” and is comprised of two letters (*kāf* and *nūn*), hence this phrase is the equivalent of saying that God commands something to “be” and it comes into existence between uttering the “B” and the “E.”

Jesus [‘Isā], son of Mary [Maryam] without a father. And along with this, if a man has intercourse with his wife while she is menstruating, the child will be either black or deficient or feeble-minded because of the corruption of the menstrual blood, for God, blessed and praised, created souls in their gloriousness from drops of sperm, like trees are made to grow [from seeds], by the graces of the Giver, and he enfolds and transports this white, handsome, honorable body from this vile sperm drop in the shadows of the bowels, and he designs it as he wills.” The people erupted in *shahādas* and *takbīrs*, and praise upon the giver of good news and warnings, then [Ja‘far] turned to al-Ḥārith and said to him, “O Ḥārith, I have said something, do you believe me regarding it?” “Yes, by the covenant of the Arabs and the month of Rajab and He who, when one asks, procures” [Ja‘far] said, “When you drew near your wife, truly, was she menstruating?” He said, “Yes, by the covenant of the Arabs.” So Ja‘far smiled and clapped one hand against the other, then [...]⁶³³

BNF MS Arabe 3840, ff. 379:

قام الامام جعفر على الاقدام وقد اقبل الامام جعفر بوجهه عليهم وقال معاشر من حضر اما نزل حكم الله ان
الأسود الأبيض والأبيض من الأسود وليس بصعب ذلك الامر علي الله لانه يقول للشبي كن فيكون خلق
عيسى بن مريم من غير اب ومع ذلك اخبركم ان الرجل اذا جامع زوجته وهي حايض جاء الولد اما اسود
اما ناقصا لاجل فساد الدم قال فعند ذلك ضجت الناس بالتهليل والتكبير ثم انه اقبل علي الحارث وقال يا
حارث أقول لك شبي وتصدقني فيه قال أي وحق ذمة العرب فقال يا حارث انت لما دنوت من زوجتك كانت
حايزا قال نعم فضرب جعفر يد علي يد وقال صدق الزاجر وما كذبت الضماير واعلموا يا معاشر العرب

⁶³³ The ellipsis is due to the fact that the volume (the final in this fragmentary version of the *sīra* containing only the first four parts) concludes here.

ان مثل هذه حكومة جرت بين يدي جدي رسول الله صلي الله عليه وسلم وقد حمل اليه مثل هذا الغلام اسود
وامه بيضا فحكم جدي انه ولدهما وقال ان الرجل قد واقع زوجته والدم اسود وبهذا احكم جدي وانت يا
حارث واقعت زوجتك وقد لحقها ما يلحق النساء ثم ان الامام جعفر رجع كرر النظر في وجه عبد الوهاب
وقال والله ليكون هذا الولد مجاهد في سبيل الله تعالى وركنا للاسلام ثم دعا له بالبركة وشهد الاميرة انها
برية من الزنا فعندها فرحت وأشارت تقول ...

The imam Ja‘far stood and turned to face them and said, “O gathering of people, as for [what has been] sent down with regards to the judgment of God, truly black [can come from] white and white from black, and this matter is not difficult for God, for he says to a thing ‘be’ and it becomes. He created Jesus son of Mary without a father, and in addition to this, I inform you that should a man have intercourse with his wife while she is menstruating, the child will be born either black or lacking because of the contamination of the blood.” With that, the people erupted into *shahādas* and *takbīrs*, then [Ja‘far] turned to al-Ḥārith and said, “I’ve said something, do you believe me regarding it?” He said, “Yes, by the truth of the protection of the Arabs.” Then he said, “O Ḥārith, when you drew near your wife was she menstruating?” He said, “yes.” So Ja‘far clapped his hands together and said, “The chider has been proven true, and the consciences have not lied, and know, o Arabs, that the likes of this case came before my ancestor, the Messenger of God, peace and blessings upon him, and there was brought to him [a child] like this black boy, and his mother was white, so my ancestor determined it to be their [legitimate] child. He said that the man had sex with his wife while her blood was black, thus judged my ancestor. And you, o Harith, had sex with your wife while there clung to her that which clings to women.” Then Ja‘far returned his glance to

the face of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and said, “Truly, by God, this boy will be a *mujāhid* in the path of God and will be a pillar for Islam,” then he gave him a blessing, and he proclaimed the princess of adultery, so she became overjoyed and recited poetry [...]

E. Farhi and H. Sitruk, Sīrat al-Dalhama (Tunis: 1890-?), ff. 382.

והאדא באש ג'א עבד אלוהאב אסמר יאסר, ויכנוהו ולד מרזוק, ותוקע עליה פ'צאלא יאתי זכרהא,
ותמא כלאם צחיח אנהו ואידא כאן ראג'ל כ'אלט מרה ויכון האך אלוקת מיג'אל אלהיץ' מתאעהא
ודפ'ק ותרפ'ע האך אלוקת, יחתק אלמולוד יג'י אכחל, ואידא כאן עלא עקאב אלחיץ' יג'י אלצג'יר
אסמר. והאדא שי מא פ'י שך, ומעא האדא כלהו באש מא יקעדשי קבר פ'י צ'הר ופ'י האך אלטרקיה
אלדי כ'אלט אלחארת פ'אטמה תרפ'ע מנהו בהאדא עבד אלוהאב, והווא אלדי תתקאם עליה אלסירה,
וכ'רג' אלחארת וברד וטפ'א ג'מרתו ופאח אלכ'בר פ'י אלקבילה במא עמל אלחארת בפאטמה, וכתרת
אלנאס כ'רג'ו וג'ייבו וג'והם מן פ'אטמה.

وهذا باش جا عبد الوهاب اسمر ياسر ويكنوه ولد مرزوق وتوقع عليه فصلا يأتي ذكرها وثمة كلام صحيح
انه اذا كان راجل خالط مرة ويكون هاك الوقت مجال الحيض متاعها ودفق وترفع هاك الوقت يحقق المولود
يجي اكحل واذا كان على عقاب الحيض يجي الصغير اسمر وهذا شي ما في شك ومع هذا كله باش ما
يقعدشي قبر في ظهر وفي هاك الطريقة الذي خالط الحارث فاطمة ترفع منه بهذا عبد الوهاب وهو الذي
تتقام عليه السيرة وخرج الحارث وبرد وطفى جمرته وفاح الخبر في القبيلة بما عمل الحارث بفاطمة وكثرة
الناس خرجوا وغيبوا وجوهم من فاطمة.

And ‘Abd al-Wahhab shall come forth very black, and they’ll nickname him “son of Marzūq,” and there will transpire upon him [events in] early infancy that will bear recollection. There is a truthful saying that if a man has sexual intercourse with a woman and at that time her menses is at its height, while [the blood] is pouring forth and [its level] is elevated, it is determined that the newborn will

emerge dark-colored, and if it was on the heels of the menses, then the little one will come out black. This is something in which there is no doubt, and through this that which is buried comes to the surface. It was in this way that al-Hārith had intercourse with Fāṭima, resulting in this ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, and he is the one on whom this *sīra* is based. And al-Hārith departed and the ember [of his love] cooled and died away, and news of what he had done to Fāṭima circulated throughout the tribe, and many people left and turned their faces from Fāṭima.

Cambridge MS Qq 247, n.p.

قال نجد فلما سمع جعفر الصادق اشعارهم وتحقق امورهم واخبارهم قام قائما علي قدميه وحمد الله واثنى عليه وذكر جده محمد صلي الله عليه وسلم وقال الحمد لله الذي انشا جميع الموجودات بقدرته ومحي الدارسات بوابل رحمته الدال بلطيف حكمته علي وحد اتيته تعالي عن الشبيه والمثيل والقرين وعن كيفية تقطع بها الاحاطه عليه وتعالي في وجوده عن تشبيه العفات ؟ عليه وتحيرة العقول عن الوصول الي علم ذاته وعجزت الافهام عن ادراك معرفته ربوبيته صور الانسان من نطفة امشاج وقدره في قر ارداج فجعله ضلوعا منشقه واعضا متفرقة حتي اذا قدره تقديرا وجعله مميعا بصيرا اظهره باراداته باحسن تقويم ذلك تقدير العزيز العليم اعترفت المخلوقات بربوبيته وخضعت رقاب الجبابره لعظمته ثم بعث محمد صلي الله عليه وسلم لطفا منه وانزل عليه القران تنزيلا وفضله صلي الله عليه وسلم علي كافت رسله تعقلا صلي الله عليه وعلي اله ما برح هلال وتردد ريح الشمال ثم امسك ونظر اليهم وتكلم ففهموا كلامه وسمعوا نظامه هذا وقد علمت ذو الهمة انه كلام تشریف فطمعت في براهة نفسها ووقع ذلك في حسها فبينما هم ناظرون ولكلامه صامتون فاقبل عليهم وقال اما الأسود من الأبيض فاخرجه ليس صعب علي الله اذ كل صانع يقدر يصنع الأبيض اسود ولا يقدر ان يصنع الأبيض اسود الا الله تعالي لانه قاد وضد القدره العجز والله سبحانه وتعالي لا يعجزه بشي يقول للشبي كن فيكون وامره بين الكاف والنون خلق عسي علي السلام من غير اب ثم اعلموا أيها الناس ان المرأه اذا علق بالولد وهي في اول حيضها جا الولد اسود لاجل فساد دم الحيض لان الله تبارك وتعالي خلق الانفس علي جلاله الشهوه من قطرة النطفه وابدع هذا الجسم والرسم الكريم التي

يأتي من نطفه من تلك النطف المغيبه في ظلمات ثلاث قد اشتملت عليها ظلمت الاحشا وهو يدر بها ثم اقبل عليها وقال لها هاتي ولدك ايتها المراه المظلومه حتي افعل هذه الحكومه فعندها تقدمت الاميره اليه وبين يديها عبد الوهاب فلما راه اخذه؟ بيديه وقبله بين عينيه ثم قعدوا قعده علي ركبتيه ونظر الي امه والي ابيه والي الولد وقال للجماعه الحمد لله الذي احياني حيث حتي رايت هذا الولد السعيد الذي يكون مجاهدا في طاعت الملك المجيد وهو يكون ترسا لقبر المظلل بالهامه الشفيع يوم القيامه ثم قال يا حارث اصدقني بحق دمة العرب لما واقعت هذه المراه هل كانت حايض قال نعم لما واقعت ذو الهمة كانت حايض قال صدقت في هذا الكلام اعلمو يا سادات العرب واهل المناصب والرتب ان مثل هذه الحكومه جرت بين يدي جدي رسول الله صلي الله عليه وسلم وحمل اليه مثل هذا الولد ولد اسود وابوه وامه ابيضان فحكم جدي انه ولد هما لاجل الموافقه في حيض النسا وقال ان الرجل اذا واقع زوجته والدم اسود مختنق في اول الحيض جا الولد عميق السواد فان واقعها عند انتها الحيض وصفا الدم ونضافه {نظافة؟} الرحم جا الولد شبيهه ابيه وهذا حكم جدي وانت يا حارث واقعت زوجتك وهي حايض ولحقها ما يلحق النسا من الحيض والمستحاضه دمها احمر والحيض اسود والنطفه بيضا ودم المرأة اغبر فاجتمع اسود واحمر وابيض اسود واغبر وخلق الخالق ودبر وهذا الرجل اعترف انه واقعها وهي حايض والولد ولده فان شا يقربه وان شا بعيده ثم كرر النظر في وجه عبد الوهاب وقال والله ليكون هذا الولد مجاهد في سبيل الله عز وجل وركنا للاسلام ثم وعاله بالبركه في حياته والذكر بعد وفاته وشهد الاميره انها بريه من الزنا فعندها فرحت الاميره بهذا وانشدت تقول ونحن وانتم نصلي علي الرسول المرسل

Najd said: When Ja'far had heard their poetry and investigated their matters and reports, he stood up and praised God and gave obeisance to Him, then recalled his grandfather Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him, and he said, "Praise be to God who has produced all entities through his capacity and is the enlivener of knowledge-seekers through the profusion of His mercy, the One who demonstrates His wisdom to an individual with grace, giving it—may He be exalted!—through analogy and parable and precedent and the fashion in which

knowledge is brought into effect. [Praise] and exaltations upon him with regards to His existence, for the likeness of virtuous qualities [?] to Him and for confounding the minds [of humankind] in [its attempts] to access knowledge of his nature, and the failing of understandings in [endeavoring to] cognize his knowledge and his godliness. He fashioned an individual from a mixed sperm-drop and his capacity for determination, he [makes things proceed] step by step; the then makes its ribs take form, and its limbs separate, until through His power He makes its blindness sight, bringing this about according to his will and in the finest form. Such is the capacity of the Great, the Knowledgable. Creation is aware of his godliness, and the necks of great men are bent to his greatness. Then he sent Muḥammad—peace and blessings upon him—as an act of grace and sent down the Qur’ān to him and gave him favor, peace and blessings be upon the sufficiency of his messengers in intellection, praise upon him and upon his family by the showing forth of the crescent moon and the goings and comings of the north wind.” Then he paused and looked at them and resumed speaking, [ensuring] they understood his words and heard his well-composed speech. Dhū-l-Himma realized that his speech was honorable, so she longed for exoneration, and this prevailed upon her emotions. As they were waiting in silence for his speech, [Ja‘far] turned to them and said, “As for black from white, making such a thing emerge is not difficult for God, for whom all manner of creating is possible, He fashions the white into black and no one can fashion the white into black save God almighty, because He has directed [it to be so]. The opposite of capability is incapacity, and God, blessed and exalted, is not incapable of anything. He says to

a thing ‘be’ and it becomes, for His command is between the *kāf* and the *nūn*. He created Jesus—peace be upon him—without a father. So know, o people, that if a woman conceives a child while in the first portion of her menses, the child will emerge black due to the contamination of the menstrual blood, because God, blessed and exalted, creates souls in the gloriousness of [His] desire from a droplet of sperm, and he transforms this noble body and shape which comes from a sperm drop from amongst the sperm drops secreted away in the three [layers of] shadow, having surrounded it in the shadows of the bowels, and he designs it. Then he turned to [Fātima] said to her, ‘give me your child, woman of Mazlūm, in order that I may make this judgment.’ The princess presented herself to him, and with her was ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. When [Ja‘far] saw him, he took him in his hands and kissed him on the forehead, then he sat him on his knees and looked at his mother and father, and at the child, then said to the crowd, “Praise God, who made me live to see this fortunate child, who will be a *mujāhid* in obedience to the eternal King and will be a shield for the grave of the one who is shaded by the divine inspiration of the intercessor on the Day of Judgment.” Then he said, “O, Ḥārith, trust me, by the truth of the protection of the Arabs, when you had sex with this woman was she menstruating?” He said, “yes, when I had sex with Dhū al-Himma she was menstruating.” [Ja‘far] said, “You’ve spoken rightly. Know, o prominent Arabs and people of rank and esteem, indeed this is like a case that fell into the hands of my ancestor the messenger of God—peace and blessings upon him—there was brought to him a child like this one, a black child whose father and mother were both white. So, my ancestor judged that he was their child

because of the accordance with [the time of] women’s menstruation. He stated that if a man has sex with his wife and the blood is black and flowing profusely at the beginning of the menstrual period, the child will come out a deep black, and if he copulates with her at the end of the menses, at which time the blood is unmixed and the womb is clean, the child will emerge looking like his father. This was the judgment of my ancestor, and you, o Ḥārith, copulated with your wife while she was menstruating and there clung to her that which clings to women from her menses, and the blood of metrorrhagia is red and that of the menses is black and the sperm drop is white and the woman’s blood is dark, so the black and red and white and dark color mixed and created this creation and design[ed it]. And this man knows that he had sex with her while she was menstruating, and that this child is therefore his, whether he wishes to be close to him or distant from him.” Then he looked again at ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s face, and said, “truly this boy shall be a *mujāhid* in the path of God, great and glorious, and a pillar for Islam.” Then he gave him a blessing on his life and his memory after death, and declared the princess [Fāṭima] innocent of adultery, at which point she became joyous and began to recite poetry, and we all pray for the dispatched Messenger [of God].⁶³⁴

⁶³⁴ Cambridge MS Qq 247, folios not numbered.

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