² Charles H. Taylor, ed. *Haskins Anniversary Essays in Mediaeval History* (Boston, 1929).
³ Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable, *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).
⁴ See David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985); *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, 1987); John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago, 1980).

DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION: AFRICA AND MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE HISTORY

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My excursions into history have been marked by an unwillingness to accept the notion that any group of people exist outside of the historical process. The inspiration for my work, aside from a deep need to know, sometimes borders on whimsy: trips to the toy store; the onslaught of "B" movies; and, a true love for oxymorons. The three can be strung together anecdotally. My oldest son and I are in a toy store. His request is for knights on horseback crafted by a well-known British toymaker. My reply is "Sure. As long as you find some 'African knights' as well." His look and response were similar to those people who viewed the Kevin Costner production of "Robin Hood"; and the same as many of our colleagues who pointed out the "oxymoronic" notion of contemplating work on intellectual life and urban culture in medieval and Renaissance Western Sudan (West Africa)—"they don't exist." "There are no such things as 'African knights,' Moors in twelfth century England, or an Africa which existed in the medieval and Renaissance period—let alone one marked by an intellectual life and an urban culture."

It's then that we all, more or less, turn to David Aers and his "Rewriting the Middle Ages." For me, Aers provides the perfect segue to revisionist histories which entertain not only gender and class, but "race" as well.¹ The question for many, however, is how?

The answer, in terms of a theoretical model, is rather straightforward. The theoretical model is premised on the simple questions of: "do these people and places exist; and what is the level of interaction within a given time and space?" Methodologically, I rely on a distortion of Foucault's paradigm of "deconstruction." I operate on the premise that historical analysis is just that—deconstruction. And here I rely on the generation of primary source material and my ability—in fact any historian's ability—to find new angles of interpretation for existing seminal material found in both primary and secondary sources. I hasten to add that those materials are not always literary. Consider the toys and movies that we began with and then we might assess the popular culture of a much earlier period like the Middle Ages or the Renaissance: sculpture, painting, the masque, weaponry, personal ornamental items, even coats of arms. This is obviously not an exhaustive list.

In this regard, one of the best sources for generating the questions which excite me is a "coffee table book" like the Menil Foundation's *Image of the Black in Western Art*. The title itself might prompt the question of "why are there blacks in Western Art"? A cursory reply might be "because they are key to the construction of what we know as

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Western society." Or, "because they are key to the European experience as *Europeans themselves*" (again, see Debrunner: "Afro-European"). Take a look at Vittore Carpaccio's *The Miracle of the True Cross at the Rialto* (1494) which features Venetian gondoliers, and reflect on that "saucy" black fellow, resplendent in his livery, in the forefront of the work, and some distinct and not so distinct others, scattered throughout the painting. What they are doing there may provide real insight into fabled and not so fabled "moors of Venice" there or anywhere else at this time. Should we conclude that Othello was not an anomaly? Maybe . . .

Speaking of *Othello*, there are a number of works which provide as much insight as the art of these periods. The folk works of the era should not be neglected. Even negative portrayals of Africans as sheer, exotic concoctions designed to scare children do not warrant the offhand dismissal of serious historians that they often receive. But we often neglect the positive depictions. They have an overwhelming presence in religious literature. Look at the portrayals of the Magi; the search for the Ethiopian Prester John; the praise for Knight-Saints like Maurice and Thebault. From here they become a part of a mystic "canon" that so many like to promulgate as the end all and be all of the Western historical and literary experience.

Here, for me, is one of the greatest joys. It lies in the contradictions (the oxymorons) of those who interpret and teach this "canon." How are their assumptions of the "whiteness" (or "maleness" or aristocratic bent) of the age put to the test when they read *Chanson de Roland* or *El Cid*? How do these pieces determine their interpretation of *Othello*? Usually not at all; but, the material and the references are there where Moors become purveyors of Afro-Arabic culture and life (Basil Davidson); and Afro-Arabic culture after seven centuries in Spain is the precursor for Debrunner's Afro-European, if not the real thing itself.

By the same token, these interpretive pieces and interpretations of them suggest a re-reading of some of most serious secondary theses we have. Take Pirene, his supporters and detractors; their work represents volumes. Look at others like Robert Lopez. These works allude to and then ignore the centrality of Africa to the formation of medieval and Renaissance Europe. If Muhammad is key to the creation of Charlemagne as emperor, then who are these Moors who serve the cause of Islam in Europe? Ask *Roland* or the *Cid*. "Look to *Othello*." If Arab chroniclers speak to the splendiforous exchange of goods between Europe and the Muslim world, why haven't the scholars who quote them looked at the relations which they draw between Islamic and pre-Islamic Africa and this commerce? If it is Muslim gold which sets the standard for global currency in the Middle Ages, why is there so little interest in the source of this gold? These are the kinds of questions that compel me.

They compel an examination of those "other" primary sources—the ones written in Arabic, yet many of them readily available to all of us in English or French. There are a plethora of sources here. The real irony is that many of them are used by historians of medieval and Renaissance Europe. I have often lamented that if people like Pirene, Lopez, Irving Raymond, Richard Hodges, David Whitehouse or Benjamin Kedar, had simply "turned the page" of some of their Arabic sources, then learned scholars like Fernand Braudel would never have mustered the temerity to write that Africa had no urban culture in the medieval and Renaissance period. However, if this had been the case

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what would *I* write about? The most amazing aspect of these Arabic chronicles is that they *assume* an urban culture for Africa of the period as an expression of their extensive interaction.

There are the "other" primary sources as well. African folklore and epic demand serious consideration when we begin to look at a reconstruction of a medieval and Renaissance past. Consider how much "Gassire's Lute," the "Dragon Bida," or *Sundiata: an Epic of Old Mali* resemble *Beowulf, Roland,* or *El Cid.* And then consider how we might use those texts of the "European" experience to give us the tone, the flavor, the texture of the times. The African counterparts hold the same richness, and they explain medieval and Renaissance cultural phenomena in many ways that we all would find quite familiar: chivalry, loyalty, gift economies, and the like. In addition, it should be noted that in more than a few cases these works *also* speak to the importance and power of women within this African context. Here a new deconstruction and reconstruction are necessary as well.

Finally, it's best to remember that one of the "hottest" areas of historical retrieval, "oral history," actually cut its teeth on African material. The works of nineteenth-century writers like Clapperton referred to a past still governed by many conventions that we might describe today as medieval or feudal. The social structures described by many travellers, explorers, and military personnel speak to these very ideas—sometimes quite disparagingly in the face of "progress." Nonetheless, they still provide some insight into what was a not so distant past.

I close by saying that what becomes, for lack of a better word, so literally "breath-taking" for me is the fact that a great deal of what we might seek to know of Africa in the medieval and Renaissance periods is in works that are bound up in our everyday intellectual experience as "Westerners." Our ability to see this is determined by the degree to which we train ourselves and our students to be careful and critical readers. We must do careful and critical deconstructions, before we attempt the construction of histories that involve worlds of memory and creation.

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[1] My son was easily convinced: *there* were his "saracens." See Hans Debrunner, *Africans in Europe*: "saracens," "black saracens," "moors," "tawny moors," "blackamoors").

MURASAKI SHIKIBU: MEDIEVAL JAPANESE FEMINIST
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Heian Japan (794-1185) represents the height of medieval Japanese culture. It is interesting that the elaborately fashioned love "biographies" that stand at the heart of medieval Japanese courtly literature parallel the great courtly romance tales of medieval Europe. For example, in both Japanese and European romances love relationships mirror the fealty and protection patterns of feudalism. Other Japanese topoi are also familiar to Western readers—the inherent nobility of the lovers, their idealized beauty, and the secret, often adulterous love which necessitates covert communications.[1]

I have found it particularly fruitful to compare two medieval texts, both authored by women, both about romantic love, and both often called "the first novel": Murasaki's *Genji Monogatari*[2] (first half of the eleventh century) and Marie de France's *Lais*[3] (second half of the twelfth century). *Genji Monogatari* (1090 pages in the English translation) relates the amorous career of the courtly ideal, Genji, the Shining Prince. The romance begins with his first love affair with his stepmother Lady Fujitsubo (whom the emperor has married because she resembles Genji's mother) and ends with the adultery of his young wife Onna San-no-miya. In between these two milestones are his relationships with two wives and a long series of ladies. Critics have commented that the various romantic interludes seem like separate episodes and amount to independent short stories within the main theme of the novel.[4] In much the same way, Marie's *Lais*, although twelve separate tales, form a unified, collective consideration of love that qualifies as a medieval "novel." No one, however, agrees on what Murasaki's or Marie's concept of love is.

In Japanese and European medieval cultures, the popularity of vernacular romance provided a venue for female expression. In the Heian period a monogatari was, among other things, Japanese prose fiction, as opposed to classical literary forms written in Chinese. Not the first author of tsukur monogatari, "fabricated tales," Murasaki is certainly the most famous. In the same way, Marie makes a point in her "Prologue" of proclaiming her use of the vernacular to present her Breton Lais.