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Meridians: 22:1 BIPOC Europe

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Editor's Introduction

This special issue, guest edited by leading scholars of BIPOC Europe Nana Osei-Kofi and Shirley Ann Tate, although focused on contemporary populations, prompts us to remember that BIPOC Europe has a long, albeit relatively underrecognized history (Ramey 2016). By definition, to speak of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in Europe implies that these populations are distinctive from the presumptively white European. Yet European whiteness is neither natural nor long-standing. Rather, it is an invention resulting from modernity's settler colonial, colonial, and imperialist projects in Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and Australia, as are the designations *Black*, *Indigenous*, *of Color*, and their sundry precursor labels for Europe's targeted peoples and places. That is, the "white" racialization of the internally heterogeneous ethnic groups and the vast diversity of peoples who have historically predominated on the continent that came to be called "Europe" was part and parcel of naturalizing hierarchical, violent, and exploitative sociopolitical orders within European societies, and of the pursuit of global European hegemony. As a result, Europe's Others were designated BIPOC. In other words, in order to distinguish themselves from the peoples of the world, European monarchies, European settler colonies, and ultimately Europeans writ large evolved a discourse and an ideology that claimed racial difference between themselves and those they sought to conquer, dominate, and exploit outside their borders.

Keeping this in mind, we note that those we now consider BIPOC were present, participating, and at times dominant in European society long

before they were racialized as such (Northrup 2002; Otele 2021). In the central and southern regions peninsula that would become Italy in the mid-nineteenth century, and its island regions of Sicily and Sardinia, as well as its major port cities of Venice and Genoa, diasporas from Africa, the Ottoman Empire, Semitic Jewish settlements, Asia, and western European regions were part of the society at every level and “Italian whiteness” included substantial phenotypical and somatic diversity. For example, one of Italy’s most famous political figures, Alessandro de’ Medici, was the son of a Black servant woman and a male aristocrat (C. Fletcher 2016). Moreover, Roman imperial interventions triggered migrations from all of its Global South outposts to Europe, as did Italy’s twentieth-century colonial projects in East Africa, from Eritrea to Somalia (El-Tayeb 2011). Likewise, two of France’s most celebrated literary icons, Alexandre Dumas père and Alexandre Dumas fils, were descended from an enslaved African woman and a French nobleman living in Saint-Domingue during the Haitian Revolution (Martone 2018). Similarly, recent scholarship has unearthed “the remarkable stories of Africans who lived free in Tudor England” and who were fully integrated into English society (Kaufman 2018).

The racialized difference implied by the term *people of color* has likewise been part of every European population and subsequent nation-state. For example, the Roma people—commonly and pejoratively known as “gypsies”—comprising a diaspora from the Indian subcontinent that has long been racialized as permanently foreign and inferior to the local populations of the European countries in which they traveled and settled, could thus be considered people of color in the European context (Shmidt and Jaworsky 2020). Similarly, it was through colonizing and subjugating Ireland and racializing its native peoples as simian-like/less-than-white that the English established themselves as the epitome of European whiteness and civilization, building on that experience to justify racially their settler colonial project and violence in North America (Ignatiev 1995; Smedley and Smedley 2011).¹

Interestingly, populations that once predominated and exercised great political, economic, cultural, and social power were also racialized as non-European and therefore, non-white. This was the case of Muslim North Africans known as Moors who ruled the Iberian peninsula for nearly a millennium (Fierro 2021; R. Fletcher 1992). Indeed, it was the defeat of the Iberian Moors together with the expulsion of Iberian Jews that allowed for the subsequent consolidation of the Catholic Kingdoms of Castile and

Aragon, and in turn set the stage for the Columbian expeditions that initiated European settler colonialism in the Americas (Charles River Editors 2018; Lane-Poole 1996). It was precisely in colonizing the Western hemisphere; subjugating, enslaving, and racializing Indigenous peoples of the Americas as *indios*/Indians; and initiating a historically new form of chattel slavery in which enslaved West Africans were racialized as *negros*/Black that Iberians became *blancos*/Whites claiming *puerza de sangre*/purity of blood.

In sum, the whiteness of Europe and Europeanness is naturalized through the creation of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color as inherently Other (El-Tayeb 2011). Recognizing that all of these categorizations, including whiteness, are products of history and hegemony—that is, socially constructed—does not diminish their sociological, historical, political, or cultural significance. Rather, it should empower us to act based on the knowledge that all human-created hierarchical, violent, and exploitative social systems can be deconstructed and replaced with more equitable orders. May we each and all bring what we can to bear on that project, and may radical hope sustain us along the way.

Note

- 1 Ironically, the centuries of migratory flows into Iberia from throughout Europe, North and West Africa, the Canary Islands, the Ottoman Empire, and Asian trade routes meant that Iberian “whiteness” entailed a darker “somatic norm” than that of other “white” European nations (Hoetink 1967). As a result, even the Spanish *peninsulares*’ self-identified “white” Latin American descendants were considered racially inferior by their Anglo-American counterparts in North America (Scholtz 1998).

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