The Black Educology Mixtape is an open-access mixtape that moves beyond academic articles to feature various art forms and voices that are typically muted. We feature a collective of Black people working to amplify and empower Black educational voices. Our scope and sequence focus on the past, present, and future of Black education, which has been historically and systemically caught in the underbelly of western education. Our work is grounded in creating mixtapes that are both revolutionary and emancipatory in the name of love, study, struggle, and refusal.

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Erasure and Resistance: Dyeing for Black and Brown Lives

Dr. Mary Rambaran-Olm

**ABSTRACT**
As a scholar of pre-Conquest England, I was faced with the challenge of being both invisible and hyper-visible. The mental and physical toll this takes on racialized scholars in predominantly white fields is immense, which leads to many of us leaving. This track explores my departure from academia, how Black people in history and in academia are often erased and how fiber arts is utilized as a form of resistance. Resistance of hegemony and white supremacy can come in ways we least expect. Accordingly, this track examines how fiber arts has served as a form of liberation and helped me make Black and Brown historical figures in the archives more visible.

I love the feeling of soft, smooth yarn running gently through my fingertips. I close my eyes and let the silky, buttery feeling of a single strand glide through my hands. It soothes and restores me. The yarn colorway is called “Alessandro Midnight Black,” a deep black that swallows up the light and adds depth and richness.\(^1\) This concentrated black of the yarn (see Figure 1) plays with other colors, offering complement or contrast. It is intensely dark. This blackness is a popular colorway among fiber artists; it is a strong color that crafters know is versatile. It is highly visible amid other colorways, no matter how bright and colorful complimentary colors are. Blackness, as a racial construct, on the other hand, often means oscillating between invisibility and hypervisibility.

**Figure 1**
“*Alessandro Midnight Black*” Yarn and Alessandro de’Medici

![Image](https://repository.usfca.edu/be/vol2/iss1/17)

*Note.* The colorway “Alessandro Midnight Black” yarn laid out on a silver plate with pearls and pink roses. An image of the Florentine ruler, Alessandro de’Medici (1510-1537) is laid beside the yarn.

I was once one of those scholars who was conveniently invisible as an expert, and yet hyper-visible when I entered a room of almost all-white scholars in my field of medieval studies. Simultaneously, I was uncitable, unnoticeable, a hidden scholar, but my mere existence as a mixed-race Black woman was disruptive to the field. As I gained notoriety for resistance and challenging heteropatriarchal white supremacy, my name and body were highly visible among other scholars.\(^1\)

\(^1\) All pictures were provided by M. Rambaran-Olm and used with permission in this piece.
visible and weaponized by many scholars, and some used my body to further their careers.²

As Frantz Fanon discussed in his writings on the relationship between visibility and invisibility of marginalized people, he described how resistance gave resolve and power to the powerless (Fanon, 1952). At the end of Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon emphasizes the need for colonized subjects to actively reject the white mythos while creatively carving out a new present. Liberation meant action and was both a psychological freedom as well as corporeal. “I was committed to myself and my fellow man, to fight with all my life and all my strength so that never again would people be enslaved on this earth” (Fanon, 1952, p. 202). For Fanon, his mentor Aimé Césaire, and other anticolonialist or postcolonialist scholars like Edward Said, Achille Mbembe, Stuart Hall etc, psychological liberation is vital in anticolonial struggles (Fanon, 1967). To grapple with mental liberation in academia is to undo much of the programming that instills fear into us. We are taught to question everything to the point that we begin to question whether we are good enough.

For afropessimists like Frank Wilderson, slavery, for Black people, is a permanent state as “Blackness is coterminous with slaveness” (Wilderson III, 2020). For Wilderson, emancipation is a myth and just like Calvinists believe in predestination, Black folks seem predestined to navigate the word in figurative shackles. The idea of Blackness being continuously associated with enslavement is evident in research in pre- and early modern studies. Often, Black presence is dismissed and rationalized through presumed stories of enslavement. This is very much about approaching Blackness with the wrong questions from the outset.

How did an image of a Black man end up in an Abbreviato of England’s thirteenth-century Domesday Book? Why have previous scholars often written this figure off as an enslaved person rather than a commoner? His tiger-like tunic and zig-zagged, pumpkin-y-orange and blue tights indicate that he was probably not a nobleman, but that by no means indicates that he was enslaved. Blackness is flattened to strip Black people of humanity. A white lens does not give Black people agency to be present in medieval Europe other than through slavery. In some cases, enslavement is true, but the idea of race and racism was not exclusively demarcated by skin color, and if we read texts and medieval images more carefully, we see hidden figures who have often been overlooked, ignored, dismissed, erased or described as simply ‘enslaved’ (Nubia, 2019). While this track does not focus on Blackness or Black figures in premodern history in detail, it is worth noting that re-examining previous archaeological and literary evidence, along with investigating current findings, can undo a white-washed European historical narrative. How scholars have previously examined texts and archaeological evidence, along with questions and assumptions scholars have hitherto asked, reveals why and how history has often been whitewashed.

In current work that Erik Wade and I are doing to examine race in early medieval England, we have at times uncovered anti-Blackness in the period that has seldom, if ever, been discussed in detail (Rambaran & Wade, forthcoming, 2025). Independently, Wade examines how “negative medieval depictions of Black-skinned people can be found well prior to the rise of whiteness.” (Wade, 2022). Scholarly readings have often lacked or dismissed recognizing how people of color are depicted or referenced throughout medieval literature, especially Christian literature where cleanliness and holiness are connected to whiteness and blackness is flattened to mean ungodly or evil. The failure to recognize racial connotations of these color references is often rooted in traditional readings formed by a white gaze or lens. Also, readings are often simplified as “spiritual interpretations” rather than investigating how early Christian literature began formulating ideas of anti-Blackness from its infancy. There is much work to be done in this area, as well as uncovering or rediscovering texts and scholarship that shed light on race and anti-Blackness in premodern Europe.

The façade of academia is one of acceptance, pursuing intellectual curiosity for the good of society in an inviting and inclusive environment. However the pretense of academia displays itself to the world, the reality is that modern academia is founded on white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. A closer and more honest look at the ivory tower reveals not so much the liberal haven people assume, but an overly hostile, intellectually and

creativity-stifling conservatism, and a stifling not simply of free speech, but a covert restrictiveness on speech that is at times in tune with neoliberal capitalism and always at odds with liberation movements. Capitalism does not mask the idea that money matters more than learning. In some sense, the battlegrounds of academia are nothing that one wouldn’t find in other industries, but other occupations and trades outside academia don’t seem as bothered to cloak the abusive and corrupt system quite like academics and academia. The supposed victors in academia are those who survive the game. Although they may not always be the ones who make tenure, they may simply make it on the ladder, dangling—like Domesday Man in Figure 2—counting down until the end of each semester when the cycle of academic abuse and finish line of exhaustion will start afresh. Those who pivot and leave, or the ones who are never able to find permanent positions, are often seen as “failures.” Academia is mentally grueling and a common myth is that it’s those who aren’t “tough enough” who don’t last. Scholars are told to push harder. Academia is not just about mental strength and tenacity though; it is built on mental abuse and constant battles.

Figure 2

Doomsday Man

Note. An image of Domesday Man’s colorway laid out to show its variegated orange, white, and blue pattern. In the upper left is a copy of an image of the Domesday Man from the Domesday Book found in the National Archives, ref: E36/284.

The intense silver colorway of the legendary third-century Black Theban legionnaire St. Maurice reflects the deep shiny armor that he adorns in this sixteenth-century depiction presented in Figure 3. His armor does not outshine his bravery and steely resolve in the face of his Gallic opponents. The battles of history are often fought today in different ways. Academia, too, is a battleground. Not just in terms of competing intellectual ideas and theories; but it’s a battle of will and spirit, constantly testing our limits in terms of the mental thrashings we take and give to ourselves and others, the unpaid labor we undertake, and the challenges to our ethics—not just as scholars, but as human beings. Of course, this is not everyone’s experience in academia, particularly not those sheltered by privilege (whether it comes in being white, cis-, hetero and/or wealthy), but it is common enough to some degree.

My own experiences are not unique in academia, and those of us who find ourselves on the periphery for being outspoken often become part of an academic diaspora. Our connection may be found in our “Otherness” but we are also connected in defiance. We find each other. Perhaps the universe makes it so. It is no coincidence that many of us are Black or Indigenous. This racial bombardment makes psychological liberation more challenging. Anti-Blackness/Indigenous erasure are not new, and Black people’s absence, especially, is visible in the archives.
particularly relating to pre- and early modern European history. One important point that other scholars of color should always be mindful of is how participating in or contributing to anti-Blackness or anti-Indigeneity and erasure gains social capital. Proximity to whiteness or parroting colonial talking points is a refusal to cast-off one’s white mask. It is a lie about who one is, to deny a real collective struggle, and it only furthers white supremacist goals. It is equally tempting to fall into the same modes of thinking and acting within the academy that one initially opposes. We can become complicit in heteropatriarchal hegemony. It’s by no means easy to resist, but resisting is an ethical stand that speaks to and about one’s core. How scholars of color navigate a white supremacist system often takes a physical and psychological toll, we are hurled between a constant barrage of structural racism in and outside of the academy. For medievalists and early modern scholars, the presence of Black people in pre-modern Europe is explained away as exceptional. These white-washed narratives play with the psyche, and resistance to these narratives sometimes forces self-exile and psychological anguish. Fanon states “I was not mistaken. It was hatred; I was hated, detested, and despised, not by my next-door neighbor or a close cousin, but by an entire race. I was up against something irrational” (Fanon, 1952). So often, we gaslight ourselves into thinking the problem is us, but again Fanon’s own psychological liberation models liberating techniques for racialized people.

Figure 3

St. Maurice

Note. A skein of deep silvery-grey yarn with pink, cream and magenta roses. The left is an image of St. Maurice in silver armor, carrying a flag. The copy of the image comes from The Pfirtsch Alter of St. Maurice, 1526-30. The original is in the Bavarian State Painting Collections.

As mentioned, racism is in every sector, field, industry—and yes, even in the arts. Simply diversifying fields and industries does little to no damage to the structure of white supremacy. It should come as no surprise that I was one of the only people of color in my entire field of early English studies. Racial tokens and overworked scholars of color who resist being tokens is yet another battlefield. Over the decades there have been a number of Black and Brown scholars and students who were forced to pivot out of the field because of racism. Stuart Hall, as medievalist Kathy Lavezzo discovered, is the most recognized example of someone having been dissuaded from pursuing medieval studies, while others are simply erased and forgotten (Lavezzo, 2021). Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) learn to cope with racism. Marginalized folks learn this from a very young age, maybe even before we can fully comprehend what racism is. Racism isn’t something we can ignore because it’s ever-present, but we pick and choose our battles. Daily microaggressions and racial violence force marginalized people to internalize pain, which often leads to physical and mental health issues that are invisible, just as our “Otherness” can be ignored and hidden. Coping is one thing, but as Fanon reminds us, liberating our minds can lead us to methods of resistance and eventually tangible freedom. We can resist in different ways. For example, one of the ways that I have found useful as a type of therapeutic and restorative form of resistance to white supremacy is in the fiber arts. While protests, petitions, boycotts, and in extreme cases, job termination or the act of leaving is also resistance, saying “no more” in whatever capacity is the embodiment of defiance. Liberation of any kind, most likely, is not without pain or cost, but such struggles can lead to psychological freedom. Until liberation, it will feel like we cannot breathe. In academia, I could not breathe. I wanted to breathe. So in 2022, I left traditional academic walls, feeling worn out and scarred. I refuse to believe emancipation is a myth, to be erased, and be flattened to nothing more than one embodying Blackness and Otherness.

My presence in medieval studies was and continues to be polarizing. My idea of resistance means I make people uncomfortable, because I have concluded that academia is the master’s house and we can’t use its tools to destroy it. Oppressed people are not obligated to tiptoe around the feelings of those in the West and Global North who feel “uncomfortable.” All I wanted was liberation, despite years of trying to convince myself that there was hope for academia and that I could help “fix” it. I wanted equal footing, not a leg up, but there was always an obstacle in the way to any effort to level the playing field. White people, especially, will lean into whiteness when you step out of line. Academia pretends to be non-conformist, but it shackles people into compliance with a paycheck. We lose any creative ways of thinking and seeing the world and buy into the lie that we have no other weapons, gifts, or talents. We become enslaved to the very system we think we are using to liberate. Our minds are not free. As I said in a Medium piece that became my manifesto on my own exit from academia:

The white, neoliberal capitalist lie is that you need to wait until you get to the top to change “the system,” but much of that sort of change is often symbolic, superficial, and performative. Using “burn it down” as a motto has been sullied and disconnected from being a meaningful call of action. For people who want liberation, for those in racial and social justice movements, to those fighting settler colonialism in the Americas, Australia, Palestine & beyond, to burn things down is to tear down structures of inequality and to work on restorative (in some cases land back) justice. To build anew. To ‘burn it down’ is to be part of a revolution. It is to revolt and say enough is enough. But it is not enough to just say the words. These calls to arms require actions and often this means saying no or no more. It means being ethical and prioritizing equity over ego. (Rambaran-Olm, Oct. 2022)

Fanon writes about the colonial mindset and how we might break free. When I think of this mindset in academia, I reflect on Fanon’s way of explaining how Black people are often placed or forced into an "inferior status within a colonial order" (Fanon, 1952). This is certainly how medieval studies operates. There is no force *yet* in the field of medieval studies. There will be. For now, the only force that exists is the one that pushes radicals and liberators out. The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. (Lorde, 1984/2007a). This doesn't mean surrendering in "the house," but we must acknowledge that racist foundations of our institutions make it impossible for us to be liberated and to liberate from within. Our thinking needs to delineate from western imperialist approaches to the past, present, and what we want our future in and out of academia to look like. Small changes are important, but we become complicit and beholden to our oppressors, and it's a matter of understanding how we can resist damaging ourselves and others the most, which complicates matters.

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There was no (white) savior or miracle for me. I needed to be the one to save myself and that meant leaving the walls of traditional academia. For me, it was an ethical decision. I was tired of the violence and abuse that was making me a shell of who I wanted to be. I finally said no to the years of being the water-carrier, the counselor who spent countless hours listening & encouraging late into the night and, often, into the early morning, the bottom-ranked invisible laborer (for no reasons other than being non-Ivy league and Black), the target of white supremacist and academic harassment, the "go-to" for menial labor, the unofficial secretary, the cheerleader, letter writer, unacknowledged editor, pitbull, lightning rod, shield, and doormat. People know when one is a "doer" and academics are great at exploiting that. I understand why many have to or choose to remain, and I believe those who remain should never stop being disruptive because we are neither safe nor free in academia. I’ve been painted as the “angry Black woman” and the hostile “harasser” but to return to hypervisibility and invisibility, people become transfixed on the reactions and responses of the abused, rather than seeing the years of abuse that came before. For me and others, escape from the confines of higher education is not about running away from problems and racism. As scholars, we are often encouraged to “think outside the box” but still limit ourselves to accepting traditional, institution-restrictive frameworks. So, I created my own miracle and left academia.

“The Miracle’s” colorway is splashes of soft pink and a deep reddish purple with teal (See Figure 4). The red specks reflect the vibrant hat on this Black figure’s head. The shimmery silver (in the figure’s neckline/collar) is reflected in the sheen of the silk. The soft feeling is a sensory delight as it soothes and provides comfort. Just as the Black figure in the painting serves, the yarn gives in lots of different ways by tapping into different senses. The colorway is inspired by a Black figure from the 1775 painting “The Wedding Feast of Cana” by the Italian painter Gaetano Gandolfi. The Black figure, although unnamed, is central in a large image depicting Jesus’s first miracle, where he turns water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana. Our gaze turns to the Black figure holding a silvery-gold tray with a goblet. As he serves, we are reminded that we can give too. Whereas academia encourages “mesearch” and hoarding knowledge, crafting allows us to think of others, whether it’s in the materials we use, the creations we make, the patterns we use or what we do with our final projects. The western ethos is built on selfishness and “I.” Part of my revolt against traditional academic learning and colonial narratives means sharing hidden stories, offering yarn, giving gifts, and creating crochet tutorials and patterns to encourage people to carve out time away from the daily and persistent battles of white supremacy. This is the essence of helping others find liberation. Racial capitalism, as Cedric Robinson put it, makes Black people commodities. To give unconditionally is an act rebellion against capitalism (Robinson, 2000).

Figure 4

“The Miracle” and “The Wedding Feast of Cana”

Note. A number of yarn skeins called “The Miracle” are displayed on a silver plate with small flowers scattered around it. On top of an open skein is an image of a Black figure from the 1775 painting “The Wedding Feast of Cana” by the Italian painter Gaetano Gandolfi. The image is in an eating hall of the convent in San Salvatore, Bologna.
Thus, for many of us BIPOC in the crafting world, we use fiber arts not just as an escape from white supremacy but as an act of resistance. This is one strategy to strengthen creative skills, build community, and take back our time. For me, fiber arts emerged as a way to restore so I could get back to daily “battlefields.” We spend moments and days being bombarded with racism, anti-Blackness, and anti-Indigenousness. This racial aggression and violence robs us of energy, and takes away pieces of us too. Dealing with racist aggression is time consuming and eats away at our mental health and well-being. Heart attacks, strokes and more health-related issues are increasingly linked to racism, particularly in Black men and women. In my own academic world, I’ve seen Black and Brown women in particular die before 60 or 70, with no explanation other than compounded stress from racism and sexism. This early death is a theft beyond measure, and although we are indispensable, we are treated like we are expendable. Institutions desire marginalized people to score diversity points but are unwilling to support the endeavors of those of us who are serious about institutional change.

In Audre Lorde’s Sister Outsider, she reminds us that “we must recognize and nurture the creative parts of each other without always understanding what will be created” (Lorde, 1984/2007b) The act of creating is a powerful way to communicate solidarity, to take time back and to resist. To nurture creativity is to allow yourself and others to express freely. With impudence, white supremacy is a time thief. It robs us of precious hours of the day and minutes of our lives, as we battle with overt and stealth racism. This battle extends across intersections and marginalizations as we fight heteropatriarchy, bigotry, Islamophobia, anti-Arab discrimination, and anti-Semitism. We are often silenced or intimidated to stay silent on issues. Creativity in whatever capacity continues to serve as an expression of resistance and solidarity to say “NO” and “NO MORE” to white heteropatriarchy.

Creativeness gives us a chance to take back parts of who we are, to nurture, restore and give. We don’t always know what we are creating, as Lorde says, but the act of tapping into the creative centers of our brains allows us to focus on transformation and bringing about something new. Creativity is a symbol of empowerment and a testimony of resistance. The vibrant variegated colorway of Jean Blanc (John Blanke) reflects an early 16th-century tapestry image of a Black trumpeter in Henry VII and VIII’s court (see Figure 5). Rich and bright, the colorway reflects this Black Englishman’s outfit and heraldry flag. Just as Blanke is in the act of declaration, those of us who resist white supremacy in academia hold the banner of resistance. We will no longer be hidden. We will be bold, loud, and present until all of us are free.

**Figure 5**

*John Blanke and "Wrestling at the Field of the Cloth of Gold"

![Image of John Blanke](image)

*Note. One skein of John Blanke (Jean Blanc’s) colorway, along with one other skein open and laid out. John Blanke’s image is in the center. It is a copy of the image of him playing a heraldry trumpet. The original image is from a tapestry of Le Camp du Drap d’Or, the meeting of Kings Henry VIII and François Ier, ca. 1520, probably Tournai. The tapestry is called “Wrestling at the Field of the Cloth of Gold.”*

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My own act of resistance from white supremacy is inspired by imagery of Black and Brown figures in premodern works—some are hidden, while others are visible and centered in manuscript images and portraits. This is one of many ways to push back at colonial narratives and white-washed histories and it enables others to learn not only about Black history but working with this yarn takes back time from white supremacy. My job now involves letting these hidden figures be seen. Resisting the white gaze and pushing back at colonial narratives is one method of revolt. White supremacy requires us to erase, dehumanize, and downplay BIPOC’s presence and influence. I see strength, courage, humanity, and even simplicity in premodern artistic renderings of Black, Brown, and other figures of color. For me, finding innovative ways that blend art and history is a pedagogical way to counter white-washed narratives. Showing beauty in Blackness and “Otherness” is also an act of resistance. Fiber arts can be restorative as well as provide ways to express solidarity, mourning, celebration, and can act as forms of resistance and speaking truth to power when we are silenced in other ways. Dreaming of colorways has brought a type of freedom and relief that I didn’t think was possible. Being able to express myself through the art of dyeing combined with my specialization in medieval history has created an alchemical solution to silencing Black voices in the present and in history. It is my magic. No matter the creative art that one chooses, it can be used to speak truth to power in invaluable ways. For me, my hooks and needles continue to function as weapons against white supremacy, and they, as well as other art mediums, can be tools outside the master’s house that chip away at white supremacy’s foundation.⁶ I no longer feel like I am dying. Dyeing has given me a way to heal and feel alive again.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributor

Dr. Mary Rambaran-Olm, is a literary historian who specializes in the literature, language, culture, and history of pre-conquest England. Her current research focuses on race in the early medieval period and medieval misappropriation. She has published widely in New Literary History, postmedieval, Notes & Queries, English Studies, Digital Medievalist, as well as in a number of compilations. As a public literary historian her work has been featured in Public Books, TIME, Smithsonian, History Workshop Online, Religion Dispatches, and elsewhere. Her second book co-written with Dr. Erik Wade is Race in Early Medieval England (CUP: 2024). She is also an independent yarn dyer who runs a small business that combines her expertise of the premodern world with fiber arts. You can find her work at www.RepublicOfYarnia.com

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