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# Edge People<sup>1</sup>

John Tolan

“Identity is a dangerous word. It has no respectable contemporary uses.”<sup>2</sup> So wrote historian Tony Judt in 2010, in an article in the *New York Review of Books* called “The Edge People.” Over and against the collective labels imposed on groups of people, Judt identifies with those of shifting identifications, who speak multiple languages, who navigate between multiple confessions and convictions, who live on the ragged and complex interstices between states, empires or “civilizations”: what he calls the “edge people”. Judt was a specialist of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of central and eastern Europe, where many cities saw mixing of Catholics, Orthodox, Muslims and Jews, speaking a babel of languages. Throughout the twentieth century, pogroms, the Shoah, mass deportations and forced immigration put an end to the cosmopolitan mix of many of those cities as nationalist states sought to impose linguistic, ethnic and religious homogeneity in their territories. Judt’s fear was that such forces were continuing to impose their tribal definitions of identity in the twenty-first century, and that the “edge people” were becoming a rare entity.

In 1998, Amin Maalouf had expressed similar worries in his essay *Les identités meurtrières*.<sup>3</sup> Maalouf, a Lebanese Christian who had lived in Egypt, immigrated to France at the age of 27 when civil war erupted in Lebanon. Arab, Lebanese, Christian, French, European: Maalouf is all these things and more, but found in the 1990s that he was increasingly asked to explain which of those was his *real* identity, as if in the end one somehow had to choose one of the many facets of one’s life and define oneself as narrowly belonging to one homogenous group. Such conceptions of identity are “murderous” for Maalouf, because they can push people to marginalize, exclude and attack those who do not fit into the group, whether that group is defined by ethnicity, religion or nationality.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally published in German as: “Edge People: Außenseiter”, in Thomas Serrier & Ekaterina Makhotina, eds., *Zwischenwelten: Grenzüberschreitungen Europäischer Geschichte* (Darmstadt: Wbg Academic 2023), 73-87. The research for this article received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (synergy grant agreement no. 810141), project EuQu "The European Qur’ān. Islamic Scripture in European Culture and Religion 1150-1850".

<sup>2</sup> Tony Judt, "The Edge People," *The New York Review of Books*, 23 February 2010 (<https://www.nybooks.com/online/2010/02/23/edge-people/>).

<sup>3</sup> Amin Maalouf, *Les identités meurtrières*, 19. ed, Le livre de poche (Paris: Grasset, 2015); Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, trad. par Barbara Bray (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2012).

Reading Judt and Maalouf made me realize that I myself had long been interested in “edge people”, and at how they questioned historians’ (and others’) notions of group identity, whether “religion”, “nationality”, “ethnicity”, “race” or “civilization”. Indeed, the more I thought about these categories, the more they seemed insufficient to describe group dynamics in the world of the twenty-first century and completely anachronistic when used to describe the human communities of the middle ages that I was studying. And the more I realized that scholars working on modern and contemporary societies often did not reflect on the problematic nature of the categories they used.

Étienne François and I are both “edge people” in many ways, straddling national, cultural and linguistic boundaries in our lives and questioning them in our work. As a dual French-US citizen living in France, collaborating with colleagues throughout Europe, the Maghreb and the Middle East, I have always been attuned to the ways in which history is manipulated, consciously or not, by those who seek to construct (or deconstruct) narratives of national, transnational or religious history. I met Étienne François in 2009, when he was a fellow at the Nantes Institute for Advanced Studies and I was director of the partner institution, the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme Ange Guépin. He was working on a project on European *lieux de mémoires*, what would eventually become the book *The European way since Homer: history, memory, identity*.<sup>4</sup> Nantes is unique among similar institutes in Europe and North America in that a large proportion of its research fellows come from the global south, in particular India, Africa and Latin America. Étienne found that their questions and ideas about his work were often very different from those of European colleagues and changed the way he conceived his project, compelling him to integrate the perspectives of non-European scholars on subjects ranging from colonialism to religion to economic history. The discussions at the Institute with fellows from across the world changed the scope and nature of his project.

Indeed, for Étienne, for myself, and for many other European or North American scholars who frequented the Institute, the interactions with colleagues from other parts of the world was an exercise in “provincializing Europe”, to use the term coined by Indian intellectual Dipesh Chakrabarty.<sup>5</sup> Both Étienne and I were established scholars who had a broad comparative outlook that was in part a product of the fact that we straddled two nations, two cultures, two languages: the US and France for me, France and Germany for Étienne. Yet

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<sup>4</sup> Etienne François et al., éd., *The European Way since Homer: History, Memory, Identity*, First edition (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton university press, 2007).

the encounter with scholars from other parts of the world forced us to question many of our assumptions. For me, it enriched and complexified my work on the religious and ideological rivalries between two supposed entities awkwardly and problematically called “Islam” and “the West”.

I entered Yale University as an undergraduate in 1977. The following year, Edward Said, professor of English at Columbia University, published *Orientalism*, which fundamentally changed the perspectives of those, like me, who study how Europeans have portrayed Muslims and Islam. Said defined three different varieties of orientalism. First, the academic study of the “Orient”: a series of academic disciplines (from Japanese poetry to Moroccan archaeology), encompassing all that is not “Western”, that is to say European. Second, an overarching discourse of seeing the “Oriental” as “Other” (exotic, backward, childish) found in the works of countless European authors and artists, travelers and diplomats. Related to the two is the third meaning:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient--dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.<sup>6</sup>

Said chronicles the ideological implications of representations of the Orient in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and French culture. Orientalism as discourse, for Said, is the ideological counterpart to the political and military realities of British and French Empires in the Near East: Orientalism provides justification for empire. Said has had a profound impact on the field, not least because he emphasized how scholarship is not immune to the political and social pressures of the surrounding society, and how through deliberate distortion or unconscious bias scholarship can support or reinforce the colonial project. Said and other more recent scholars in postcolonial studies have helped us understand how institutions (including those devoted to teaching and research) can conceive and construct colonialist discourses and how the broader culture (including literature and the arts) can justify and even celebrate these discourses.

Yet as I read and thought about Said, the supposed link between colonialism and orientalism began to create as many problems as it seemed to solve. Is orientalism a product of the colonial enterprise, or vice versa? Said seems to say both. He opens his book with Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt in 1798, which he suggests was both a product of Orientalist fantasy and a motor for further orientalist scholarship which would in turn justify the colonial

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<sup>6</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 3.

endeavor. Napoleon's ships, after all, bore to Egypt not only soldiers, but a veritable army of scholars. The French had come not only to conquer Egypt but to study it. If here Said seems to date the birth of Orientalism to the eighteenth century, at other times he posits it as an eternal, almost immutable characteristic of Western European culture, a set of cultural stereotypes that can be traced back to Aeschylus' *Persians*. Was he not inadvertently falling into a trap of "Occidentalism", caricaturing and homogenizing Western culture?

Said did not have a lot to say about the middle ages, and what he did say was based primarily on Norman Daniel's *Islam and the West: The Making of An Image* (1960, republished in a slightly revised version in 1993).<sup>7</sup> Daniel's was a work of considerable erudition; he searched out and documented medieval Latin texts, in print or in manuscript, cataloguing what many medieval Christians wrote about Muhammad, the Qur'ān, and Muslim ritual. He was also a Catholic intent on finding new, less adversarial strategies for creating dialogue with Muslims in hopes of their eventual conversion to Christianity; indeed, his attitude was not so far removed from that of the more irenic of the thirteenth-century authors he discussed.<sup>8</sup> Daniel was shocked by the inaccuracy and hostility of what he found in many of the medieval texts he analyzed. Medieval Christian writings about Islam contain crude insults to the Prophet, gross caricatures of Muslim ritual, deliberate deformation of passages of the Qur'ān, degrading portrayals of "Saracens" as libidinous, gluttonous, semi-human barbarians. Daniel's reaction to his own catalogue of such hostile caricature was to shake his head in sad consternation. Yet there is little in his book to suggest *why* Christian writers presented Islam in this way, or what ideological interests these portrayals might have served. This is all the more unfortunate because Daniel's work became *the* reference in its field, indeed Said, in his *Orientalism*, bases most of his short passage about the middle ages on Daniel's book.

Daniel's approach to his sources, for all its erudition, seemed deeply flawed to me. He made little effort to understand, much less explain, the varying perspectives of the medieval authors he critiqued or the great variety of their texts, which range from world histories to religious apologetics or polemics to travel narratives to *chansons de geste*. And Said's use of Daniel was problematic as well, as it posited a perennial hostility of West towards East, devoid of any real historical perspective. Two years after Daniel's book, Richard Southern wrote a brief essay on *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*. His approach is radically

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<sup>7</sup> Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, Rev. ed (Oxford: Oneworld, 1960).

<sup>8</sup> See David Blanks, "Western Views of Islam in the Premodern Period: A Brief History of Past Approaches," in Michael Frassetto and David Blanks, eds., *Western Views of Islam in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Perception of the Other* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 11-54, esp. 24-29.

different from Daniel's, and informed by a profound knowledge of the cultural and intellectual context of the Latin middle ages. As he states the issue:

The existence of Islam was the most far-reaching problem in medieval Christendom. It was a problem at every level of experience. As a practical problem it called for actions and for discrimination between the competing possibilities of Crusade, conversion, coexistence, and commercial interchange. As a theological problem it called persistently for some answer to the mystery of its existence: what was its providential role in history--was it a symptom of the world's last days or a stage in the Christian development; a heresy, a schism, or a new religion; a work of man or devil; an obscene parody of Christianity, or a system of thought that deserved to be treated with respect?<sup>9</sup>

In the decades following the publication of Southern's essay, a great number of studies had been published on various aspects of Medieval Latin authors who wrote about Islam, but no broad synthesis that took up the questions posed by Southern and challenged the positions of Daniel and Said. Hence I undertook a reassessment of the subject, which became my book *Saracens*.<sup>10</sup> In the middle ages, from Iraq to the Iberian peninsula, Christian authors wrote apologetic and polemical tracts designed to discourage apostasy, portraying Muhammad as a false prophet and a heresiarch, lambasting the Qur'ān, mocking Muslim ritual. To the legal discrimination and condescension that they received from their Muslim overlords, these Christian authors responded with equal and opposing scorn. It is important to bear in mind these origins of Christian polemical views of Islam. In the light of the current vogue for post-colonial studies, inspired in part by aid's work on the links between Orientalism and colonial ideologies in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain and France, students of Medieval and early modern Christian polemics against Islam tend to look for a pre-imperial Orientalism, for discourses that justify Christian or Western hegemony over Muslim subjects. Such discourse indeed exists, notably in the context of Crusade to the Levant and *Reconquista* in the Iberian Peninsula: the religious inferiority of the Muslim is supposed to legitimate his subjection to the Christian prince and his inferiority to Christian subjects. Yet most of those Christian writers of the Middle Ages who wrote anti-Muslim polemics did so from the position of *dhimmi*s, subjected minorities desperately (and to a large degree unsuccessfully) seeking to instil disdain for Islam in their flock to stem the tide of apostasy.

These writers were not perpetrators of colonial discourse, but, if anything, represent what Said has called "resistance culture": they demonized the ideology of the dominant power and offered an alternative, subversive narrative of its history.<sup>11</sup> Said describes how the

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<sup>9</sup>Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), 3.

<sup>10</sup> John V. Tolan, *Saracens. Islam in the medieval European imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup>For the idea of "resistance culture" see Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

colonized define and affirm a culture that opposes that of the colonizers. They seek to sever the links between the two cultures, often through acts of violence (symbolic or real) against the manifestations of colonial power. This in turn provokes repression, creating resentment against the colonizers which ultimately reinforces the culture of resistance. In ninth-century Córdoba, a small group of Christians publicly insulted the prophet Muhammad and denounced the Qur'ān, deliberately provoking the Muslim authorities who had them put to death. These martyrs and their apologists forged a resistance culture, seeking to galvanize the Christians of al-Andalus into rejecting their infidel overlords and ceasing to collaborate with them. Theirs was a failed resistance culture, as the majority of Andalusian Christians rejected their fanaticism and sought to live peacefully under Muslim rule. This example, one among many, showed how anachronistic it was to project Said's orientalist schema onto premodern European responses to Islam.

Daniel, Said, and various historians inspired by their work are handicapped by several biases: an overly Western perspective that ignores the Eastern origins of contacts (and conflicts) between Islam and Christianity; and concerns specific to the twentieth century, a twentieth century in search of the origins of modern imperialism and racism, which does not pay enough attention to the concerns of medieval authors. Norman Daniel tended to portray medieval Christian views of Islam as distortions or misunderstandings of it. My approach was different: I sought to understand the place that various medieval authors gave to Islam and Muslims a place in a Christian *Weltanschauung*. They used their (often poor) knowledge of the Muslim Other to assign him a pre-established role in Christian theology and eschatology: infidel scourge sent by God to punish wayward Christians; heretical deviant from the true faith.

In the years following the publication of *Saracens*, I became interested in looking at how European ideas about Islam and Muslims evolved in the centuries following the middle ages. Here too, I quickly came up against the limits of Said's *Orientalism* and of the work of those who invoked him. Much of what Europeans wrote about Islam and Muhammad indeed corresponds to Said's schema: they used the supposed foibles of the prophet to explain the weaknesses and shortcomings of modern Muslims who need the tutelage of the French or the British. Yet to focus solely on these aspects of European discourse on Islam is to miss the ambivalence and nuance that I found throughout these sources. While Said's impact has been important on the field, many historians have highlighted his weaknesses. Said was not a Muslim, and he was not a scholar of Islam: he knew far less about Islam than the orientalists whom he criticizes. For historian Humberto Garcia Said's schema is based on a "Whig

fallacy” according to which, for example, radical Protestant writers and Deists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are little more than precursors to the secular reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>12</sup> As a result, Said and others ignore the religious nature of much of these authors’ work, or they reduce it to a kind of code for the political. For these authors, “Orientalism” defined Islam as religious and hence atavistic, enforcing a Western superiority and justifying Western domination. This makes them incapable of appreciating the complexity of European responses to Islam, in particular, for Garcia, what he calls “Islamic Republicanism”: using primitive Islam, the community that Muhammad founded in Medina, as a model for a rightly ordered society and for proper relations between Church and State. It also makes them incapable of understanding the frank admiration that many European romantics had for Muslim spirituality and for the prophet Muhammad.

I decided to trace the history of the diverse European representations of the prophet in a book, *Faces of Muhammad: Western Perceptions of the Prophet of Islam from the Middle Ages to Today*.<sup>13</sup> Muhammad has always been at the center of European discourse on Islam. For many medieval authors, he was either a golden idol that the “Saracens” adored or a shrewd heresiarch who had worked false miracles to seduce the Arabs away from Christianity. Such contentious images, forged in the middle ages, proved tenacious; in slightly modified forms, they provided the dominant European discourse on the prophet through the seventeenth century. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, variants of the image of Muhammad as an “impostor” have been used to justify European colonialism in Muslim lands and to encourage the work of Christian missionaries. This hostility toward Islam and its prophet is an important part of the story that I wanted to tell, but it was by no means the whole story. Muhammad occupies a crucial and ambivalent place in the European imagination; he figures as the embodiment of Islam, alternatively provoking fear, loathing, fascination, or admiration, but rarely indifference.

Indeed, the figure of Muhammad and the text of the Qur’ān could inspire interest and esteem, particularly from those who criticized the power of the Church in European society or who deviated from its accepted dogmas. Sixteenth-century Protestant theologians such as Martin Luther or Theodor Bibliander used the Qur’ān in their anti-Catholic polemics: Muhammad was indeed a false prophet, for Luther, but “the Pope’s devil is bigger than the

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<sup>12</sup> Humberto Garcia, *Islam and the English enlightenment, 1670-1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 13-17.

<sup>13</sup> John V. Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad: Western Perceptions of the Prophet of Islam from the Middle Ages to Today* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); John V. Tolan, *Mahomet l’Européen. Histoire des représentations du Prophète en Occident* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2018).



Turk's devil". Catholics such as Guillaume Postel sought similarities between Muslim and Protestant theology in order to denounce Luther as a new heretic worse than Muhammad. Unitarian Miguel Servet went further, presenting Muhammad as a monotheist reformer who rightly rejected the irrational doctrine of the Trinity. Servet mined the Qur'ān for anti-Trinitarian arguments; condemned by the Catholic inquisition, he escaped only to be burned at the stake in Calvin's Geneva. In the midst of bloody confessional wars that were tearing Europe apart, some looked to the toleration of religious diversity grounded in the Qur'ān and practiced by the Ottomans as a model Europeans should follow. Various authors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in England, France, and elsewhere, portrayed Muhammad as a reformer who abolished the privileges of a corrupt and superstitious clergy, showed tolerance to Jews and Christians, and reestablished the true spirit of monotheism. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he is increasingly portrayed as a "great man," a sort of Arab national hero, bringing law, religion, and glory to his people. Many of these authors are interested less in Islam and its prophet *per se* than in reading in Muhammad's story lessons that they could apply to their own preoccupations and predicaments.

In my work I seek to upset or at least nuance European representations of European history. European nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was based on simplified, biased views of national history, with the middle ages as a crucial formative period according to nineteenth-century nationalist ideologues who forged the "myth of nations" as historian Patrick Geary called it.<sup>14</sup> These myths are still very much alive in popular culture and in far-right political rhetoric. Medieval communities are imagined as ethnically, religiously and culturally homogenous, whereas they were on the contrary hybrid and constantly changing. My work on European perceptions of Muhammad emphasized that Islam, far from being a foreign element recently introduced into Europe via immigration, has long been part of European culture. In the same vein I initiated, with my colleagues Mercedes Garcia Arenal (Madrid), Roberto Tottoli (Naples) and Jan Loop (Copenhagen), a project financed by European Research Council on "The European Qur'ān. Islamic Scripture in European Culture and Religion 1143-1850".<sup>15</sup> We study the ways in which the Islamic Holy Book is embedded in the intellectual, religious and cultural history of Medieval and Early Modern Europe. We are particularly interested in how the Qur'ān has been translated, interpreted, adapted and used by Christians, European Jews, freethinkers, atheists and

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<sup>14</sup> Patrick J. Geary, *The myth of nations: the Medieval origins of Europe* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> <https://euqu.eu/>

European Muslims. Many of these uses will come as a surprise to readers: in the sixteenth century, Protestants mined the Qur'ān for arguments to use against the Catholics, and vice versa. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, anticlerical authors saw the Qur'ān as the expression of a pure monotheistic religion devoid of the corrupting influence of clergy. Nineteenth-century romantics saw the Qur'ān as a poetic expression of faith unsullied by Western materialism. The Qur'ān is part of the intellectual baggage of European thinkers from the middle ages to today, part of Europe's Islamic legacy.

If Muslim elements in European history have been ignored or excluded from mainstream conceptions of European history, the same is true to a large extent with Judaism. In 1290, Jews were expelled from England and subsequently largely expunged from English historical memory. Yet for two centuries they occupied important roles in medieval English society. England's Jews revisits this neglected chapter of English history—one whose remembrance is more important than ever today, as antisemitism and other forms of racism are on the rise. As I show in my most recent book, *England's Jews*, Jews were protected by the Crown and granted the exclusive right to loan money with interest; they financed building projects, provided loans to students, and bought and rented out housing.<sup>16</sup> Jews and Christians shared meals and beer, celebrated at weddings, and sometimes even ended up in bed together. Church authorities feared the consequences of Jewish contact with Christians and tried to limit it, though to little avail. Royal protection proved to be a double-edged sword: when revolts broke out against the unpopular king Henry III, some of the rebels, in debt to Jewish creditors, killed Jews and destroyed loan records. Vicious rumors circulated that Jews secretly plotted against Christians and crucified Christian children. All of these factors led Edward I to expel the Jews from England in 1290. Paradoxically, thirteenth-century England was both the theatre of fruitful interreligious exchange and a crucible of European antisemitism.

In thinking about how to frame this paradoxical role of Jews in thirteenth-century Medieval England, I was struck with parallels with recent debates on the links between history, memory and identity in the United Kingdom, in its former empire, and beyond. Mainstream historical narratives have until recently tended to downplay the key role of empire in the politics, culture and economy of colonial powers like Britain or France, portraying slavery and colonization have as non-essential elements of national historical narratives. Paul Gilroy, in *The Black Atlantic* and other works, has insisted on the central role that slavery played in the making of modern European culture, a role often ignored or

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<sup>16</sup> John Victor Tolan, *England's Jews: finance, violence, and the Crown in the thirteenth century*, The Middle Ages series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023).

minimized in the narration of European achievements of an “age of discoveries” encompassing renaissance, reformation, and enlightenment.<sup>17</sup> The denizens of Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* are not only victims of slavery and racism; they also are actors in the economies and cultures of empire, through complex combinations of participation and resistance. They also played a key role in active opposition to slavery and in its eventual abolition, which was not merely the gift of enlightened (white) English legislators.

Analogously, Medieval England’s Jews should be remembered not only as victims of prejudice and violence, but as key actors in the construction of English society. The rich range of sources we have examined show Jews participating fully in English society: traveling across the country, helping finance Oxford colleges or monastic institutions, sending gifts to the king and his advisors, appearing in court to press charges against delinquent debtors, drinking beer with their Christian neighbors, inviting them to their weddings. Yet at the same time as they fully participate in English society, they do not do so as equals.

We as historians have a modest but important role to play in combating the historical lies that underlie them. We live in an age in which, in the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States and elsewhere, new forms of nationalist demagoguery, based on racist propaganda, rear their ugly heads. These ideologies rely on simplified, sanitized versions of national histories, in which important elements (such as England’s Jews or Europe’s Muslim heritage) are deliberately ignored, and the brutal crimes of the state and other actors (such as the violence against religious or ethnic groups) are consigned to the dust-bin of history.

But as important as it is to combat nationalist historical discourse by underlining the role played by those excluded from that discourse (slaves, religious or ethnic minorities), it is equally important to be wary of the discourse of those who claim to represent those disaffected groups. Hence the danger, underlined by both Judt and Maalouf, of a ghetto mentality in which each group nurtures its own historical narrative. These narratives are necessary and salutary to counter nationalistic historiography, but they also need to be subjected to sharp critical enquiry. We need to be wary of renewed tendencies in academia (in the US and increasingly in other parts of the world) to anachronistically project our own categories, such as “nation”, “civilization” or “race” onto the past. Over and against the simplistic narratives of those who proffer “murderous identities”, it is important that the critical voices of “edge people” be heard.

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).