

BOOK FORUM

Before Race, and After Race: A Response to the Forum on *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*

Geraldine Heng 

The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA
Email: heng@austin.utexas.edu

The aim of this book is to sketch paradigms and models for *thinking critically* about medieval race ... that call attention to tendencies and patterns, inventions, and strategies in race-making and identify crucibles and dynamics that conduce to the production of racial form and raced behavior.

Dorothy Kim's response to my 2018 book, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, opens with the quotation above, taken from the book itself. In requoting, I've emphasized the words *thinking critically* because most of the articles in this forum see that *Invention of Race* is scholarship that emerges out of the varied genealogical traditions of critical race theories, even as the book works to remain faithful to the premodern archives with which it transacts—so as to confront head-on, as Amrita Dhar puts it, the “charges of presentism and anachronism” that are invariably visited upon critical scholarship on premodernity.¹

Before *Invention of Race*, euromedievalist work on race largely produced *descriptive* or *taxonomic* scholarship (e.g., scholarship that asked who belonged to the “Germanic races” or “Celtic races”), or focused on scrutinizing Muslim, Jewish, or Black characters in literary texts—often, texts of recreational/fantasy literature. Accordingly, the objection raised by the historian William Chester Jordan to discussing race in the European medieval past, in a 2001 issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* on race and ethnicity, edited by Tom

¹ In premodern studies, feminist scholarship, scholarship on sexualities and genders, and critiques like Orientalism—among other critical scholarship aimed at transforming established paradigms—have also met with charges of presentism and anachronism when they first appeared. John Boswell's 1981 book is a salient example: *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

Hahn, was that most of the articles in that 2001 issue focused on *fiction*, not archival history.²

Invention of Race thus set itself the task of scrutinizing broader archives that included laws, state legislature, statuary, maps, missionary letters, diplomatic accounts, church canons, saints' lives, visual illustrations, architectural features, chronicles, travel records, religious commentary, and political, social, and economic institutions.

In the study of these archives, a question repeatedly arose: If the phenomena, institutions, practices, and behavior recorded in them were to recur again, in the modern era—today—would we be reluctant to call them *racial*? And, if the answer is no—if tagging people with badges, herding them by the force of law into specific towns to live, creating surveillance systems exclusively for them, enslaving them as a group, judging them as not really human and recommending their extinction, or damning them by their skin color, and more: If these would be considered racial practices today—why would we refuse to call them *racial*, just because they occurred in a nonmodern era?

Unlike earlier scholarship on premodern race, *Invention of Race* did *not* ask: Did premodern people in the Latin West/Christendom think of themselves as belonging to races, or as having a race, and did they see their behavior as racist? Nor: Did medieval people have words or concepts in their languages for “race” or “racism”? Instead, the book looked at *what happened*: the impacts, effects, and outcomes produced by laws, institutions, and behavior as these affected populations and peoples.

The book thus made the simple argument that racial practices, racial phenomena, racial law, racial thinking, and racial institutions could occur in premodernity, before there was a vocabulary to name them for what they were. This did not seem like a controversial argument. After all, a lag in vocabulary for naming is nothing new in human societies, and there were urgent aims for making the argument.

One aim was to prevent a whitewashing of the past, and the reproduction of an erasure that made the European Middle Ages appear more benign by destigmatizing its atrocities and actions—just because its modes of racialization, often, were driven by religion, and not the science or pseudoscience of modern eras. Another was to furnish analytical tools and a conceptual scaffolding for those who might also wish to undertake critical race analysis of premodern cultures, societies, and histories.

Yet another aim was to contribute to a longer critical history of race than had been available, by tracking the grammars, dialects, and varieties of racial formation and racisms through the deep past, and attending to continuities, differences, and transformations—and in doing so, augment and complexify existing critical race theories.

Has the book at least partially accomplished these aims?

Invention of Race has been honored with four book awards in the fields of history, religious studies, and multidisciplinary formations, but not in literature—no

² Thomas Hahn, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31.1 (2001).

doubt because it has not been viewed as a book devoted to literary criticism. It has sold thousands of copies and has been adopted into courses in race studies, art history, religious studies, political science, sociology, and, yes, literary studies.

It has also been reviewed more than a dozen times in journals ranging from the literary (e.g., *Critical Inquiry*, *TLS*, *Modern Philology*) and medieval (e.g., *Speculum*) to journals in art history (*Contemporaneity*), history (*English Historical Review*), communication and information studies (*H-Soz-Kult*), religious studies (*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*), and archeology (*Medieval Archaeology*), among others.

The contributions to this forum in fact represent well and articulate some of the most striking ways that *Invention of Race* has been received.

Seeta Chaganti's article—possibly the finest critical manifesto I've read by a scholar-activist on what medieval studies, and the academy and society at large, need at this juncture of the twenty-first century—generously attributes to my book conceptual foundations that model collaborative and coalitional work. Such foundations, Professor Chaganti optimistically hopes, might function in tandem with the coalitional solidarities she calls for in the struggle to transform the neoliberal corporate university, and globalized late capitalism and post-neocolonialism today.

Chaganti's article, too profoundly complex to treat with any adequacy here, signals the urgency of the moment by beginning with the University of Leicester's recent decision to excise medieval authors from its English curriculum as part of an attempt to decolonize the university's curricular offerings: a process that will render their medievalists in English obsolete and jobless.

While deploring Leicester's cooptation of left rhetoric and liberalish-multiculturalism, a question also arises: Might the Leicester medievalists have been spared their job loss if they had been teaching a *critical canon*—as many colleagues in early modern studies do—alongside a *counter-canon*—as some of us premodernists do, when we teach, say, anti-Islamophobia courses that deploy premodern and modern texts?

Amrita Dhar—the sole early modernist in this forum—demonstrates how Shakespeareans of color teach a critical Shakespeare that's no stranger to the kind of decolonial curriculum Leicester ostensibly seeks. To her fellow panelists at the 2021 Shakespeare Association of America conference, Professor Dhar posed a question: "What does a Dalit Shakespeare look like, or a Maori one, and how do these Shakespeares influence the 'mainstream' currency of Shakespeare in the UK-US axis?"³

Would the University of Leicester have fired their medievalists if they had taught Chaucer in the way that Amrita Dhar's question treats the teaching of Shakespeare?

Dorothy Kim's Chaucerian syllabus, which she outlined at the 2020 MLA annual conference, also seems to exemplify the kind of curriculum Leicester

³ Amrita Dhar, "Shakespeare in the 'Post'Colonies: What's Shakespeare to Them, or They to Shakespeare?" Panel Abstract, Annual Meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, 2 April 2021.

says it wants. Entitled “Toxic Chaucer,” Professor Kim’s syllabus confronts head-on the racism, Islamophobia, misogyny, anti-Semitism, coloniality, and classism visible in the Chaucerian corpus.⁴

My hope, thus, is that premodernists who have adopted *Invention of Race* for their courses may be attempting to teach a critical canon, and a counter-canon, to decolonize how European literature, history, culture, and art are taught in their institutions.

If so, the book’s unvarnished reading of Europe’s archives should help them retrieve a past that’s not sanitized or utopianized—whitewashed or nostalgically rendered—to support arguments against right-wing uses of the past today and enable classroom investigations of whether race-making strategies are novel, or have devolved, and transformed, across the ages.⁵ Such critical discussions should allow for the relations between past and present to be rethought and recalibrated with greater ethical and epistemological precision. From scholars like David Theo Goldberg and Philomena Essed, I understand this is how race studies theorists themselves use *Invention of Race* when they adopt it for teaching.

Most articles in this forum correctly see *Invention of Race* as emerging from, and intervening in, traditions of critical race theory (CRT) in the academy. Critical theories of race, of course, have complex and intertwining genealogies: in postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and globalization studies, as well as in Black studies, Atlantic studies, indigenous studies, and ethnic studies, to name a few. Those familiar with CRT see that the definitions and terms in *Invention of Race* issue out of a nearly three-quarter-century-old accumulation of critical scholarship on race.

The book understands race as “one of the primary names we have—a name we retain for the epistemological, ethical, and political commitments it recognizes—for a repeating tendency, of the gravest import, to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, so as to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups.”

That minimum working hypothesis enables race-making to be seen operating as historical occasions in which strategic essentialisms are posited and assigned through a variety of practices and pressures, so that a hierarchy of peoples might be constructed for differential treatment. For those familiar with CRT, it is unexceptionable to see race as a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences—a mechanism of sorting, for purposes of prioritizing and hierarchizing—rather than a substantive content.

⁴ Dorothy Kim, “Toxic Chaucer,” a conference paper presented in “Race and Periodization,” a panel jointly organized by the Chaucer and Shakespeare divisions of the Modern Language Association, Annual Meeting of the MLA, Seattle, Washington, 10 January 2020.

⁵ On right-wing extremist use, in the United States, of the symbols, institutions, and histories of the European medieval past, see Dorothy Kim, “White Supremacists Have Weaponized an Imaginary Viking Past. It’s Time to Reclaim the Real History,” *Time* April 14, 2019 (<https://time.com/5569399/viking-history-white-nationalists/>), and Sierra Lomuto, “Public Medievalism and the Rigor of Anti-Racist Critique” (blog post), *In the Middle*, 4 April 4, 2019 (<http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2019/04/public-medievalism-and-rigor-of-anti.html>).

Such a view allows for a recognition of how *both* a somatic, physiological base (“biology”) and a social, cultural, or religious superstructure can be conscripted for purposes of race-making in the medieval period and beyond. Differences that are selected for essentialism will vary in the *longue durée* of human history from the premodern eras to the twenty-first century—perhaps battering on bodies, physiognomy, and somatic features in one instance; perhaps on social practices, religion, or culture in another; and perhaps a multiplicity of interlocking discourses elsewhere.

A biological base, and a social, cultural, or religious superstructure, can each separately, and with relative autonomy, conduce to the performance of racialization and racisms or can be articulated in a variety of ways in the performance of racialization and racisms. The archives of premodern Europe show evidence of a both/and as well as an either/or in the ways that “base” (biology) and “superstructure” (religion, culture, the social) function in racial formation and in the enacting of racisms.

I am particularly grateful that Jonathan Boyarin sees this transhistorical minimum hypothesis of race as an advantage because it helps “to blur that periodization which set the ‘Middle Ages’ securely in a superseded past and thereby reinforced the tenuous legitimacy of the modern age.”⁶

But these kinds of formulations can be a sticking point for premodernists unfamiliar with critical race theories, who assume that race *must* be a matter of biology, physiognomy, DNA, somatic difference, lineage, and inheritance alone. This is to say, the medieval period’s *lag in naming*—when racial phenomena existed, but not the vocabulary for them—is paralleled by a contemporary *lag in conceptualization* among academics who today still require biology and the body to remain the sole ground of reference and definition in matters of race.

But *why* should such a conceptual lag dog premodernists in 2021? Amrita Dhar suggests that a calculated withdrawal may be the answer in the face of contemporary urgencies. The rejection of race, she says, allows scholars to “keep safe the ‘alterity of the past,’” and “choose to *not* have the past matter consequentially for the political present. It is safer and easier that way.... Scholars who see the past as firmly in the past may choose to do their academic work as a kind of shelter from the mess of the present.”

Not Engaging with the “Mess of the Present”: or, Dismissing Critical Scholarship on Race

Cord Whitaker, who like Professor Dhar does not shy away from “the mess of the present” in his own work, focuses not on the *why* but on the *how*, when he looks at strategies deployed to block critical work on race. Revisiting the historical

⁶ Professor Boyarin rightly places the term “Middle Ages” within quotes: this traditional naming of an interregnum between two glorified ages of empire and authority—Greco-Roman antiquity and its so-called renaissance—along with its received chronology (500–1500 CE) is highly problematic; I’ve critiqued both the naming, and the chronology, in past and forthcoming publications.

reaction to Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*—a book that jumpstarted new scholarship on race in antiquity even as it was denounced by some classicists—Professor Whitaker analyses parallel strategies at work in a forty-six-page book review of *Invention of Race* written by a premodernist scholar of Iberia, S. J. Pearce.⁷

When it appeared in fall 2020, Professor Pearce's was the longest book review I'd read in my life. Dubbed a "review essay," it was also the only "review essay" I'd ever read that reviewed only *one* book—and, not just that, but zeroed in on *one chapter* of that one book: a 504-page book with seven chapters and an introduction. The chapter was so awful, Pearce proclaimed, the whole book had to be canceled; the book couldn't be improved, or revised, or have a second edition. It needed to go away.

I've responded to this lengthy screed and its politics elsewhere and need not revisit the arguments in detail here (see "Why the Hate?" and "On Not Reading").⁸

But Cord Whitaker takes Pearce's review to task with some *new* arguments. Pearce—someone who had never published on race before, but nonetheless posed as an expert arbiter on matters of race—uses terminology originating in *Invention of Race* without acknowledging or crediting the book, Whitaker points out, as if the terminology were the reviewer's own, and original to her, or commonplace in medieval studies, rather than taken from the book.

A lack of knowledge about critical scholarship on race—or just critical scholarship in general—also has other pitfalls, Whitaker shows, when Pearce confuses the work of two very different, and very prominent scholars, the medievalists Kathy Biddick and Kathleen Davis. By contrast, Jonathan Boyarin's article in this forum does *not* commit the same error: though a scholar of the modern era, not the medieval era, Professor Boyarin is clearly familiar with critical scholarship on the European Middle Ages.

In addition to the reviewer's bad-faith appropriation of knowledge, gained from having read *Invention of Race* (an appropriation that performs the erasure of the book for which the reviewer calls), Professor Whitaker's incisive article also points to the reviewer's inability to grasp distinctions between "hermeneutic" and "physiognomic" Blackness discussed in *Invention of Race*, and a concomitant inability to read for *tone of voice*, when the caustic savagery in the book's mimicry of the phrase "in the fullness of time" goes undetected by the reviewer, who assumes the phrase to signify *Invention of Race*'s active endorsement of the medieval church's apocalyptic anti-Semitism.

Perhaps it is the "anxiety to preserve medieval studies' racial innocence" that precipitates all these errors, Whitaker muses, an anxiety that gives itself away through such errors. This is where Cord Whitaker's and Amrita Dhar's views

⁷ S. J. Pearce, "The Inquisitor and the Moseret: *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* and the New English Colonialism in Jewish Historiography," *Medieval Encounters* 26 (2020): 145–90.

⁸ Geraldine Heng, "Why the Hate? *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, and Race, Racism, and Premodern Critical Race Studies Today," *In the Middle*, December 21, 2020 (<https://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2020/12/why-hate-invention-of-race-in-european.html?m=0>); Geraldine Heng, "On Not Reading, Writing, or Listening to Poetry in a Pandemic: A Critical Reflection," *PMLA* 136.2 (2021): 290–96.

converge: in their detection of a desire, on the part of some, for the old ways when the archive could be left alone and enjoyed as a form of refuge, before the interventions of critical race scholarship.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that several articles in this forum touch on the same chapter in *Invention of Race* that is the obsessive focus of Pearce's review—chapter 2. Though the book “reaches across North America, Scandinavia, India, China, and Africa” and “encompasses familiar and neglected peoples ... Mongols, Paleo-Eskimos, Icelanders and Romani ... Jews, Saracens [Muslims] and Ethiopians” (Turner), chapter 2 seems to function like a Rorschach blot of a reader's political subscriptions and touches some raw nerves.⁹

Entitled “A Case Study of the Racial State: Jews as Internal Minority in England,” chapter 2 amasses layers of archival detail to show how England's obsessive preoccupation with its minority population of Jews over time conduced to the creation of the first racial state in the history of the West.

The chapter's thick description of bureaucratic, juridical, and regulatory modes of governmentality, in concert with and underwritten by ecclesiastical authority, details a panopticonic state system that intersected at the principal powers of governmentality—collection, administration, surveillance, and enforcement—the operations of which comprehensively interlocked to produce a premodern version of the racial state.¹⁰

Seeta Chaganti, who sees similar processes of governmentality and racial governance operating in US society today, finds the chapter useful for its descriptions of state apparatuses and surveillance technologies that enact violence on minority peoples, both in medieval England and in Black communities today.

Jonathan Boyarin, an anthropologist and scholar of modern Jewish studies with a transnational and transhistorical focus on the Jewish diaspora, also sees the chapter as bridging the gap between the technologies of the medieval past and those of today: in his assessment, chapter 2 is “an important intervention in a broader conversation about the relations between Christianity, Jewishness, and the rhetorics and techniques of the modern nation-state.”

Dorothy Kim sees the racial state propounded in chapter 2 as fulfilling what Jonathan Freedman, a modern Jewish studies scholar, recommends as important to accomplish in scholarship on premodern Jews, and quotes Freedman lauding premodernists who “pay attention to the formation of the Christian-state complex.” “This is exactly what Heng does,” Professor Kim concludes.

Kim also situates chapter 2's theorization of a premodern racial state under the rubric of *critical whiteness studies*, a subset of Black and Black feminist critical race theory.¹¹ Refusing to name Pearce by name (and thus demonstrating for us a

⁹ Victoria Turner, “*The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, by Geraldine Heng,” *The English Historical Review*, March 12, 2021 (<https://academic-oup-com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/ehr/advance-article/doi/10.1093/ehr/ceab035/6168526>).

¹⁰ On the modern racial state, see David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002).

¹¹ Chapter 2 owes much to a long-ago graduate school background in Foucault, Althusser, Spivak, Said, Stuart Hall, Gramsci, Birmingham cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and feminist

practice of refusal initiated by communities of color that will not center “white fragility or white defensiveness”), Professor Kim alludes only to “certain reviews” critiquing the book “for things [Heng] has stated explicitly that she is not doing.”

Instead, Kim’s article points to the unnamed reviewer’s lack of knowledge of England’s archive (Pearce is a scholar of Iberia) since Pearce’s review condemns chapter 2 for critiquing England through English state and church laws, state records and documents, and state institutions that are marshaled against Jews. According to Pearce, using state and church archives to critique England means that chapter 2 actually identifies with the viewpoint of the English state and church, making me an “inquisitor” (145ff) and a “magpie” (177), and making *Invention of Race* a “neo-colonial” and “neo-Orientalist” book (182).

I’ve pointed out before that English state and church archives are, in fact, what generations of scholars on Anglo-Jewry have analyzed, without attracting condemnation, because that’s the archive available—England simply doesn’t have the rich plethora of Jewish texts that Pearce’s region, Iberia, has—but Kim’s article details the reasons for the paucity of the archive and the impossible problem it poses for scholars trying to retrieve the responses of English Jews to their treatment by the state.

Admittedly, chapter 2’s attempts at treating what is not there do not feel satisfactory to me. Following the example of scholarly predecessors, chapter 2 reads resistance and defiance on the part of England’s Jewish population in the *traces* lodged within the archival record: for example, in the documents of fines levied on Jews for noncompliance and refusals to wear the Jewish badge or records of imprisonment for defying and resisting England’s laws. This is a limited way of listening for the unsaid.¹²

But how else might we fill the vast and gaping voids of an archive, Dorothy Kim asks? “Instead of accusing Heng of erasing Jewish voices that the archive’s material exigencies had already effectively erased,” she retorts, “a more generative discussion would have been to question how to methodologically address the medieval English archive through collaboration and collaborative work.” Kim suggests that a productive answer might be found in the example of

psychoanalytic theory, so any convergence of theoretical coordinates with critical whiteness studies is a gift rather than planned.

¹² Another example is in Suzanne Bartlet’s *Licoricia of Winchester: Marriage, Motherhood and Murder in the Medieval Anglo-Jewish Community*. Using state and church archives because “Almost all that we know derives from sources produced by non-Jews, and much of what we know comes specifically from the judicial and fiscal records generated by England’s precociously bureaucratized government,” the author and editor of this book piece together fragments of Licoricia’s life from such state records as her deeds of debt and documents of financial transactions compiled through state surveillance; fines imposed on Licoricia and her family members; records of their imprisonment by the state (5), and so forth, while acknowledging the impossibility of sketching more than the merest outline of Licoricia’s life in this way because “Ultimately, the voices we hear of Jews in medieval England are filtered through non-Jewish, and sometimes overtly hostile, sources” (10). See Suzanne Bartlet (with Patricia Skinner), *Licoricia of Winchester: Marriage, Motherhood and Murder in the Medieval Anglo-Jewish Community* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2009).

transatlantic Black studies of slavery and Holocaust studies embedded within a global, comparative view of genocide instituted by European imperialism.

Citing Saidiya Hartman's theoretical method of "critical fabulation" that strains against "the limits of the archive" and "enacting the impossibility of representing ... precisely through the process of narration," Kim boldly speculates that future work by premodernist scholars might *extrapolate and imaginatively supply* what is not there in modes of collaborative scholarship that can be persuasive and satisfying to "imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done" (citing Hartman 12).

This represents the most far-reaching and imaginative response at present in medieval studies on how to deal with an absent archive. It remains to be seen if medievalist scholars of Anglo-Jewry show the same courage and boldness as scholars in African American studies when looking into the face of an archival void.

Hartman's theoretical method, and Kim's follow-through, may also raise the prospect of a question for Jonathan Boyarin, who cites Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and Jacques Derrida on the archive: What would either think of such imaginative responses to an archive that doesn't quite exist?

But Dorothy Kim's article is at its most impressive when she takes on the task of unpacking the history of Jewish studies in answer to Pearce's view that scholarship on premodern Jews and race is best performed by those who, like Pearce, are situated in Jewish/Judaic studies and not by outsiders.

Professor Kim reminds us that historically, area studies in universities were established during the Cold War, when the CIA and State Department needed information about the rest of the world and supported or sponsored academic programs, journals, and societies in order to collect specialized information and exercise muscular influence in systems of knowledge-power. By contrast, ethnic studies in the academy arose out of the ferment of the civil rights movement, and through antiracist coalitions in universities and beyond, and had always centered critical race theories as its core programmatic work.

Kim observes that Jewish/Judaic studies has not aligned itself with ethnic studies, and some of its practitioners appear to favor the area studies model. And, given that Jewish studies lacks a history of centering critical race work, still lacks diversity, and is still struggling to articulate antiracist positions, she suggests that this academic formation is in fact in a poor position to do the work of premodern critical race scholarship that Pearce professes Jewish studies (and not outsiders) should perform.

Finally, Kim considers *Jewish scholars of color* familiar with critical race theories and committed to centering CRT to be best positioned to conduct premodernist work on race.

Kim's extraordinary article thus demonstrates what can be accomplished when a scholar has thought long and deeply about archival limitations, institutional histories, and racial politics, and how to recommend generative rather than destructive outcomes.

I should conclude this section of the forum by briefly addressing the views of the sole Middle Easternist, Justin Stearns, who finds *Invention of Race*

“unconvincing,” “stale and unproductive.” Sadly, contradictory strains in Professor Stearns’s article, which seems *both* to want to reject premodern race, yet also want to keep it in some way—so long as it’s Iberianists and Middle Easternists talking about race—makes the article hard to treat without length (but I will try).

Oddly, Professor Stearns reads *Invention of Race* as a book I do not recognize: a book that’s about the “High Middle Ages,” rather than one that treats the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries; rooted in “Northwest Europe,” rather than following the Romani into southeastern Europe, Franciscans into Mongol Eurasia and China, pilgrim-militias into the Middle East and Africa, and Greenlanders and Icelanders into North America; and that deals largely with “English and French literary sources” rather than one that incorporates archeological evidence, architectural display, illustrations, statuary, maps, laws, religious treatises, letters, chronicles, and, when it reads literary sources, reads those originally in Old Norse, Latin, Middle High German, and Middle Dutch, in addition to “English and French.”

In the same vein, it’s bewildering that Stearns finds only a singular, homogenous “Europe” in *Invention of Race*, a book that points to “Latin Christendom,” “the Latin West,” the Greek Orthodox east and north, and regions practicing alternative Christianities, or no Christianity, in treating the diversity of what euromedieval studies heuristically, and for convenience, calls *Europe*. If Professor Stearns attributes a very basic naivete to me, in how to understand the “Europe” in euromedieval studies, I must assume that some kind of reading miscognition has taken place out of unfamiliarity with how we in euromedieval studies discuss “Europe”/Christendom/the Latin West, in our research and teaching.

But, plainly, Professor Stearns’s rejection of the use of race as an analytic category for premodernity because of “what is lost when we blithely use the term race in all its modern biological fullness to describe premodern demarcations of cultural and genealogical difference” identifies him as belonging to the company of premodernists I’ve previously described: those who see race as a solely biological phenomenon that falls outside the realms of culture, religion, and the social.¹³

Instead, Stearns professes admiration for S. J. Pearce’s book review, which, in an earlier version of his article, he praises as “nuanced and sophisticated,” and, in this version, as exhibiting a “particular poignance.”¹⁴ He recommends a 2009 essay on fifteenth-century Iberia by David Nirenberg (in which Nirenberg changes course from his earlier arguments on race) as the antidote to *Invention*

¹³ Interestingly, though he rejects *Invention of Race*’s analysis of race-making and racialization as presentist, Stearns advocates for “racecraft”—which he acknowledges is also presentist—in order to have an alternative to my scholarship. By contrast, my concluding section following this one lists Middle Easternists, Africanists, and Asianists—typically scholars of color—who do not shy away from CRT, and charges of presentism, in their developing work on premodern race.

¹⁴ By contrast, a book review by a scholar of color calls Pearce’s effort “a failed assassination attempt” on *Invention of Race*. See Yonatan Binyam, “England and the Jews: How Religion and Violence Created the First Racial State in the West,” *Reading Religion*, June 21, 2021 (<https://readingreligion.org/books/england-and-jews>).

of *Race*. In ending this section, I hope Professor Nirenberg will forgive my disclosing correspondence from him in which he emphatically distances himself from S. J. Pearce's opinions, and wistfully concludes, on the publication of *Invention of Race*, "many of us might wish" they had written "that big book on race."

Professor Stearns is wholly entitled to his views, of course. I'm aware the ideas and arguments in *Invention of Race* are not for everyone; and resistance to shifting old paradigms, Cord Whitaker reminds us, has a long life in the academy. Some will doubtless continue to prefer noncritical, descriptive, and taxonomic scholarship on premodern race. But I am deeply grateful that Stearns's article spares me invective and name-calling—a professional courtesy I very much appreciate, after reading the longest book review I've ever read in my life.

The Future of the Past: New Scholarship on Race, Premodernity, and Early Globalisms

The articles in this forum that advocate so brilliantly for critical race scholarship on premodernity are vindicated by the emergence, today, of a tipping point: Articles, lectures, workshops, colloquia, symposia, conferences, special issues of journals, and anthologies on medieval race have become common since 2018 and are too numerous to list; six monographs on race and racisms in medieval Europe have appeared over just five years.

This nexus of books—by Lynn Ramey (*Black Legacies: Race and the European Middle Ages*), Matthew Vernon (*The Black Middle Ages: Race and the Construction of the Middle Ages*), Cord Whitaker (*Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race Thinking*), Lindsay Kaplan (*Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity*), and Roland Betancourt (*Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages*), along with *Invention of Race*—means that a real review essay on the landscape of critical medieval race studies can, in fact, readily be written today.¹⁵

More work is in the pipeline at the University of Pennsylvania Press's new series, *RaceB4Race: Critical Studies of the Premodern*, edited by Ayanna Thompson and me: monographs, anthologies, sourcebooks, and translations on race from antiquity to the eighteenth century.

As importantly, with the help of critical conceptualists and race theorists like Cedric Robinson (*Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*), Willie James Jennings (*The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*), and Terence Keel (*Divine Variations: How Christian Thought Became Racial Science*),

¹⁵ Lynn T. Ramey, *Black Legacies: Race and the European Middle Ages* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2016); Matthew X. Vernon, *The Black Middle Ages: Race and the Construction of the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018); Cord Whitaker, *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race Thinking* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); M. Lindsay Kaplan, *Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Roland Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

premodernists are accruing additional ways to bridge the racial politics of the past and the present.¹⁶

With Jennings's and Keel's emphasis on the role played by Christianity and Christian theology, perhaps the stranglehold exercised by an old axiom—that only *science* (the dominant discourse of modern eras), and not *religion* (the dominant discourse of the European Middle Ages), can conduce to race-making and racialization—is finally falling away.

One of the limitations of *Invention of Race*—so obvious from the book's title—is that the book does not treat race and racialization that falls outside the European Middle Ages. The book follows the presence, activity, and gaze of the medieval subject from the Latin West around the world, but questions of race and racialization in China, Africa, India, the Americas, the Middle East, and elsewhere that center on non-European subjects and subjectivities requires scholarship by other premodernists.

Such scholarship exists, and more is emerging. Don Wyatt, the author of *The Blacks of Premodern China*, is completing a Cambridge Element on slavery and race in East Asia in a new Cambridge Elements series on the Global Middle Ages. Shao-yun Yang, the author of *The Way of the Barbarians: Redrawing Ethnic Boundaries in Tang and Song China*, is amassing an annotated critical sourcebook on race and ethnicity in premodern China for Pennsylvania's RaceB4Race series.¹⁷

A chapter in Bruce Hall's 2011 book, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1960*, treats the racializing of Black Saharan Africans in thirteenth-century West Africa by Arabic- and Amazigh-speaking groups who used Islamic sources and histories.¹⁸

Michael Gomez, the author of *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa*, in a 2020 keynote lecture inaugurated new thinking and arguments on the racialization of Black Saharans and Saharan slavery, in a multilayered discussion of how Arab and Persian sources from the tenth to the seventeenth centuries racialized Black Africans and slavery in West Africa by invoking the Hamitic curse, as well as deploying climate and zonal theories, among other strategies.¹⁹ In the same lecture series—Race in the Archives—Rachel Schine, a postdoctoral fellow, offers her own work-in-progress on

¹⁶ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1983, 2000, 2021); Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Terence Keel, *Divine Variations: How Christian Thought Became Racial Science* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

¹⁷ Don Wyatt, *The Blacks of Premodern China* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Shao-yun Yang, *The Way of the Barbarians: Redrawing Ethnic Boundaries in Tang and Song China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019).

¹⁸ Bruce S. Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁹ Michael A. Gomez, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

Blackness and race in popular premodern Arabic literature as she prepares a monograph.²⁰

This new work on race in the premodern Middle East is cognizant of critical race theory and applies analytic tools and critical apparatuses absent from older scholarship such as the well-known work of the Princeton Orientalist Bernard Lewis (*Race and Color in Islam* and *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*).²¹

Graduate students—always on the cutting edge of new work—are writing dissertations on premodern race not only in the West but also in other regions of the world. Needless to say, what race looks like in those other regions is important for understanding the relation of their historical past to their contemporary present and also for understanding how the regions themselves view the world, sociopolitically, in international relations today.

I'll end my response to this forum on *Invention of Race* by addressing what may appear to lie beyond the topic of race, yet remains intimately intertwined with race. In his article, Cord Whitaker reports being repeatedly asked where Black people were in premodernity: "The perception that Black people have no history—or at least no history from before chattel slavery in the Americas—is common in the western world. It has prompted otherwise well-educated professionals to ask me, incredulously, 'Where were the Black people in the Middle Ages?'"

That the seemingly "well educated" can ask such a question is enraging, deeply troubling, offensive, and wholly unacceptable.

Professor Susan Noakes of the University of Minnesota and I are the coeditors of a new Cambridge Elements series on the Global Middle Ages.²² Initially a five-year, forty-title series of born-digital studies on the premodern globe focusing critically on the histories, geographies, cultures, societies, natural and built environments, economies, technologies, peoples, and arts of many zones across a long timeline, this series launched in November 2021 and has an indefinitely extensible remit. Don Wyatt and Shao-yun Yang—alongside archeologists, art historians, literary scholars, religious studies scholars, digital media specialists, as well as other historians—are among our collaborators in an international consortium of scholars authoring the series.

With one lacuna now closing—the old lacuna of critical scholarship on premodern race—another needs urgent attention over the next years: so as to end the segregated silos of academic disciplines that prevent the "otherwise well educated" from decolonizing their own education and their self-understanding; to end Eurocentrism and Western-centrism in academic curricula; and to

²⁰ All the lectures in the "Race in the Archives" series organized by Ali Yaycioglu, the former director of the Center for Medieval and Early Modern Studies at Stanford—including Gomez's keynote plenary—can be found at <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1V8ThGLPMJ-nFSZNwE7ckkurRp3CTV4tr>.

²¹ Bernard Lewis, *Race and Color in Islam* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

²² The *Global Middle Ages*, a term-cum-concept I coined in 2003, and now broadly embraced in medieval studies, is even more problematic than the *Middle Ages*, but has nonetheless been widely adopted for use in the lexicon of academic medieval studies. My Cambridge Element, *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction*, and the introduction in a Modern Language Association (MLA) volume, *Teaching the Global Middle Ages* (in press), offer the fullest autocritique of the term and suggest how to treat the term if we must continue to use it.

recognize the complexity and diversity of the world's multifarious peoples, societies, and civilizations and their critical interrelations across macrohistorical time.

Contributors to this forum on *Invention of Race* have called for collaborative work: to transform the academy and to add to a thickened vista of critical race scholarship of the premodern past. Soon, that collaborative work, alongside collaborative work on the Global Middle Ages in early critical global studies, will make it impossible for anyone to ask, so, where *were* the Black people in the Middle Ages?

Author biography. Geraldine Heng is Perceval Professor of English and Comparative Literature, and an affiliate of Middle Eastern Studies, Women's Studies, and Jewish Studies at the University of Texas, Austin. She is the author of *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (Columbia University Press, 2003), *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), and *England and the Jews: How Religion and Violence Created the First Racial State in the West* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), books that have received five awards, and *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, November 2021). The editor of *Teaching the Global Middle Ages* (MLA, 2022), Heng is currently completing *Teaching Early Global Literatures* and writing a new book, *Early Globalisms: The Interconnected World, 500–1500 CE*. Originally from Singapore, Heng is a Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America, Founder and Director of the Global Middle Ages Project (G-MAP: www.globalmiddleages.org), and coeditor of the Cambridge University Press Elements series in the Global Middle Ages, and the University of Pennsylvania Press series, *RaceB4Race: Critical Studies of the Premodern*. (Email: heng@austin.utexas.edu)

Cite this article: Heng, Geraldine. 2022. "Before Race, and After Race: A Response to the Forum on *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 9, 159–172. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2021.35>