

**Zeitschrift:** Traverse : Zeitschrift für Geschichte = Revue d'histoire

**Herausgeber:** [s.n.]

**Band:** 29 (2022)

**Heft:** 2: Vormoderne postkolonial? = Moyen Âge postcolonial?

**Artikel:** Interview with Geraldine Heng

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1005944>

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## Interview with Geraldine Heng

**Isabelle Schürch**

I. S.: *The editors of this issue of *traverse* are interested in what historians of pre-modern history can learn from postcolonial approaches, studies, and criticism. How has your own thinking, writing, and presenting been shaped by postcolonial thinkers and texts?*

G. H.: I was fortunate to have been a medievalist graduate student at a time when postcolonial thinkers and other theorists were inaugurating their best-known work. My cultural and intellectual background and personality predispose me to wear learning lightly: so, I never say, e. g., “now I’m going to apply the theory or methods of so-and-so.” Instead, I spend time absorbing and figuring out theoretical paradigms and arguments, while simultaneously asking if they help me better understand the conundrums, problems, and issues of the medieval period. Assuming that they offer fresh perspectives and bring new ways to understand medieval culture, history, and literature, I then write through a theorized understanding that has been distilled from a period of absorbing and understanding theory. So I don’t “apply” a theory or a method as such. And theory is never an end in itself; it is always (to paraphrase and adapt Stuart Hall), a corridor on the way to something else more important.<sup>1</sup>

I aim for an intersubjective relationship with the artefacts of the past: rather than explicitly imposing a method (which makes charges of presentism and anachronism easy, when, say, someone resists the idea of medieval race), I respond to what the artefact itself does or says. That artefact may be a statue of a millennium-old saint that is suddenly depicted as a Black Saharan African. Or it may be a passage in a saga that says two native boys were kidnapped by Greenlanders and Icelanders, brought back to Scandinavia, and forcibly Christianized. Or it may be a map where the human monsters are placed in south Africa and northwest Asia. Artefacts like this belabor you with questions: Why? What does it mean? What does it want to do? And why does it matter? So, you develop a provisional hypothesis, ask yourself what the consequences of the hypothesis are, then go back to see if the artefact will support it, or if your hypothesis must be thrown out, or substantially reformulated. A dialectical process of sense-making, and mean-

ing-making like this, in which the artefact speaks its particulars and the scholar responds, going back and forth, in an ongoing conversation, is something that a theoretical training teaches and requires.

If you're familiar with my work, it's obvious I'm influenced by a variety of scholars, not just in postcolonial studies, but also in cultural studies, critical race theories, feminism, left materialist theory, and what used to be called "high" theory: Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and other Subaltern studies scholars, Stuart Hall, Fredric Jameson, Antonio Gramsci, Frantz Fanon, Étienne Balibar, Immanuel Wallerstein, Homi Bhabha, David Theo Goldberg, Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and more, in no particular order; not to mention Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, the French feminists, and other scions of psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theory. When I started publishing as a graduate student and an assistant professor, I was much more enamored with the language of theory than I am today. Today, I want to reach the broadest possible audience, while retaining the complex understanding that critical theory affords. If theoretical language makes it difficult for readers to follow an argument, today I eschew such language in favor of clarity, as far as possible.

What can historians of premodern history learn from theory? All the theorists I mention above are very good at the analysis of power, inequality, empires, colonization, race, states, nations, politics, gender, sexuality, globalism. There is much that can be learnt from them, including the understanding that one is never working from a neutral, politics-free, non-theoretical position – working from a vacuum. Even if you're unaware of your own self-positioning, your politics, and values, the kinds of theory to which you implicitly subscribe (are you implicitly liberal? conservative? progressive? politically confused or undecided?) will all be visible in the stances you take in your writing and teaching.

*I. S.: You are a medievalist working on race. Although several historians have used "race" as a category to think about human difference, discrimination, and persecution in European premodern societies (e. g. Peter Biller, Steven Epstein, or David Nirenberg), the narrative of race as a distinctly "modern" phenomenon still prevails. Sometimes there seems to be a strange competition about the "origin" or "invention" of race and racism in European history. How do you approach this juxtaposition of modern and premodern ideas of race and racism?*

*G. H.: My thinking about premodern race developed out of decades-long conversations with friends who are race theorists, like David Theo Goldberg, as well as efforts to make sense of what I was seeing in a variety of medieval archives. You'll notice that I never talk about the "origin" of race. An "origin" is the com-*

ing-into-being of something that has never existed before, that has never been seen, that never occurred before. Instead, I talk about “inventions” and “reinventions” – what happens when fields of force in society or culture coalesce in a new pattern, in new ways, at a particular historical juncture. This is a way of thinking that’s informed by theory, and especially by Foucault. Seeing like this, there is no competition about when the “origin” of race occurred. My work is not about origins.

Also, while there may be continuities, analogues, or homologies between racial formations, racial form, racial institutions, and racial practices from one period to another, there are also *discontinuities*, transformations, and change. Foucault speaks of epistemic transformations, changes that occur between epistemes. Even if you’re following the transformational grammar of race across eras, it’s important to honor differences in the *expressivity* and *phenomenality* of race and racialization in different eras: so, race in classical antiquity is going to have its own specificities and modes; medieval race is going to look different from race in antiquity, even if the medieval period inherits humoral and climate theories from antiquity, or Galenic notions, or the idea of the Plinian or monstrous races; and early modern race, too, will have its own particularities, and so on, through the colonial and high modern periods of race, to today, an era of globalization, financialization, and late capitalism.

But one difference between how I see race, and how some other medievalists see race, is that my perspectives come out of a background in critical race theory (CRT). CRT has a number of genealogies, and is now two-thirds of a century old, but, until recently, its practitioners were predominantly modernists. In the US, CRT has emerged out of legal studies, Black studies, the social sciences, Black feminist traditions, and Atlantic studies. It has also emerged out of cultural studies, postcolonial studies, globalization studies, and Marxism, both elsewhere and in the Americas. All these fields of scholarship have been shaped by the modernists who inhabit them, so the assumption that race is a modern phenomenon is utterly unsurprising. However, premodernists who understand CRT (obviously, I’m not talking about those who are still working with a 19th century or early 20th century understanding of what race is) will soon change the academy’s understanding of how long the history of race is, and what the terrain of race is like in different eras and centuries.

I. S.: Your book is about race-making in the European Middle Ages. You suggest the following working hypothesis: “‘Race’ is one of the primary names we have – a name we retain for the strategic, epistemological, and political commitments it recognizes – that is attached to a repeating tendency, of the gravest import, to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are

*selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups. Race-making thus operates as specific historical occasions in which strategic essentialisms are posited and assigned through a variety of practices and pressures, so as to construct a hierarchy of peoples for differential treatment. My understanding, thus, is that race is a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content.”<sup>2</sup> How do you apply this broad definition of race as a structural (power) relationship building on essentialized human differences to specific European medieval contexts? And to what extent does the “reinvention of race” necessarily entail a Eurocentric perspective?*

G. H.: The chapters in *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* take readers through several examples of relationships of power that are based on posited, essentialized, human differences – whether it's Christians in the Latin West claiming that Jews possess biological essences like a certain Jewish smell or Jewish men suffering from a bloody flow, or Jews being predisposed by nature (as the medieval English chronicler Matthew Paris says) to coinage thievery; or the claim that Muslims are not really human beings, but just fleshly embodiments of evil incarnate (as Bernard of Clairvaux says in *De Laude Novae Militiae*); or Greenlanders and Icelanders who see the indigenous peoples of Vinland/ North America as essentially Stone Age savages. There are many other examples: e. g., Black Saharan Africans (“Ethiopians”) being viewed as populations of sinners (by St Jerome) because of their color essence; the Romani (“Gypsies”) of southeastern Europe being viewed as innately a slave race, after they've been enslaved for generations, and so on.

If you look at our world today, you see inventions and reinventions of race and racisms across the globe, well beyond a European or western perspective. It would be surprising if the premodern past did not also witness racisms and racializations across the globe. But what the nonmodern invention and reinvention of race and racisms would look like outside the West will need to be addressed by other scholars – Sinologists, Indologists, Africanists, etc. For instance, Don Wyatt's *The Blacks of Premodern China* and Shao-yun Yang's *The Way of the Barbarians* are among the efforts by Sinologists to address what inventions and reinventions of essentialized differences might look like in premodern China.<sup>3</sup> There's also older scholarship – e. g. by the Orientalist Bernard Lewis – on race as conceptualized in Islamicate societies,<sup>4</sup> as well as new work today on how premodern Arab and Persian authors viewed race. The distinguished Africanist and African Americanist Michael Gomez delivered a magisterial keynote lecture in a 2020/21 Stanford lecture series, *Race in the Archives*, on how Arab and Persian authors from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries racialized Black Saharan Africans and

Saharan slavery in West Africa, by deploying the Hamitic Curse as a resource, alongside climate and humoral theories.

As the co-editor of the University of Pennsylvania Press series *RaceB4Race. Critical Studies of the Premodern* I am especially interested in scholarship on premodern race in non-western parts of the world – whether that scholarship takes the form of monographs, anthologies, sourcebooks, or translations. In fact, Shao-yun Yang is currently compiling an annotated sourcebook on race and ethnicity in premodern China for this Penn series. In discussing what processes of racialization might look like for China, Yang is investigating Chinese *supremacism* in the treatment of and response to “barbarians.” In South Asia, caste and religious communalism may well be pertinent for understanding race: Indologists will no doubt guide us on how to think about race there.

I. S.: *In your work, you open up a wide range of historical instances of “re-inventions” of race: Islamic “Saracens” as race figures in international contests of empire-building, depictions of blackness (and whiteness), heretics as a “virtual race,” the so-called “monstrous people” as the ultimate “Other,” or “Gypsies” as a slave race. However, most critics of your work have commented on your case study of medieval England as a “racial state.” You argue that the history of English state-building can be better understood if we understand its entangled relationship with the Jews as an internal minority group, culminating in King Edward I’s Edict of Expulsion of 1290, when all Jews were expelled from the island. Most criticism is aimed at your structural argument, the “racing” of Jewish religious communities. There are concerns that the focus on race interferes with (historical) anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, so that – in the worst case – anti-Semitism as a problem threatens to disappear behind racism. How do you integrate the concerns of researchers and research traditions of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism into your framework of historical race-making?*

G. H.: I think the different ways to name the atrocities, hate, persecutions, legal murders, pogroms, surveillance, and state and church laws targeting Jews in medieval England all constitute ethical attempts to account for varied dimensions of horror in the treatment of Jews in medieval England. Whether we evoke conceptual categories like racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Judaism, or something else, we are trying to find terms that do not *minimize* how Jews were treated, whatever our preferred categories of analysis may be. What we are *not* saying is that the treatment of Jews was merely a form of “premodern prejudice,” “alterity,” or “difference” – which are more benign-sounding terms that destigmatize the horrors faced by medieval English Jewry.

I rather think the criticism of chapter 2 you mention tends to emerge from medievalists unfamiliar with medieval English Jewry. Prominent historians of English Jewry, like Robert Stacey (who, as it turns out, was one of the anonymous reviewers of the book manuscript for Cambridge University Press) seem to be fans of the chapter. Scholars of early modern England are also fans of the chapter: I was recently asked by those who run The Globe Theatre (Shakespeare's Globe) to write a blog essay on medieval England and its Jews, to accompany a new production of *The Merchant of Venice* that's being planned at the Globe with an all-Jewish cast. Indeed, half of my invitations to speak seem to issue from Jewish studies programs and Jewish studies scholars.

However, colleagues of color do urge me to understand that the more virulent kinds of response to chapter 2 may have *racial* reasons (I'm not Jewish, not white, not born in the US – quite the trifecta to make for resentment), and, additionally, may also stem from resentment toward medievalists ensconced in English departments. Because of the legacy of England's extensive imperial colonialism, English departments seem to take up more air and space in the western academy today than, say, Spanish departments, or German departments, or even French departments. So, I've been warned that objections to my politics, and to my conceptual work, may be a mask for other kinds of resentments: like professional competitiveness, disciplinary and departmental resentment, as well as my race, national origin, "interloper" status, etc.

Interestingly, chapter 2 of *Invention of Race* has been increasingly recommended on social media by *non*-medievalists and *non*-academics – recommended by members of the public who identify as Jewish – after the massacres of Jewish peoples at synagogues, hate incidents at Jewish community centers, Jewish institutions, and kosher supermarkets, and especially after Whoopi Goldberg's public remarks that the genocide of Jews in the death camps during the Holocaust (the Shoah) wasn't about race, but about "man's inhumanity to man." In response, people posting on social media have emphasized that genocide and hate crimes are not about whether Jews *naturally* or *biologically* form a race or not, historically and today; they're about how Jews are *racialized* and *treated as a race*. And chapter 2 then gets recommended, to explain how racialization occurs, and how Jews are *made* into a race, and to serve as evidence of anti-Jewish racialization in deep historical time and today.

But you ask an important question: will the concept of anti-Semitism *vanish* as a tool of analysis if the concept of race and racism as analytical tools in Jewish studies expands? I shouldn't think so at all. There are forms of anti-Semitism that amount to racism, and there may be forms of anti-Semitism that do not amount to racism. Different scholars will take the measure as they think best. The important thing is to ensure that we do not de-stigmatize the treatment of medieval

Jews by using vocabulary that's euphemistic, doesn't speak truth to power, and is ultimately just too benign and anodyne.

I also imagine that in twenty years all these questions will become moot. When I first published *Empire of Magic. Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* as a youthful scholar in 2003, some found it hard to accept that European medieval romance had anything to do with the history of the Crusades at all.<sup>5</sup> One UK critic even castigated me for the romances I chose to treat, saying that I had picked strange, idiosyncratic, and unfamiliar texts because they were probably my favorite romances!

Yet today, so many dissertations, books, and articles feature those very same romances – like *Richard Coer de Lyon*, and the *King of Tars* – which are now no longer considered idiosyncratic or strange choices to write on, and which, obviously, are no longer unfamiliar. Even Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie* had not seen any scholarship on it for half a century before *Empire of Magic* and the predecessor article I wrote in 1998 were published:<sup>6</sup> the *Historia* had seemingly vanished into scholarly oblivion.<sup>7</sup>

But today, two decades later, the understanding that all kinds of relationship existed between European medieval romance and the history of the Crusades is commonplace, and perhaps even banal. The romances I treated in 1998 and 2003 are no longer undiscovered or ignored, and Geoffrey's *Historia* has returned to scholarly discussion in a prominent way. I predict that twenty years from now, scholarship on medieval race will be equally commonplace, and all the questions will have been considered and answered.

I. S.: Your work on the invention – or rather: reinvention – of race in the European Middle Ages has been intensively discussed in seminars and research groups not only in the United States and the United Kingdom, but also at German and Swiss universities. Was it a coincidence that your book was published almost at the same time as the Black Lives Matter protests brought the issues of structural racism, lack of diversity, and demands for decolonization into the lecture halls of academic institutions with renewed vigor? Or does your work speak to older, persistent, and ongoing structural problems in academia, in the humanities, and, more specifically, in Anglophone medieval studies?

G. H.: Actually, till you mentioned it, I didn't know that *Invention of Race* had been “intensively discussed in seminars and research groups” in Germany and Switzerland. I know about some of the reading groups and seminars in the US and the UK, partly because I'm occasionally invited to participate, partly because of book sales, and partly because of announcements and conversations on social media.

But I do know the book has been *taught* in classes in Europe, primarily by race studies scholars, because people who have taken those classes in Europe, as well as the professors who teach the courses, have told me so. What I'm pleasantly surprised by is not just the geographic dispersal of the book, but the circulation of the book among *modernists* – not only among the obvious folks like religious studies scholars, literature scholars, art historians, historians, and other humanities people, but also among social science folks like political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, and so on. There have even been book reviews in an archaeology journal and in a communications and media studies journal.

As for the *timing* of the book's appearance, yes, it is entirely coincidental that crises of race were exploding everywhere when the book appeared. The same can be said of my first book, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*, which was published in 2003, not long after September 11, 2001, and which examined the long history of the crusades, trauma, memory and forgetting, and the fraught relations between Europe and the Near East. I don't at all time book publication to coincide with public political discourse. How can you possibly predict what public political discourse will focus on next? The books appear when I've finished writing them. For instance: I first coined the term, "the Global Middle Ages" out of sheer expediency in 2003, when devising experimental teaching, but only published *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction*, in 2021, nearly two decades later, because that's when I finished writing it.

But as you say, structural racism did not make an appearance only with the recent movement for Black Lives, or the rise of anti-Asian hate in which people of East Asian descent (or people *assumed* to be of East Asian descent, though the attacks have also targeted Southeast Asians, Pacific Islanders, and others) are held responsible for China, where we think the Covid virus originated. The work of Stuart Hall, e. g., discusses racism in England, and the rise of critical race theory (CRT) there as a response in the 1970s. So, there's half a century of scholarship that discusses structural racism in England. Kathy Lavezzo recently pointed out in an MLA conference paper that Stuart Hall was discouraged from becoming a medievalist by J. R. R. Tolkien at Oxford, because, she suggested, Hall was Black and from Jamaica. Stuart Hall famously helped to start the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies instead, so we in the academy are not the losers for this loss to medieval studies. But Kathy gave us a *very* memorable and spectacular anecdote about invisible, systematic, pervasive racism in the academy, in the humanities, and in medieval studies in the UK. In 2021–2022, I am delivering the Stanton Lectures at Cambridge University, a series of four lectures on race. So far, after each lecture, my host thanks me for a rich lecture, and adds, "we in the UK are so far behind the US in matters of race." And let me tell you, we in the US are not really much ahead in matters of race.

But I think it would be naïve to imagine that racism is a problem only in Anglophone medieval studies, or in the Anglophone academy. Are you familiar with European colonial history? Have you read the documents, say, of the Dutch, when talking about the brown people of the Indonesian islands (some of whom the Dutch colonial government enslaved); the Spanish, about Filipinos and the indigenous peoples of the Americas; or the French, about the inhabitants of Indochina and sub-Saharan Africa? Every one of those European powers has academies today as well as medieval studies programs.

*I. S.: Here in Switzerland, but also at other German- and French-speaking universities, a general tendency towards Global History can be observed: The global Middle Ages is no longer a research question, but a given description of the medieval world. On the one hand, this can be seen as a positive consequence of overcoming national identity narratives; on the other hand, there are the pitfalls of flattening and smoothing historical specificities, complexities, and power structures by thinking in abstract terms of connection, entanglement, and circulation. Is this a blessing or a curse for the history of race?*

G. H.: I've been working on a Global Middle Ages since 2003, nearly two decades ago, and from the beginning, there was never a question of neglecting or ignoring the local, or the regional, in favor of the global, but always a matter of seeing the *interconnections* in a nexus of local-regional-global. I have publications where I discuss the importance of microhistories of the local, and the importance of histories-from-below (not just the histories of empires and large polities, or of the elites who leave their mark in the archives), so as to consider the intersections and interleavings of microhistories, and invisiblelized histories, with the global.

What we can learn – epistemologically, socio-culturally, and politically – from entangled nodes of connection and intermingling among local-regional-global is massively important. One example I like to point to is Spain. Spain's persecution and expulsion of Jews and so-called "Moriscos" is a moment of local self-purification that is constitutive of the early Spanish nation. It is, as many have noticed, a race-making as well as a nation-making moment. But this is a moment, also, in which Spain's global-colonial ambitions arose and began to spread Spain's umbra around the world. As it forcibly emptied itself of people it saw as belonging elsewhere in the world, not in Spain, Spain under the Catholic monarchs also made its governance bloom elsewhere in the world, bringing under its ambit a plethora of foreign races.

The spread of Spain's national boundaries outward in the form of Hispanized colonies around the globe – in the Americas, in the Philippines – thus affirmed

the forces of Spanish nationalism and Spanish imperialism-globalism as mutually constitutive and interlocking, in the formation of Spain's national and global identities. Clearly, this has ramifications for the study and history of race, and it's just one small example of what you can learn – an example with epistemological, political, and ethical consequences – when you view at all scales of relation: local, regional, global.

There should never be a flattening out, erasure, or loss of historical specificities and complexities, or an overlooking of power structures. Of course, what is gained, and what is lost, in studying the global, regional, or local, depends a good deal on *who* is performing the analyses and undertaking the scholarship, and *how* that scholarship is undertaken and performed. My latest study, *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction*, was published in the new Cambridge University Press Elements series in the Global Middle Ages in November 2021. You'll see in that introductory Element, and in all the Elements that follow (there are currently five titles on our Cambridge website, with more to follow soon), the myriad ways that a consortium of scholars introduce the global in relation to the local and the regional. Some of the Elements' authors also have monographs and articles in pre-modern critical race studies: e. g. Don Wyatt, Lynn Ramey, Helen Young, Yonatan Binyam, Kavita Mudan Finn, Dorothy Kim, Shao-yun Yang, etc.

This Cambridge Elements series concentrates not only on geographic zones, but also on culture, the arts, technology, climate, built and natural environments, the socio-political, life-worlds, global medievalism, etc. There are Elements on Oceania, the Swahili worlds of Africa, Tang China, island Southeast Asia, Cahokia and the North American Worlds, Ethiopia, India, etc. But there are also Elements on Eurasian Music, Persian Poetry, textiles, global ships, China's literature, the Jewish diaspora, elephants and ivory, slavery in East Asia, the Evil Eye, the role of museums, digital media for teaching and research, popular culture and global medievalisms, etc.

When my co-editor Professor Susan Noakes of the University of Minnesota and I introduce the global, the *socio-political* – including histories of race, slavery, animal use, persecution, etc. – is not side-lined, ignored, or prettied up. Ours is not a sanitized Global Middle Ages.

*I. S.: From experience, there seems to be a general tendency among students and junior academics to question the white, male, European canon of so-called "Western Civilization." Some students even plead for more politically oriented historical scholarship. What is your own experience of teaching and supervising students, graduate students, and PhD candidates in the US?*

*G. H.: Undergraduates have been gratifyingly enthusiastic about the courses I teach, and for many years now, I've taught only courses that decolonize the cur-*

riculum. To give you some idea of how long I've been teaching a decolonizing curriculum, 20 years ago, on September 11, 2001, when those planes were flying into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, my students and I were reading about Islamophobia that morning (and this was before the word "Islamophobia" became common in public discourse) in a medieval critical race course. In 1994, I taught a critical course on the crusades, long before 9/11, and the proliferation of crusades courses afterward around the country, and even longer before publishing *Empire of Magic*, a book on crusading history and medieval romance. I simply follow my interests. Surprisingly, people and events seem to catch up with those interests.

Of course, changing population demographics today in the US means that contemporary cohorts of students in higher learning, like the societies in which they live, have diversified substantially in terms of their race, class, countries of origin, sexualities and genders, and physical, cultural, and psychosocial composition. As you've noticed, students, more than faculty, are among those who have called for curricular transformations that are responsive to the exigencies of our time.

I am the only professor in my department and on campus teaching non-Eurocentric, non-western-centric courses pre-1700. Over and over, students complain that it's hard for them to find pre-1700 courses in the department that are not Eurocentric or western-centric. But ironically, on a campus where I'm the sole premodernist teaching premodern courses that thematize race, class, colonization, empire, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism, and an English department where students of color have complained there are too few such courses, I was told by a department administrator, before 2020–2021 (2020–2021 was a watershed year of academic transformation, bringing key changes in departmental culture in response to #MeToo, the movement for Black lives, anti-Asian hate, and a post-Trumpian era) that I should teach more "standard" "Brit Lit" courses. As you know, the University of Leicester in the UK has responded to student demands by deciding to decolonize its curriculum. Unfortunately, at Leicester, that means excising their English department's medieval courses, including Chaucer, which would render their medievalists in English jobless, if the university's plans are carried through. So yes, students are driving institutional transformations in the 21st century, sometimes with faculty becoming casualties. In the US, it's often university and college students who have spearheaded social and political change of many kinds, including curricular transformation. And academics who are at the junior ranks are indeed often the ones who are most in tune with students.

As for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows: they are the lifeblood of academic studies. The concept and field known as the Global Middle Ages

began with an experimental, 6- to 9-credit-hour multidisciplinary, collaboratively-taught graduate seminar that took place in spring 2004 on campus. I'd spent fall 2003 designing the seminar, recruiting faculty to teach in it, and persuading the deans that it was a good idea. Despite some anxiety on the part of one faculty member, it turned out to be an unforgettable experience for all involved, students and faculty alike, including the dean who'd volunteered to teach in it. We literally did not want the seminar to end. I've written about it elsewhere a number of times, and need not repeat myself here.

*So the Global Middle Ages began because of graduate students:* it was an attempt to introduce an uncentered world to them, reaching across disciplines, to give them distinctive training that would help them build a new professional identity in the academic market. The graduate seminars I teach today in premodern race studies, and on early globalism, have the same aim. Graduate students and the newly minted PhDs who become postdoctoral fellows are the future of the academy. They are also my best interlocutors everywhere. Without their idealism, their intellectual energy, their curiosity, political dedication, and sheer determination, we would have an ageing, static, and moribund academy. In seminars, they are outstanding: deeply engaged with ideas and arguments, and often producing excellent research that's publishable. I love citing them and quoting their work. They are unafraid to try new things, and are curious to see what happens when they experiment with new forms of analysis and new ways to think and see. Graduate students and postdoctoral fellows give me hope for the future.

I. S.: *Would you have written a different book 10 years ago? And how would you go about it today?*

G. H.: You have to remember I started working on medieval race in the late 1990s, when I was writing *Empire of Magic*. That's more than 10 years ago: that's 20–25 years ago. *Empire of Magic* has two chapters that explicitly deal with race, and two more chapters that treat race more implicitly.

What's the difference between those early chapters and the later work in *Invention of Race*? In the late 1990s, I was working with a concept I called "race-religion," in order to understand how racialization could take place in premodern eras when religion, not science, was the dominant discourse. I was in animated conversations with a number of race theorists, who didn't think that religion could facilitate racialization at all, and only modern-era capitalism, modern-era chattel slavery, modern maritime imperialism and colonization, Enlightenment pseudo-science, contemporary globalization, etc., could conduce to racialization and racism. Some of those race theorists, like Étienne Balibar, were saying that only *biology* could conduce to race and racism; *religion* only resulted in something milder called "pre-

modern discrimination.” I never did manage to persuade Balibar about race and racism in premodernity, but I eventually persuaded some others.

I was grappling with how to conceptualize race adequately for premodern eras, and how to come up with a minimum working hypothesis that could define race appositely – in ways that my sophisticated interlocutors and friends who were modern scholars of critical race theory wouldn’t find naïve or simplistic, and in ways that medievalists (many of whom were intellectually conservative, even if they voted democrat at the electoral box) wouldn’t dismiss out of hand.

After *Empire of Magic* appeared, I saw how certain medievalists ran with my concepts and the thinking in *Empire of Magic*, and saw that they in fact wanted to work on race, but were trying to figure out how, and needed help. So I began to build the work that became the many chapters of *Invention of Race*, one building block at a time, by experimenting with courses and teaching, and trying out different methods in articles, till I finally published a two-part manifesto in 2011 in the journal *Literature Compass*, called “The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages I: Race Studies, Modernity, and the Middle Ages,” and “The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages II: Locations of Medieval Race.”

But even as late as 2011, the then medieval editor of *Literature Compass* refused to publish this article on medieval race. Fortunately, the editor-in-chief of the journal at the time decided to make an executive decision to publish, despite the recommendation of her medieval editor to reject my work. After the two-part article was published, a podcast appeared on it, created by two assistant professors and a graduate student, all from different universities.<sup>8</sup> In some ways, the public response to that two-part article helped to pave the way for the book which appeared in 2018.

How would I go about writing *Invention of Race* today? This is an astute question, since I suspect my publishers will want a second edition. The book has won four awards and prizes, sold thousands of copies. A postcolonial studies journal devoted a forum to it. Conferences, workshops, symposia, and panels on premodern race now abound, and articles, special issues of journals, and new anthologies on premodern race have become common. There’s been an explosion of work on premodern race. So, what should a second edition look like?

For one, I’ve come to realize it would be useful to have a chapter on the history of race theory in general (including pernicious theories of race), and the history of critical theories of race in particular, in greater and more explicit detail, because, it seems, people do not know these histories and theories. I’ve also come to realize that a section on *keywords* relating to race would be useful. For instance, people still seem perplexed about the relationship of *ethnicity* to *race*, or they think that *intersectionality* is a modern invention that has been imported backward in time by those eager to undertake intersectional analysis – instead of understanding that medieval archives already show evidence of intersectional practices and thinking. I’ve

also been asked what the limits of racial analysis are, and if there are any limits to thinking about race. I'd like to treat *ethnophilia*. And I'd like a chapter on global race that doesn't just follow the European subject and Christendom's racializing gaze around the world – to North America, Africa, the Near East, Eurasia, India, China, etc., like *Invention of Race* does – but that critically surveys work on race performed by premodernists who are not Europeanists. That's just for starters. I welcome suggestions for what might be useful to have in a second edition.

I. S.: *As a medievalist in Switzerland, it would be very easy to argue that a racial perspective on the history of the medieval region today known as Switzerland is not just anachronistic, but downright absurd. Interestingly enough, the oldest Swiss abbey is Saint-Maurice, dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The abbey is famously connected to the martyrdom of the Theban legion and its prominent commander, Maurice. In your own work, you have studied statues and portraits of Saint Maurice and you argue for a shift in 13<sup>th</sup>-century depictions of this saint: He became black. Wouldn't the history of the abbey be an ideal place to reflect on the place, status, and historical complexities of race in Swiss history?*

G. H.: The history of the abbey of Saint-Maurice would indeed be a terrific lens and focal point through which “to reflect on the place, status, and historical complexities of race in Swiss history.” Someone should undertake this work. It would make for an exciting dissertation topic, monograph, anthology, or at least a good-sized article. What a splendid idea.

#### Notes

- 1 “Theory is always a detour on the way to something more important,” cf. Stuart Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” in Arthur D. King (ed.), *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System. Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, Minneapolis 1997, 41–68, 42.
- 2 Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, Cambridge 2018, 3.
- 3 See Don J. Wyatt, *The Blacks of Premodern China*, Philadelphia 2010; Shao-yun Yang, *The Way of the Barbarians. Redrawing Ethnic Boundaries in Tang and Song China*, Seattle 2019.
- 4 Bernard Lewis, *Race and Color in Islam*, New York 1971; Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East. An Historical Inquiry*, New York 1990.
- 5 Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic. Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*, New York 2003.
- 6 Geraldine Heng, “Cannibalism, the first crusade, and the genesis of medieval romance,” in *Differences* 10 (1998), 98–174.
- 7 J. S. P. Tatlock was the last to publish in a major way on the *Historia*, and that was in 1950 see John S. P. Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain. Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and its Early Vernacular Versions*, Berkeley 1950.
- 8 Online access: <https://alwaysreadypodcast.wordpress.com/2017/11/21/heng> (20. 12. 2021).