


BOOK FORUM

## Solidarity and the Medieval Invention of Race

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As I wrote this piece, University of Leicester administrators proposed to excise Chaucer and other medieval authors from the English Department’s curriculum, choosing instead “modules” pertaining to “race, ethnicity, sexuality, and diversity” to achieve a “decolonised curriculum.”<sup>1</sup> Responses ranged from advocacy of inclusive access to Chaucer to interrogation of the neoliberal agenda underlying the cuts to debate over medieval studies’ ability to incorporate those other modules.<sup>2</sup> The Leicester Students’ Union noted the “co-opting” of “decolonisation rhetoric.”<sup>3</sup> This last point raises two related questions. First, what did scholars in modern and contemporary fields engaging in liberatory work on decoloniality and self-determination think about this iteration of the administrative weaponization of left-leaning language given the many ways that ethnic and gender studies have historically dealt with administrators’ similar co-optive demobilizations? Second, how are we creating solidarity beyond medieval studies with these and other fields? A medievalist response to administrative threat could be to fight for a radical curriculum across many fields; to take action against the zero-sum, divide-and-conquer terms that administrations set; to amplify labor union actions, such as strikes and boycotts; to insist that no one,

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<sup>1</sup> David Clark, Twitter, January 20, 2021, 12:49 a.m. (<https://twitter.com/dragonista99/status/1351814125458960386>).

<sup>2</sup> Shazia Jagot, “Students from All Backgrounds Need Access to the Literature of Every Age,” *THE*, January 31, 2021; Dan Sales and Ross Ibbetson, “Leicester University Denies It Is Dropping Chaucer for Being ‘Too White’ after Proposing Modules on Race and Sexuality Instead,” *Daily Mail Online*, January 22, 2021; Marion Turner, “Chaucer Represents the Very Things He Is Being Dropped in Favour of,” *The Telegraph*, January 21, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Letter of No Confidence to the Executive Board and Vice Chancellor (<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1gmUcvj9YCWZzVpi-Hmw4DXdFjuwBeHB6x4jUxuhyr8A/edit>); Helen Dell, “Neo-Liberal ‘Decolonisation’ and Medieval Studies in UK and Australian Universities,” *Medievally Speaking*, January 26, 2021.

including but not limited to medievalists, be fired.<sup>4</sup> Medievalists have always engaged in such solidarity. But what seemed medieval studies' most visible public action in this instance involved a case for the value of medieval studies.<sup>5</sup> Although it is logical to speak about one's own field, I wonder about ambitions toward broader solidarity. How does medieval studies directly combat threats that are at base motivated by the values of racial capitalism and neoliberalism?

I use this article's occasion—Geraldine Heng's *Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (2018)—to explore what solidarity might mean to medieval studies. I will argue that *The Invention of Race's* theoretical foundations attune us to theories and praxes of cross-racial solidarity; in so doing, the book construes those studying premodernity as participating in coalitional networks seeking justice and freedom. Although I began with an issue of labor solidarity—which academia consistently attempts to undermine and obscure—labor justice is historically and necessarily linked to racial and other social justice. The Leicester example shows this truth: some social media users supporting the cuts also espoused xenophobia, hate speech, and misogyny.<sup>6</sup> Cord J. Whitaker answered a webinar question about job threats at Leicester by suggesting common cause among medievalists, scholars of Black studies, and scholars of other ethnic studies in terms of university structures.<sup>7</sup> I consider the potential of solidarity, as configured through Heng's vision of medieval studies, to achieve goals of justice and liberation beyond the field.

Here and throughout, *solidarity* is a multivalent term, negotiating poles of individual behavior, group cohesion, altruism, community, and collectivity.<sup>8</sup> In a reading of the 1977 Combahee River Collective statement and Frances Beale's 1969 "Double Jeopardy"—two texts representing the Black feminist lens central to configuring collective anticapitalist and anti-imperialist goals—Colleen Lye illuminates a dialectic of totality and particularity at work in solidarity frameworks.<sup>9</sup> Solidarity's aims lie outside the realm of the discursive. It does not require liberal empathy.<sup>10</sup> I invoke solidarity here in the sense of medievalists collaborating to oppose what the group discerns as injustice while recognizing the fight's broadest implications. Seeing beyond our field's white liberal interests, medievalists can engage larger practices—attending to their complexity—as part of a liberatory project larger than either the field or paeans to the value of humanities education.

<sup>4</sup> The University of Leicester UCU (<https://web.uculeicester.org.uk>).

<sup>5</sup> Open letter to University of Leicester administrators (<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZksZuLqKYu0tETr8T61rEJ3WbtG8R7HVadOBjUQnDqw/edit>).

<sup>6</sup> "The Global Academic Boycott: An Explainer for Prof. Edmund Burke" (<https://web.uculeicester.org.uk/the-global-academic-boycott-an-explainer/>).

<sup>7</sup> Cord J. Whitaker, Q&A, "Critical Approaches to Race and Ethnicity: Premodern Identities and the Transatlantic Politics of Scholarship," February 11, 2021 (cited with permission).

<sup>8</sup> Arto Laitinen and Anne Birgitta Pessi, "An Introduction," in *Solidarity: Theory and Practice*, eds. Arto Laitinen and Anne Birgitta Pessi (New York: Lexington, 2015), 1–29.

<sup>9</sup> Colleen Lye, "Identity Politics, Criticism, and Self-Criticism," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 119.4 (2020): 701.

<sup>10</sup> Antonio Gramsci and Martin Buber raise questions regarding solidarity, emotional engagement, and community. Ryan Adams, "On Solidarity: Gramsci's Objectivity as a Corrective to Buber's I-It," *Phenomenology and Mind* 12 (2017): 248–55.

A path toward these goals unfolds through a political understanding of the field of global medieval studies. As Sierra Lomuto has argued—in alliance with Heng’s work—for a Global Middle Ages (GMA) to change the field requires its extension beyond “curricular diversification.” GMA must confront, rather than occlude, the role of medieval archives and methodologies in constituting what Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul term the “colonial imaginary.”<sup>11</sup> Otherwise, GMA weaponizes diversity, rendering it counterinsurgent. Lomuto associates this effect with Jodi Melamed’s discussion of “neoliberal multiculturalism.”<sup>12</sup> When GMA constitutes itself as only a diversified curriculum, it plays into an institutional strategy to preserve an epistemological and political status quo.

A longer history exists of a movement toward curricular change whose goals were explicitly liberatory, and aspects of this modern history draw upon pre-modernity. In the late 1960s the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), a multi-racial coalition including Black American, Asian American, Latino/a American, Chicano/a American, and Indigenous student groups, demanded with the Black Student Union (BSU) significant curricular and hiring revision toward an educational focus upon self-determination, anticoloniality, and other emancipatory aims.<sup>13</sup> On campuses in San Francisco and Berkeley, the TWLF movement involved extended student strikes and other actions to which police violently responded. Its curricular demands, which envisioned a shift in content away from Western texts and topics, were inflected by an awareness of the radicalizing potential of early global histories. For Malcolm X aligned knowledge of pre-modern African history with revolutionary vision in a speech he gave in Harlem on January 24, 1965 (less than a month before his assassination), which Betty Shabazz published in 1967 as *Malcolm X on Afro-American History*. Gary Okiihiro connects Malcolm X’s perspectives on miseducation and lack of historical education to the San Francisco State College demands.<sup>14</sup> The speech exhorts listeners to recognize the relationship between self-determination and an awareness of pre-North-American histories of Africa. It equally suggests that developing such knowledge illuminates the relationship between local curricular conditions and the broadest international political structures.<sup>15</sup> Malcolm X focuses on curriculum in his discussion of “Negro History Week” in schools, pointing out how schools limit the meaning of “history” to restrict the contributions of Black people to what they have given the master.<sup>16</sup> In such formulations, earlier histories can politically affect both local curriculum and what lies beyond it.

<sup>11</sup> Sierra Lomuto, “Becoming Postmedieval: The Stakes of the Global Middle Ages,” *postmedieval* 11.4 (2020): 504–06; Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 257.

<sup>12</sup> Lomuto, “Becoming Postmedieval,” 509; Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 2–3, 7, *passim*.

<sup>13</sup> For a survey of the groups involved, see Daryl Joji Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 29–33.

<sup>14</sup> Gary Okiihiro, “Education for Hegemony, Education for Liberation,” in *Ethnic Studies*, ed. Gary Y. Okiihiro (New York: Markus Wiener, 1989), 1, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Betty Shabazz, *Malcolm X on Afro-American History* (New York: Pathfinder, 1990), 11–15.

<sup>16</sup> Shabazz, *Malcolm X on Afro-American History*, 22–23.

More specifically, this advocacy to refashion historical study geographically and temporally took as its explicit objective the tearing down of whiteness's terms in order to enable self-determination on other terms.<sup>17</sup> Malcolm X does not intend only to supplement incomplete histories, make the invisible visible, or place the margin at the center. Rather, his speech's periodic declamation of its "Pick up on that" refrain progressively intensifies a refocusing of historical curriculum as a destabilizing of white supremacy's operations in the academy and outside it. When he notes, "If you know history, you can put him right in his place. In fact, he'll stay in his place, if he knows that you know his history," the implication is to destroy white institutions and their knowledge claims, exposing their self-protective concealment of what they in fact know about history and race.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout their histories, the ethnic studies departments that emerged in response to the TWLF actions have engaged in coalitional work to combat oppression, resisting liberal strategies to demobilize this work. These fields have a long-held understanding of the internal pressures existing in academic endeavors that have antiracist, decolonial, or revolutionary aims. Robin D. G. Kelley discusses what we can learn from ethnic studies in the 1980s and 1990s and its insurgent response to neoliberal order.<sup>19</sup> In 1991, E. San Juan Jr., called to "recapture the impulse residing at [ethnic studies'] birth."<sup>20</sup> More recently, Gary Okihiro advocates for a Third World studies that makes clear its attachment to the principles of the movement.<sup>21</sup> The Critical Ethnic Studies Editorial Collective reflect upon the impact of "domesticated 'difference'" upon the trajectories of ethnic studies: "How has such a political-cultural imagination [referring to the TWLF as "dream form"] enabled robust collective movements against oppressive hegemonies while also (necessarily) failing to fulfill the aspirations of a radical totality ... ?"<sup>22</sup> Lye rehistoricizes the Combahee River Collective's statement through its relationship to Maoist thought to illuminate the potential for a "revolutionary mass subject."<sup>23</sup> In ethnic studies fields, ever-renewed analysis of the possibilities and limits of multiracial coalitional

<sup>17</sup> Shabazz, *Malcolm X on Afro-American History*, 18–21. On the term *self-determination*—the shift from its early signification within a Leninist critique of imperialist oppression to its use as an instrument by which ostensible commitment to "self-rule" in fact enables "new justification for overseas settlement and control" or the "old colonial principle" by which Indigenous leaders entered agreements with colonizers—see Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso, 2011), 69–71, 80.

<sup>18</sup> Shabazz, *Malcolm X on Afro-American History*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, "Over the Rainbow: Third World Studies against the Neoliberal Turn," in *Reflections on Knowledge, Learning, and Social Movements*, eds. Aziz Choudry and Salim Vally (London: Routledge, 2018), 205–22, esp. 218.

<sup>20</sup> E. San Juan Jr., "Multiculturalism vs. Hegemony: Ethnic Studies, Asian Americans, and US Racial Politics," *The Massachusetts Review* 32.2 (1991): 468.

<sup>21</sup> Gary Y. Okihiro, *Third World Studies: Theorizing Liberation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 2–3.

<sup>22</sup> Nadia Elia, David Hernández, Jodi Kim, et al., "Introduction: A Sightingline," in *Critical Ethnic Studies: A Reader*, eds. Elia, et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

<sup>23</sup> Lye, "Identity Politics, Criticism, and Self-Criticism," 702–08.

action and thought form part of constant mobilization against liberal multiculturalism.

The history of US ethnic studies clearly distinguishes itself from the development of medieval studies, global or otherwise; at the same time, this US history represents a site at which medievalists might engage with disciplines definitionally intertwined with emancipatory, rather than reactionary, social and political movements. The history of critical ethnic studies further glosses the objectives of not only GMA but also premodern critical race studies (PCMRs). Margo Hendricks has argued that PCMRs is about “finding ways to destabilize the academy’s role in furthering capitalism’s use of White supremacy to sustain itself.”<sup>24</sup> The past, present, and future of critical ethnic studies might encourage medievalists to act in solidarity with fields that have formed themselves in the crucibles of radical missions. Mobilizing together allows us to expand our answers to support the important question that Hendricks’s formulation suggests; that is, how do academics enact relation between discursive work and emancipatory anticapitalist action beyond it?

If medievalists owe our attention to ethnic studies’ self-examinations, then we equally owe our attention to the conceptual frameworks and practices of solidarity that provide the skeletal structure underlying ethnic studies’ development and relationship to activism. Here we might focus, as one illustrative example, on Black and Asian American activism in the TWLF movement. The influence of the Black Power movement on the Asian American movement helped make the TWLF a compelling example of multi-ethnic alliance.<sup>25</sup> Daryl Joji Maeda sees the Asian American movement as espousing an “inherently coalitional nature,” one that understood its liberatory horizons as national and international, existing beyond local educational rights even as education was an important site of struggle. Furthermore, Maeda’s reading of this coalitional movement brings the concerns of labor and labor exploitation to the fore as an important “common denominator.”<sup>26</sup> Reinforcing my opening point, here labor issues relating campus and community intersected with bonds across racial coalitions. The TWLF and BSU demands attended to groups across races as well as across campus, workers, and community. These demands related to not only curriculum but also hiring, financial aid, admissions, restructuring (as in the demand for a Third World College), the removal of ROTC, and other elements involved in a comprehensive reimagining of postsecondary education and its relationship to adjacent communities.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Margo Hendricks, “Coloring the Past, Rewriting Our Future: RaceB4Race,” *RB4R Race and Periodization Symposium*, September 5, 2019 (<https://www.folger.edu/institute/scholarly-programs/race-periodization/margo-hendricks>).

<sup>25</sup> Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*, 5–7. See also Robin D. G. Kelley and Betsy Esch, “Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution,” in *Afro Asia*, eds. Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 98–99, on an earlier history of Afro-Asian solidarity.

<sup>27</sup> Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*, 37–38. On ROTC, see Kelley, “Over the Rainbow,” 208.

At the same time, the continuing histories of Black and Asian American activism exemplify how multiracial coalitional politics demand analysis and critique. Claire Jean Kim's influential "racial triangulation" model, counteracting the problematics of both hierarchies of racial oppression and the rendering of different racial formations as autonomous, continues to be revisited and complicated.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, in Jared Sexton's reading of scholarly responses to the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, the concealment of anti-Blackness in analyses of US Black-Asian dynamics renders violent the "desire for coalition" unless those addressing this "conflicted/collaborative interaction see[k] a different common ground: against property and propriety."<sup>29</sup>

Medieval studies' challenge is to resist consuming these and other critical analyses of coalition and solidarity for its liberal benefit, instead learning from them to support the goals and principles of liberatory movements. One response might involve medieval studies' further interrogation of the role of institutional and wealth-based legitimization in the analysis of race and power. To develop this response, I examine briefly a site of convergence between Malcolm X's Afro-American history speech and a recent GMA curatorial project: the 2019 exhibition *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time*. Both the frontispiece of the 1970 edition of *Malcolm X on Afro-American History* and the cover of the companion volume to *Caravans of Gold* feature the late-medieval Atlas of Maritime Charts (Catalan Atlas)'s portrayal of Mansa Musa, the fourteenth-century leader of the Mali empire.<sup>30</sup> In both speech and exhibition, Mansa Musa's image manifests a suggestive orthogonality to the main project. In Malcolm X's speech, the image did not appear in the pamphlet's original 1967 publication.<sup>31</sup> Some of his remarks on Mansa Musa are omitted from the transcript (coinciding with the tape being turned); it resumes with the establishment of Timbuktu as a center of Afro-Asian learning.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, the Catalan Atlas was not an item in the *Caravans of Gold* show, appearing instead as a reproduction and on the volume's cover.<sup>33</sup> These formal instabilities of Mansa Musa's placement in both sites open a space to interrogate the indexing of material wealth to power.<sup>34</sup>

In liberatory projects engaging ethical solidarity frameworks, complicating the emblemization of Mansa Musa becomes important. While traditional

<sup>28</sup> Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27.1 (1999): 105–06; Colleen Lye, "The Afro-Asian Analogy," *PMLA* 123.5 (2008): 1733.

<sup>29</sup> Jared Sexton, "Properties of Coalition: Blacks, Asians, and the Politics of Policing," *Critical Sociology* 36.1 (2010): 99, 100–01.

<sup>30</sup> Shabazz, *Malcolm X on Afro-American History* frontispiece. Kathleen Bickford Burzock, ed., *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), cover. Mansa Musa appears also on the cover of Heng, *Empire of Magic*.

<sup>31</sup> Per UC Davis Special Collections.

<sup>32</sup> Shabazz, *Malcolm X on Afro-American History*, 35.

<sup>33</sup> At the Block Museum, Paris, BN Cartes et Plans, GE AA 566 (RES) was "on view in exhibition as reproduction" (<https://www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu/exhibitions/2019/caravans-of-gold-fragments-in-time-art-culture-and-exchange-across-medieval-saharan-africa.html>).

<sup>34</sup> The exhibition trailer mentions Mansa Musa's wealth; the volume refers to him in connection with West African gold in the global economy (24).

Marxist literary medieval studies might not suffice to address the complexity that form introduces to an association of Black liberation with premodern African wealth, other approaches that conceive of power without depending on wealth might. Cedric J. Robinson globally interweaves alternative medieval European genealogies of dissidence with Black radicalism.<sup>35</sup> Saidiya Hartman questions the practices, in some political projects of historical recovery, that align power with wealth and status, as opposed to with the earliest struggle and resistance.<sup>36</sup> Ariella Aïsha Azoulay advocates “unlearning imperialism,” “reclaiming pre-imperial and non-destructive modes of sharing the world,” specifically through critique of curatorial and archival institutions.<sup>37</sup> Reading this argument alongside, for instance, Michael J. Gomez’s account of the intricacies of dissent within fourteenth-century Mali’s formations of empire (and the meaning of empire itself in Mansa Musa’s context) might open further exploration—even generative disagreement—concerning how responses to premodern archives can support collective antiracist, anticapitalist struggle.<sup>38</sup> These frameworks can help medievalists think, for instance, about what work Mansa Musa’s image performs heading Idris Robinson’s critique of bourgeois and DEI obfuscations of “black revolutionary initiative.”<sup>39</sup>

Challenging the equation of wealth and power through historical archive furthermore challenges medieval studies’ relations to its institutions; such decisions affect and are affected by coalitional alignments. *Caravans of Gold* engaged in politically and epistemologically thoughtful curation, partnering with commissions in Nigeria, Mali, and Morocco. It experimented methodologically, drawing upon “archaeological imagination.”<sup>40</sup> It explored cultural heritage protection and migration.<sup>41</sup> Its interrogation of traditional museum practices productively confronts us with questions about what museums will or should be in the context of opposing colonialism and racial capitalism. Malcolm X spoke of the practices and implications of African art curation in the United States: “Below the Sahara ... there is being unearthed some of the finest craftsmanship ... that has ever been seen by modern man. Some of these things now are on view in such places as New York City’s Museum of Modern Art.”<sup>42</sup> Modern Art/modern man: the phrasing subtly critiques white institutions’ appropriative understanding of history. What ways have we not yet found to resist the demobilizing institutional containment Malcolm X’s words point out? Can this resistance occur institutionally? One way for medievalists to address these questions

<sup>35</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *An Anthropology of Marxism*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

<sup>36</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Transatlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 40–46. Hartman gestures to Ayi Kwei Armah’s work.

<sup>37</sup> Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (New York: Verso, 2019), 26, 29.

<sup>38</sup> Michael J. Gomez, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 96–97, 2–6.

<sup>39</sup> Idris Robinson, “Civilizing the American Wasteland,” *Endnotes*, June 2021 ([https://endnotes.org.uk/other\\_texts/en/idris-robinson-civilizing-the-american-wasteland](https://endnotes.org.uk/other_texts/en/idris-robinson-civilizing-the-american-wasteland)).

<sup>40</sup> Berzock, *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time*, 37.

<sup>41</sup> See chapters 5 and 19 of *Caravans of Gold*.

<sup>42</sup> Shabazz, *Malcolm X on Afro-American History*, 68.

involves supporting other communities of premodern scholarship who counteract the colonialist and imperialist practices that have shaped their associated institutions. The Society of Black Archaeologists, for example, constituted itself with that counteractive goal in mind, discussing globally the relation of their work to emancipatory activism.<sup>43</sup>

And yet, questions remain before us concerning medieval studies' relationship to activist praxis. Hortense Spillers observes that critical theoretical discourse currently faces more than enough crises beyond academia to which to respond and wonders whether and how it might participate dialectically in the kinds of radical renewals we have seen in the past.<sup>44</sup> What is medieval studies' role here? Studies of medieval gender and sexuality have represented sites of collaboration and consciousness change toward broader aims of justice. And as Adam Miyashiro surveys, postcolonial medieval studies has long engaged questions about medieval studies' relation to racial and colonial politics.<sup>45</sup> What does collective antiracist action mean to medieval studies now?

Offering one response, *The Invention of Race* navigates the particularity of the medievalist's position and the limits of that exceptionality, especially regarding coalitional objectives toward emancipatory aims. The book draws upon cross-racial solidarity to signal its position. Heng opens with a childhood experience in 1960s Singapore that radicalized her in the context of British imperialism. Some might understand this account as drawing attention to Heng's own positionality. But her initiating vision of "Malay neighbors, Indian classmates, Eurasian friends, and the intertwining, multicultural, multireligious life-worlds in Singapore" speaks more strongly to a network of groups with shared interests at the level of community.<sup>46</sup> It would be inaccurate to present the history of Singaporean independence as one of uncomplicated cross-racial alliances. At the same time, Heng's narrative exposes the opposition to community that originates with the colonizing English, their vast Singaporean estates temples to both isolation and ownership. Heng's opening vignette does not simply narrate her own position; it emblemizes a strategy whereby different groups build solidarity in community. Without this understanding, Heng's definition of race cannot make heard its furthest reverberations, which call to oppose oppression.

That perspective and strategy extend to the integration of activist language into the book's claims. When Heng identifies the medieval period as one of "state experiments in tagging and herding people, and ruling on their bodies with the violence of law," I discern not only a history of postcolonial discourse but also the echoes of Black protest against carcerality in the work of Angela Y. Davis:

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<sup>43</sup> The Society of Black Archaeologists (<https://www.societyofblackarchaeologists.com>). Thanks to Andrea Myers Achi for bringing this society to my attention. See also the GMA sessions associated with Heng's 2022 ICMS plenary.

<sup>44</sup> Hortense Spillers, "Critical Theory in Times of Crisis," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 119.4 (2020): 683.

<sup>45</sup> Adam Miyashiro, "Our Deeper Past: Race, Settler Colonialism, and Medieval Heritage Politics," *Literature Compass* 16 (2019): 1–4.

<sup>46</sup> Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1.



what she calls the “pandemics of violence that continue to be legitimized by ideological and legal structures.”<sup>47</sup> Heng’s chapter on Jewish people in England focuses upon law and order: surveillance technologies, the “collusion between secular and canon law,” and “the state’s machinery of racial governance.”<sup>48</sup> This analysis speaks to and from a critical discourse—and multi-coalitional activist praxis—that confronts the state’s historical use of law and order mechanisms to sponsor white supremacist violence. In making these points, I posit resonances not to elide distinctions but to acknowledge differences as part of building toward the most capacious visions of freedom.<sup>49</sup> Proceeding in this vein, I note that when Heng extends Homi Bhabha’s invocation of “the language of colonial racism” into a critique of the “evolutionary logic” and “perpetual deferment” of decoloniality, I hear in this postcolonial discourse Stokely Carmichael’s critique of deferment: “We are not going to wait for white people to sanction Black Power. We’re tired of waiting; every time Black people move in this country, they’re forced to defend their position before they move.”<sup>50</sup> Heng’s “deferment” also echoes the “deference” that Robert Williams identifies white liberals demanding as part of this strategy of infinite postponement.<sup>51</sup> In these examples, *The Invention of Race*’s very language offers possibilities to build solidarity from foundations of Black insurgency toward action beyond (even potentially against) medieval studies’ interests.

Solidarity means looking beyond the invention of a better medieval studies, and medievalists have done and do this work as medievalists. For instance, Nahir Otaño Gracia directs her insights about historical grammatical voice toward union organizing.<sup>52</sup> Medievalists of Color and the medievalist Material Collective foreground labor and social justice.<sup>53</sup> Heng’s book suggests the possibility of a transformed world through a transformed medieval studies. I admire this structure as I struggle with it. I find challenging the question of whether aims to join others in projects of social transformation can or should relate to medieval studies. To transform medieval studies will require transforming the world. Both transformations draw upon an understanding of issues around solidarity and coalitional politics largely explored outside medieval studies. Heng’s work insists that we confront all these realities. It envisions the field’s premodern archives fostering experimentation with ever more adventurous

<sup>47</sup> Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 16; Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories, 2011), 45.

<sup>48</sup> Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 68–69, 71, 73.

<sup>49</sup> See Iyko Day, “Exclusion Acts,” *Artforum*, May 13, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 38–39. Stokely Carmichael, “Speech at the University of California, Berkeley,” October 29, 1966, *Say It Plain, Say It Loud: A Century of Great African American Speeches* (<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/blackspeech/scarmichael.html>).

<sup>51</sup> Robert Williams, “Speech by U.S. Negro Leader Robert Williams,” *Peking Review* 9.33 (1966): 24–27.

<sup>52</sup> Nahir Otaño Gracia, “Why Language Shapes Us and Why I Am a BIPOC Caucus Organizer,” *UA-UNM Newsletter* 8 (December 2020): 3.

<sup>53</sup> Medievalists of Color (<https://medievalistsofcolor.com>); The Material Collective (<https://thematerialcollective.org>)

methodologies for historical inquiry, revealing ways to act that would change the field's relationship to the present and future; it challenges us to think about how such work could contribute coalitional force. Heng ends her book by invoking beginnings because she knows that scholarship is not an end.<sup>54</sup> *The Invention of Race* renavigates history and time to attune us to radical thought in a communal project to achieve liberation.

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<sup>54</sup> Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 449.

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