

Teaching premodern race as a critical canon

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Students of color make up half to two-thirds of my classes today, and race impacts them and their families in many ways. White supremacists, for instance, target ethnoracial minorities with hate, and federal and state governments harass non- white communities with punitive legislation and witch-hunts.

Studying the premodern history of race helps students understand the mechanisms of racism and race-making in the *longue durée*—mechanisms that have been adapted, revitalized, and reissued across time. We read conceptual texts that grant us tools to analyze literature and culture, and premodern texts that form part of the archive of racial history. We work back and forth between the past and the present to understand racial logics, racial targets, and racial purposes. My students thus learn that studying the past helps us to understand and calibrate the present with greater precision.

I begin by asking a question: When did *you* first become aware of race?

In student responses, we quickly learn that race is not limited to biology, skin color, bodily phenotype, or DNA. Some will tell us about racism encountered because of their religion. Those who were bullied in school because English wasn't their first

language, or mocked for what was in their lunch box from home, show us *cultural* mechanisms of race-making.

Early in the semester, we read scholarship that provides a lexicon of race and racialization across historical time. We learn of the relationship between race and nationalism, class, gender, sexuality, war, colonialism, immigration, economic interests, religion, and the state. We consider euphemisms for race, like "ethnicity." We examine *pre-critical* theories of race, before the onset of critical race theory, and study examples of intersectionality in the deep archives of literature, culture, and history.

The premodern texts we read include the Middle English romance, *Richard Coeur de Lyon*, which turns Richard I, the English crusader king, into an aggressive Christian cannibal who eats black Muslim prisoners, in an extended joke about conquest that links nationalism, war, and race.

We read the Middle English *The King of Tars*, which promotes a view of Christians as white folk, and Muslim enemies as black and loathly, a view stabilizes the connective tissue of color, race, and religion.

The Middle Dutch romance *Moriaen* imagines a bridge across differences of skin-color by hypothesizing the class solidarity of elite Christian men known as knights as an international fraternity. In the end, however, this story of assimilation, racial acceptance, and respectability, still has the Black, foreign knight, Moriaen, depart Arthurian Europe forever.

Ritual murder stories feature malignant Jews viciously slaughtering little Christian boys. These texts show us how Christian nationalism works to unite England, a land with deep internal divides of social class, language, and place, by targeting Jews as the domestic infidel.

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Prioress's Tale* even invents a genetic racial hypothesis: that Christians are born, not made—"icomen of Cristen blode", as this *Canterbury Tale* puts it. I tell students that England was the first racial state in the West. It was the place where the ritual murder libel began, before spreading across Europe and, later, to the United States. I point to the array of state apparatuses invented for the surveillance and control of English Jews, and how England was the first country in Europe to begin the expulsion of Jews, in 1290.

Looking beyond continental Europe and the Mediterranean, students read *The Greenlanders' Saga* and *The Saga of Eirik the Red*, about would-be settler-colonists in North America, around the year 1000, who cheat the local indigenous populations in trade, are ignominiously routed by Native Americans, and abort their settlements. This was half a millennium before Columbus stepped foot in the Americas.

John of Plano Carpini's *History of the Mongols* and Marco Polo's *Description of the World* bookend the process by which an unknown race of Mongols, at first demonized as bestial, savage, and subhuman, become admired and courted, once they acquire the vast wealth and resources of China.

Through all this, my students track the mechanisms that drive racialization in the deep past and today, mechanisms that repeat, but always with differences, and never identically as before.

Students also contribute importantly to course content, through individual research presentations, and group research papers on topics of their interest, their choice, and their design. Because students are free to research race across all historical time, and in any part of the world, following their curiosity and passion, extraordinary presentations and term papers often result.

My classes on race end like they begin: with a question. In Texas, where I live and work, race is part of a nexus of issues under near-constant scrutiny and attack from the state government. So, I ask the class at the end of the semester:

What will you say, if a journalist, a politician, or simply a stranger, asks you why *you* study race?