

Teaching premodern race as a critical canon

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Teaching early global literatures is a way to challenge white supremacist fantasies about the past. Today, in the West, white supremacists and Christian nationalists promote a vision of the past where so-called Christian-European values reigned supreme for hundreds of years, while the histories and cultures of the rest of the world are conveniently forgotten or erased.

Erasure and forgetting of this kind is pernicious. For instance, a medievalist colleague, Cord J. Whitaker is repeatedly asked, "Where *were* the Black people in the Middle Ages?" His "well educated" interlocutors, it seems, only know of Africa from slavery and colonialism in the modern era, and not about Africa before the arrival of the West.

Given how little people know, teaching the stories and cultures of the early world is thus an act of epistemological and ethical commitment.

For students whose ancestry, family origins, or childhoods were rooted in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, Pacifica, and elsewhere, a global literature class is an important way to encounter their countries of origin before the arrival of European colonialism and imperialism in the modern eras. Students learn that history does not begin when Europe arrives.

Early global literatures show thriving civilizations in dynamic interchange across continents and oceans, with Latin Christendom never being noticed at all. The sheer diversity of global texts, lives, cultures, cities, treasures, arts, technologies, trade, and networks in a thriving premodern world is eye-opening for students. Meanwhile, a Christendom-that-will-become-Europe was little more than a backwater for a millennium. London had 100,000 people and Paris 200,000 at a time when Cairo had three-quarters of a million. China's immense metropolises had well over a million lives. For students, this is an important shift in their understanding of the past, so that responsible recoveries of knowledge can begin.

9th-century China was already mass-producing ceramics for export to the world a thousand years before the West. 11th-century China's iron and steel industries burnt roughly 70% of the amount of coal that Britain's did in *their* Industrial Revolution of the 18th century. The revelation that there could have been a number of industrial revolutions, rather than a single, unique Industrial Revolution occurring only in the West, and only in modern time, is a mind-altering moment.

Students learn that the number zero—without which there can be no computers, no cell phones, or science as we know it—began in 7th-century India. I ask them to imagine doing math today, with Europe's contribution—Roman numerals—or to try coding without the number zero.

When we read the epic of *Sunjata*, students learn about the Empire of Mali in West Africa, the source of the gold production on which so much of the hemisphere's currency depended.

They read of glittering global cities like Vijayanagar in India, where extraordinary architecture, exquisite art, magnificent festivals, and sex workers who are protected by the police astonish a visiting diplomat.

They learn about trade routes and mercantile activities in Abu Zayd al-Sirafi's *Accounts of India and China*. In the *Malay Annals*, an epic of island Southeast Asia, they learn of the lives of sea peoples for whom oceans and seas are pathways, not obstacles. This epic tracks the connective tissue between the Malay islands and India, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean, across a bustling, dynamic world.

We follow many themes and focal issues through the semester. Students track how premodern slavery differs from slavery in later eras. They consider similarities and differences in the treatment of women, children, the old, and animals of many kinds. They see how treasure and wealth take different forms in a multiplicity of locales—how cloth becomes currency, or grapevines a source of wealth.

They trace funerary rituals, they map cities, and they consider varieties of music, tools, weapons, art, architecture, medicine, herbs, agriculture, animals, foods, festivals, clothing, manners, landscapes, beliefs, lifeways, even the different meanings of cardinal points in different societies.

By the end of the semester, no student notices that Europe is never mentioned at all.