

Premodern whiteness and racialization

A course created by Wan-Chuan Kao

Course description

What is whiteness? Is it a color or its absence? Does it mark biological facts or signify immaterial attributes? This course is an introduction to premodern critical whiteness studies, especially its intersection with matters of race. While contemporary critical whiteness studies has remained heavily invested in whiteness as a racial marker, medieval deployments of whiteness, in the absence of a rigid association between racial discourses and color, do not simply denote or connote skin tone.

Students will examine select medieval discourses of whiteness before the rise of modernity and critically analyze forms of premodern racialization through whiteness that sometimes involve skin color and the body and sometimes do not. Throughout the semester, the class will pay close attention to whiteness as a representational trope that makes visible normative cultural ideals such as courtliness, Christian salvation, chivalric prowess, and European identity. Students will ask if premodern whiteness marks the limits of ruling ideologies by registering specific ruptures and ambiguities within the values it signifies. The class will consider how medieval figurations of whiteness have continued to influence the modern world, as well as possible strategies of resistance.

Primary readings

- *The Travels of Marco Polo* and *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (Different translation editions vary; select chapters on the Great Khan of Tartary, his dreams of Mongol imperium, and his regime).
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Squire's Tale*.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Prioress's Tale* and *The Tale of Sir Thopas*.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Man of Law's Tale*.
- *The King of Tars*.
- Medieval Passion Plays: *The Harrowing of Hell* (York Cycle), *The Passion of Christ—Annas and Caiphas* (Chester Cycle), and *The Buffeting* (Towneley Cycle).
- Langland, William. *Piers Plowman*. C-Text, Passus 19–20; and The Charter of Christ

Rationale for selections

The field of premodern critical whiteness studies, like the broader discipline of premodern critical race studies, is robust and diverse. I have chosen these works—by no means the only ones possible for a course like this—both for the pragmatics of securing teaching-friendly editions (especially if a modern English translation were necessary for lower-level courses) and for the pedagogical goal of presenting to students a range of techniques and manifestations of premodern racialization via whiteness.

I like to begin the class with cartography and travel narratives as an entry point to the Middle Ages. The strangeness of the medieval T-O map, especially its eastward orientation on top, as well as the three continents of the “Old World,” offers a visual anchor for the students as they begin to learn more about the period. I also introduce students to ancient and medieval humoral theory, and how it intersects with premodern

geography and racial constructions. Building on these cultural-historical contexts, the class then transitions to Marco Polo's *Travels* and Mandeville's *Travels*, focusing especially on the racialization of Mongols, especially the Great Khan, through the tropes of white armors and white horses.

Continuing the thread of cross-cultural encounters, especially those between East and West, the class reads *The Squire's Tale* by Chaucer. A fantasy romance that reimagines medieval Mongols as "white," aristocratic Europeans, *The Squire's Tale* represents courtliness as a form of white racial capital; the medieval Mongols in the tale are functional white courtiers. Shifting from an innocuous articulation of racial difference to a darker mode of figuration, Chaucer's *The Prioress's Tale* codes religious difference as racial difference. But the anti-Semitic violence of *The Prioress's Tale* is quickly sublimated by the aesthetic force of whiteness in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, in which the whitened cuteness of both Chaucer the narrator and Thopas the character renders violence tolerable if not adorable. Next, the class examines the Constance-cycle in Chaucer's *The Man of Law's Tale* and the Middle English popular romance *The King of Tars*. While the language of *The King of Tars* is more difficult for undergraduates, even with a glossary, by this point of the semester, student will have acquired some familiarity with Middle English texts. Students will learn that whiteness, in both *The Man of Law's Tale* and *The King of Tars*, is inseparable from matters of religious conversion, gender, sexuality, and reproduction.

In the final 2 units of the course, the class turns to premodern theater—its performance practices, material cultures, and textual representations of whiteness and race. We read select medieval Passion plays: *The Harrowing of Hell* (York Cycle), *The Passion of Christ—Annas and Caiphas* (Chester Cycle), and *The Buffeting* (Towneley

Cycle), while studying premodern stagecraft. Student will learn that in late medieval dramatic praxes, actors who played Christ wore a white leather bodysuit to simulate the naked flesh, out of modesty. The white leather skinsuit resonates with the Charter of Christ textual tradition in which the crucified, suffering Christ is depicted as the "book" of salvation. In Passus 12-20 of the C-Text of *Piers Plowman*, William Langland alludes to both the Charter of Christ and the white leather skinsuit. But the white skin of Christian salvation, as students will learn, is one manifestation of the broader precaritization of Jews during the period.

Background readings and critical contexts

For the scholarly tradition of premodern critical whiteness studies

- Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2018).
- Wan-Chuan Kao. *White before Whiteness in the Late Middle Ages*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024. [I do not assign my own work in class, but please feel free to include it if it is useful to your pedagogy].
- Otaño Gracia, Nahir I. *The Other Faces of Arthur: Chivalric Whiteness in the Global North Atlantic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2025.

For the history of white as a color in premodernity

- Caviness, Madeline. "From the Self-Invention of the Whiteman in the Thirteenth Century to *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*" in *Different Visions*, 2008.
- Pastoureau, Michel. *White: The History of a Color*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023.

- Pleij, Herman. *Colors Demonic and Divine: Shades of Meaning in the Middle Ages and After*. Translated by Diane Webb. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

For *Marco Polo* and the *Mandeville's Travels*

- Dinshaw, Carolyn. *How Soon Is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012: Introduction and Chapter 2.
- Akbari, Suzanne Conklin. *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100–1450*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009: Introduction and Chapter 1.

For *The Squire's Tale*

- Crane, Susan. "For the Birds." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 29, 2007.
- Fradenburg, L. O. Aranye. "Simply Marvelous." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26, 2004.

For *The Prioress's Tale* and *The Tale of Sir Thopas*

- Blurton, Heather, and Hannah Johnson. *The Critics and the Prioress: Antisemitism, Criticism, and Chaucer's Prioress's Tale*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017: Introduction and Chapter 2.
- Kao, Wan-Chuan. "Cute Chaucer." *Exemplaria* 30, 2018.

For *The Man of Law's Tale*

- Kruger, Steven F. "Becoming Christian, Becoming Male?" in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*. New York: Garland, 1997.
- Lavezzo, Kathy. "Beyond Rome: Mapping Gender and Justice in *The Man of Law's Tale*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 24, 2002.

For *The King of Tars*

- Lomuto, Sierra. "The Mongol Princess of Tars: Global Relations and Racial Formation in *The King of Tars* (c. 1330)." *Exemplaria* 31, 2019.
- Whitaker, Cord J. *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019: Chapter 1.

For Medieval Passion plays

- Twycross, Meg, and Sarah Carpenter. *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002: Chapter 9.
- Davidson, Clifford. "Nudity, the Body, and Early English Drama." In *History, Religion, and Violence: Cultural Contexts for Medieval and Renaissance English Drama*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002.

For *Piers Plowman* and *The Charter of Christ*

- Anzieu, Didier. *The Skin Ego*. Translated by Naomi Segal. London: Routledge, 2018: Chapters 3 and 7.
- Villalobos Hennessy, Marlene. "The Social Life of a Manuscript Metaphor: Christ's Blood as Ink" in *The Social Life of Illumination: Manuscripts, Images, and Communities in the Late Middle Ages*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2013.

For undergraduates (especially in lower-level courses), it would be difficult to assign both primary and secondary readings for all class meetings. If a secondary material were dense and theoretical in nature, it would be counter-productive to assign it to the class without ample preparation and scaffolding in advance. For practicality, I establish reading

priorities for each class meeting: students must complete the reading of primary materials (of reasonable lengths) before class, with the secondary sources as optional. If the class is a seminar and has a smaller number of students, each student must give an in-class presentation on the main arguments of one secondary source (article-length and level-appropriate) and pose to the class 1-2 discussion questions that apply the critical arguments to the relevant primary material under consideration. I also ask the student presenter to lead the first 5 minutes of the discussion before I take over. And to foster a more interactive mode of learning, I often require students to meet with me individually prior to their presentation. The in-person conferences afford me a chance to monitor students' progress and offer support if they struggle with critical concepts, scholarly arguments, and cultural-historical contexts.

Possible assignments

I recognize that different institutional norms and course levels dictate the nature of student assignments and assessments. Below are some possible assignments that can either substitute for or supplement traditional papers, writing responses, and exams.

Podcast

In lieu of the traditional final paper (which no one other than the instructor will read), students will produce an engaging 12- to 15-minute (1750-2000 words) podcast for a general audience. Unlike the typical academic paper, the podcast script is more informal in tone and structure. But the podcast is no less rigorous in terms of the quality of critical analysis and the coherence of arguments. For their podcast, students will compare and contrast two primary texts examined in the course, as well as engaging with 1-2 secondary

sources. By learning all the elements of a podcast—including how to record properly, using apps like Audacity, and incorporating license-free soundtracks as intro and outro—students learn transferable humanities professional skills, in addition to critical thinking and writing. Students will submit both the final draft of the podcast script and the podcast as an audio file.

Public-facing poster project

Departments and schools love to showcase the work of their students during major events such as family weekend, alumni weekend, trustees' visits, or the end-of-semester academic social. The poster project is flexible, and students can base their poster on either a short paper or a long paper. They must redact their paper in order to produce concise, 250- to 500-word explanatory texts or captions for their poster. Students also learn effective visual presentation. While they may use generative AI as a starting point for poster design, they must develop further their own visions and incorporate original ideas. On the day of the poster session, students will interact with guests, present their findings, and answer questions about their project.