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Inventions/Reinventions

Race Studies, Modernity, and the Middle Ages

[T]he extent to which contemporary discourses, consciously or not, are affected by pre-modern paradigms is, at times, surprising.

<div align="right">Khaled Abou El Fadl, And God Knows the Soldiers (18)</div>

I N 1218, Jews in England were forced by law to wear badges on their chests, to set them apart from the rest of the English population. This is the earliest historical example of a country's execution of the medieval Church's demand, in Canon 68 of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, that Jews and Muslims be set apart from Christians by a difference in dress. In 1222, 1253, and 1275, English rulings elaborated on this badge for the Jewish minority – who had to wear it (men and women at first, then children over the age of seven) – its size, its color, and how it was to be displayed on the chest in an adequately prominent fashion. In 1290, after a century of laws that eroded the economic, religious, occupational, social, and personal status of English Jews, Jewish communities were finally driven out of England *en masse*, marking the first permanent expulsion in Europe.[1]

Periodic extermination of Jews was also a repeating phenomenon in medieval Europe. In the so-called Popular and First Crusades, Jewish communities were massacred in the Rhineland, in Mainz, Cologne, Speyer, Worms, Regensburg, and several other cities. The Second Crusade saw more Jew-killing, and the so-called Shepherds' Crusade of 1320 witnessed the genocidal decimation of Jewish communities in France. In England, a trail of blood followed the coronation of the famed hero of the Third Crusade, Richard Lionheart, in 1189, when Jews were slaughtered at Westminster, London, Lynn, Norwich, Stamford, Bury St. Edmunds, and York, as English chronicles attest.[2]

Scientific, medical, and theological treatises also argued that the bodies of Jews differed in nature from the bodies of Western Europeans who were Christian: Jewish bodies gave off a special fetid stench (the infamous *foetor judaicus*), and Jewish men bled uncontrollably from their nether parts, either annually, during Holy Week, or monthly, like menstruating women. Some authors held that Jewish bodies also came with horns and a tail, and for centuries popular belief circulated through the countries of the Latin West that Jews

constitutionally needed to imbibe the blood of Christians, especially children, whom they periodically mutilated and tortured to death, especially little boys.[3]

Cultural practices across a range of registers also disclose historical thinking that pronounces decisively on the ethical, ontological, and moral value of black and white. The thirteenth-century encyclopedia of Bartholomeus Anglicus, *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (On the Properties of Things), offers a theory of climate in which cold lands produce white folk and hot lands produce black: white is, we are told, a visual marker of inner courage, while the men of Africa, possessing black faces, short bodies, and crisp hair, are "cowards of heart" and "guileful."[4]

A carved tympanum on the north portal of the west façade of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Rouen (*c.* 1260) depicts the malevolent executioner of the sainted John the Baptist as an African phenotype (*Figure 1*), while an illustration in six scenes of Cantiga 186 of *Las Cantigas de Santa Maria*, commissioned by Alfonso X of Spain between 1252 and 1284, performs juridical vengeance on a black-faced Moor who is found in bed with his mistress; both are condemned to the flames, but the fair lady is miraculously saved by the Virgin Mary herself (*Figure 2*). Black is damned, white is saved. Black, of course, is the color of devils and demons, a color that sometimes extends to bodies demonically possessed, as demonstrated by an illustration from a Canterbury psalter, *c.* 1200 (*Figure 3*). In literature, malevolent black devilish Saracen enemies – sometimes of gigantic size – abound, especially in the *chanson de geste* and romance, genres that tap directly into the political imaginary, as some have argued.[5]

White is also the color of superior class and noble bloodlines. In the fourteenth-century *Cursor Mundi*, when four Saracens who are "blac and bla als led" ("black and blue-black as lead") meet King David and are given three rods blessed by Moses to kiss, they transform from black to white upon kissing the rods, thus taking on, we are told, the hue of those of noble blood: "Als milk thair hide bicom sa quite/And o fre blode thai had the hew" ("Their skin became as white as milk/And they had the hue of noble blood" [Morris ll. 8072, 8120–1]). Elite human beings of the fourteenth century have a hue, and it is white. The few examples I cite here from medieval England, Germany, France, and Spain – examples from state and canon law, chronicles and historical documents, illuminations, encyclopedias, architecture, devotional texts, rumor and hearsay, and recreational literature – form only a miniscule cross-section of the cultural evidence across the countries of Western Europe.

Yet, in spite of all this – state experiments in tagging and herding people, and ruling on their bodies with the violence of law; exterminations of humans under repeating conditions, and disparagement of their bodies as repugnant, disabled, or monstrous; in spite of a system of knowledge and value that turns on a visual regime harvesting its truths from polarities of skin color, and moralizing on the superiority and inferiority of color and somatic difference – canonical race theory has found it difficult to see the European Middle Ages as the time of race, as racial time. Conditions such as these typically constitute race theory's standard identifiers of race and racism, so it's logical to ask: How is such obliviousness possible?

Canonical race theory understands "racial formation" (Omi and Winant 55) to occur only in *modern* time. Racial formation has been twinned with conditions of labor and capital in modernity such as plantation slavery and the slave trade, the rise of capitalism or bourgeois hegemony, or modern political formations such as the state and its apparatuses (we think of
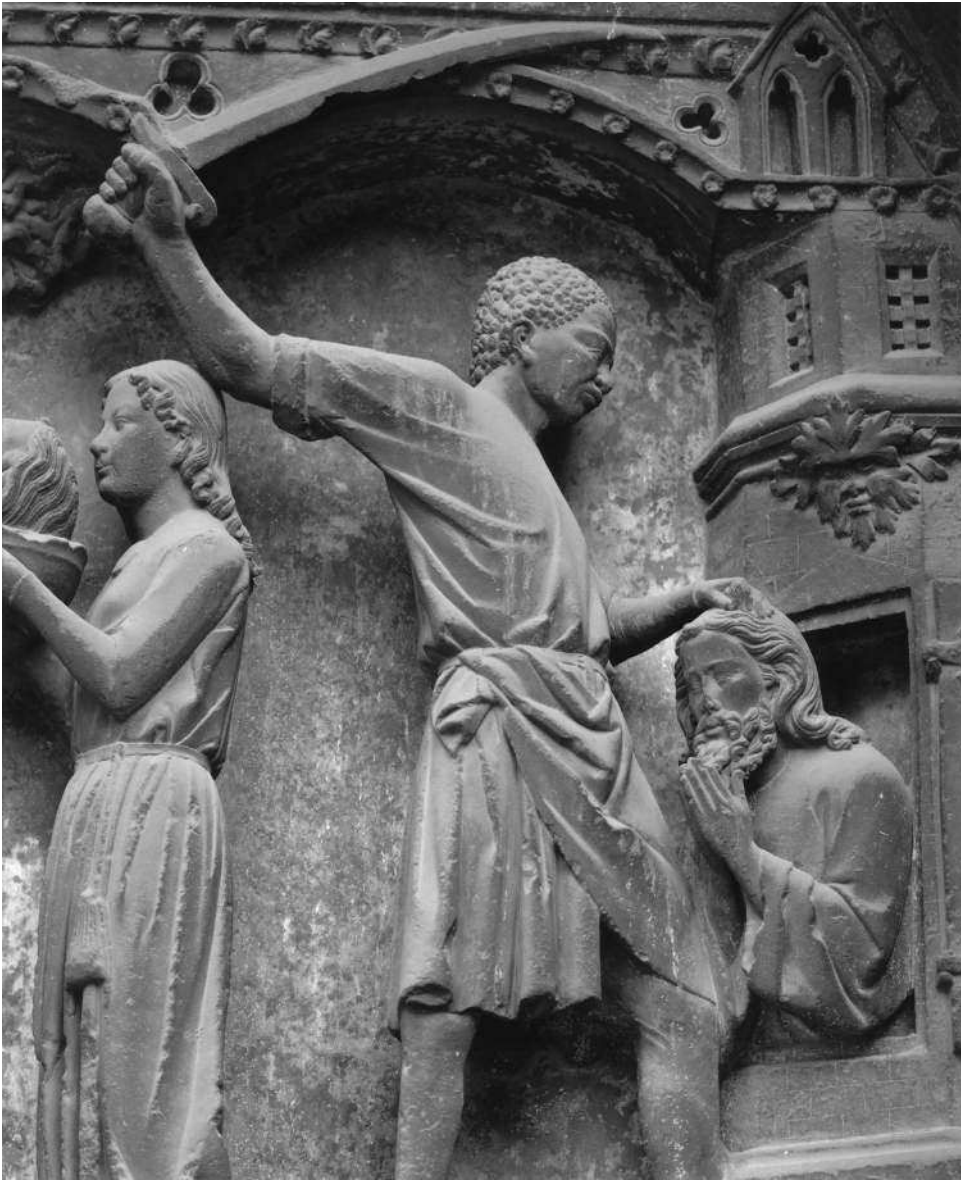
Figure 1. African executioner of John the Baptist, Cathedral of Notre Dame, Rouen: tympanum, north portal, west façade, *c.* 1260.
Reproduced with permission from the Menil Foundation, Houston; Hickey and Robertson, Houston; and Harvard University's Image of the Black Project.

David Theo Goldberg's magisterial *The Racial State*), nations and nationalisms (Étienne Balibar's chapters in *Race, Nation, Class*), liberal politics (Uday Mehta), new discourses of class and social war (Foucault of the 1975–6 Collège de France lectures), colonialism and imperialism (the work of many of us in postcolonial studies), and globalism and trans-national networks (Thomas Holt on race in the global economy).[6]
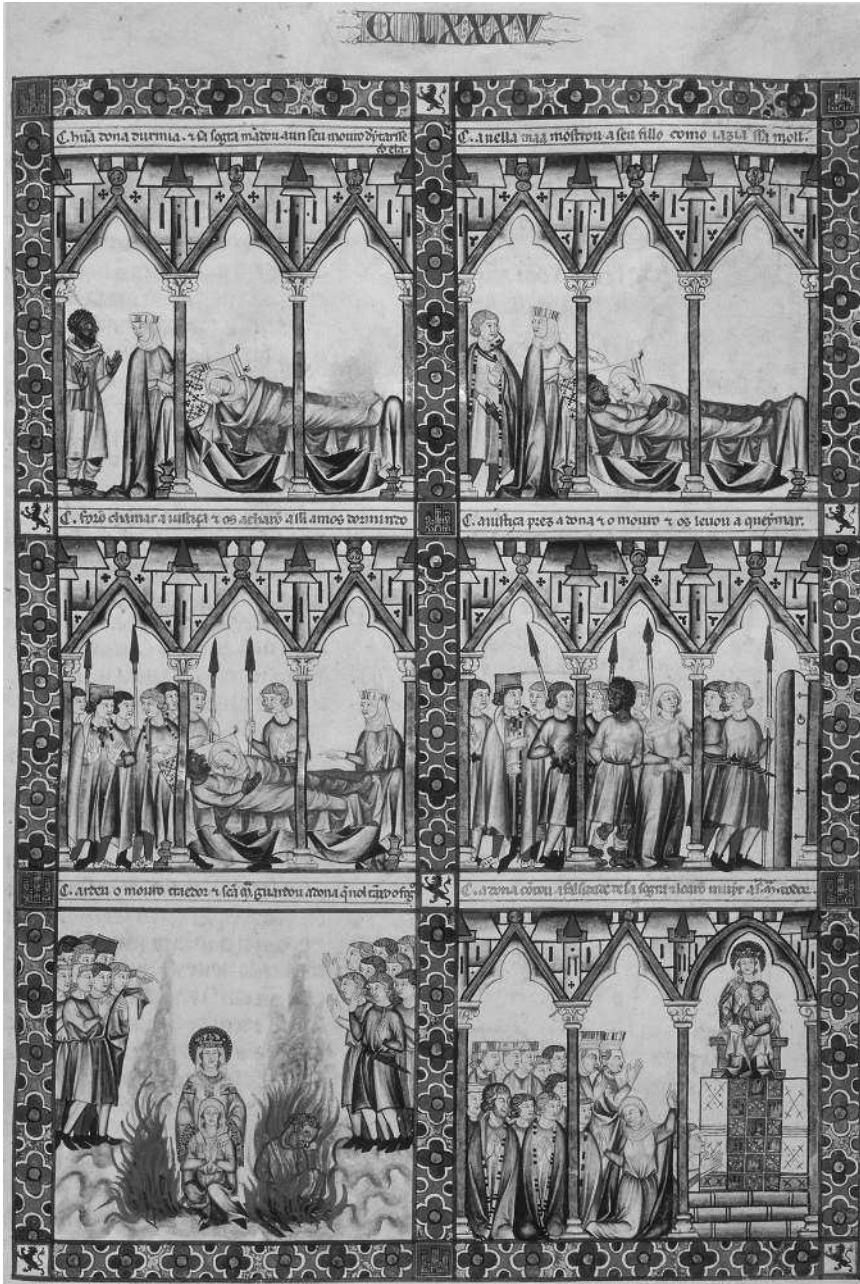
Figure 2. Illustration from Cantiga 186, *Las Cantigas de Santa Maria*, commissioned by Alfonso X of Spain. Escorial, Real Monasterio, Biblioteca, second half of the thirteenth century.
Reproduced with permission from the Menil Foundation, Houston; Hickey and Robertson, Houston; and Harvard University's Image of the Black Project.

In the descriptions of modernity as racial time, a privileged status has been accorded to the Enlightenment and its spawn of racial technologies describing body and nature through pseudoscientific discourses pivoting on biology as the ground of essence, reference, and

Figure 3. Healing of the Gadarene demoniacs. Psalter, folio 3v (detail), from Canterbury, *c.* 1200. Reproduced with permission from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

definition.[7] So tenacious has been scientific racism's account of race, with its entrenchment of high modernist racism as the template of *all* racisms, that it is still routinely understood, in everyday life and much of scholarship, that *properly* racial logic and behavior *must* invoke biology and the body as their referent, even if the immediate recourse is, say, to theories of climate or environment as the ground by which human difference is specified and evaluated.

In principle, race theory – whose brilliant practitioners are among the academy's most formative and influential thinkers – understands, of course, that race *has* no singular or stable referent: that *race is a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content*. Ann Stoler, a particularly incisive scholar of race, voices the common understanding of all when she affirms that "the concept of race

is an 'empty vacuum' – an image both conveying [the] 'chameleonic' quality [of race] and [its] ability to ingest other ways of distinguishing social categories" ("Racial Histories" 191).

In principle, then, race studies after the mid-twentieth century, and particularly in the past three and a half decades, encourages a view of race as a blank that is contingently filled under an infinitely flexible range of historical pressures and occasions. The motility of race, as Stoler puts it, means that racial discourses are always both "new and renewed" through historical time (we think of the Jewish badge in premodernity *and* modernity), always "well-worn" *and* "innovative" (such as the type and scale of "final solutions" like expulsion and genocide), and "draw on the past" as they "harness themselves to new visions and projects."[8]

The ability of racial logic to stalk and merge with other hierarchical systems – such as class, gender, or sexuality – also means that race can function as class (so that whiteness is the color of medieval nobility), as "ethnicity" and religion (Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda, "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia), or as sexuality (seen in the suggestion raised at the height of AIDS hysteria in the 1980s that gay people should be rounded up and cordoned off, in the style of Japanese American internment camps in World War II). Indeed, the "transformational grammar" of race through time means that the current masks of race are now overwhelmingly cultural, as witnessed since September 11, 2001.[9] Definitions of race in practice today at airport security checkpoints, in the news media, and in public political discourse flaunt ethnoracial categories decided on the basis of religious identity ("Muslims" being grouped as a de facto race), national or geopolitical origin ("Middle Easterners"), or membership in a linguistic community (Arabic-speakers standing in for Arabs).

But if our current moment of flexible definitions – a moment in which cultural race and racisms, and *religious* race, jostle alongside race-understood-as-somatic/biological determinations – uncannily renews key medieval instrumentalizations in the ordering of human relations, race theory's examination of the past nonetheless stops at the door of modern time. A blind spot inhabits the otherwise extraordinary panorama of critical descriptions of race: a cognitive lag that makes theory unable to step back any further than the Renaissance, that makes it *natural* to consider the Middle Ages as somehow outside real time.

Like many a theoretical discourse, race theory is predicated on an unexamined narrative of temporality in the West: a *grand récit* that reifies modernity as *telos* and origin, and that, once installed, entrenches the delivery of a paradigmatic chronology of racial time through mechanisms of intellectual replication pervasive in the Western academy, and circulated globally. This global circulation project is not without its detractors, but the replication of its paradigmatic chronology is extraordinarily persistent, for reasons I outline below.

Race Theory and Its Fictions: Modernity as the Time of Race, an Old Story of *Telos* and Origin

In the *grand récit* of Western temporality, modernity is positioned simultaneously as a spectacular conclusion and a beginning: a teleological culmination that emerges from the ooze of a murkily long chronology by means of a temporal rupture – a big bang, if we like – that issues in a new historical instant. The material reality and expressive vocabulary of rupture is vouched for by symbolic phenomena of a highly dramatic kind – a Scientific Revolution, discoveries of race, the formation of nations, etc. – which signal the arrival of modern time. Medieval time, on the wrong side of rupture, is thus shunted aside as the detritus of a

pre-Symbolic era falling outside the signifying systems issued by modernity, and reduced to the role of a historical trace undergirding the recitation of modernity's arrival.

Thus fictionalized as a politically unintelligible time, because it lacks the signifying apparatus expressive of, and witnessing, modernity, medieval time is then absolved of the errors and atrocities of the modern, while its own errors and atrocities are shunted aside as essentially nonsignificative, without *modern* meaning, because occurring outside the conditions structuring intelligible discourse on, and participation in, modernity and its cultures. The replication of this template of temporality – one of the most durably stable intellectual replications in the West – is the basis for the replication of race theory's exclusions.

For the West, modernity is an account of self-origin – how the West became the unique, vigorous, self-identical, and exceptional entity that it is, bearing a legacy – and burden – of superiority. Modernity is *arrival*: the Scientific Revolution, represented by a procession of founding fathers of conceptual and experimental science (Galileo, Descartes, Bacon, Locke, Newton) and the triumph of technology – the printing press ushering in mass culture, heavy artillery ushering in modern warfare.

Or arrival is attested by the Industrial Revolution, witnessing extraordinary per capita and total output economic growth of the Schumpeterian, over the Smithian, kind. Since origin is haunted in the post-Biblical West by the story of a fall from grace, modernity is also necessarily the time when new troubles arrive, the most enduring of which are race and racisms, colonization, and the rise of imperial powers. Regrettable as such phenomena are, their exclusive arrival in modern time (variously located) nonetheless sets off modern time as unique, special: confirming modernity as a time apart, newly minted, in human history.

The dominance of a linear model of temporality deeply invested in marking rupture and radical discontinuity thus eschews alternate views: a view of history, for instance, as a field of dynamic oscillations between ruptures and reinscriptions, or historical time as a matrix in which overlapping repetitions-with-change can occur, or an understanding that historical events may result from the action of multiple temporalities that are enfolded and coextant within a particular historical moment. The dominant model of a simple, linear temporality has geospatial and macrohistorical consequences. Since the prime movers and markers of modernity are exclusively or overwhelmingly discovered in the West, the non-West has long been saddled with the tag of being *pre*modern: inserted within a developmental narrative whose trajectory positions the rest of the world as always catching up.

Some sociological historians and historians of science, working against the grain, have attempted to disrupt the narrative of scientific, economic, and demographic transformation separating modern from premodern time in the West, and the West from the rest.[10] Revisiting the old repertoire of questions, they have argued for the legitimacy of complex, nonlinear temporalities: temporalities in which multiple modernities have recurred in different vectors of the world moving at different rates of speed within macrohistorical time. One position is articulated by Jack Goldstone's thick description of human history as punctuated by scientific and technological "efflorescences" that, coupled with labor specialization and intensive market orientation, have driven *both* Schumpeterian *and* Smithian growth and change in various societies and various eras, thus muddying the monomythic simplicity of a radical break favoring the West in modernity's singular arrival.

Against the putative uniqueness of the Industrial Revolution, we have Robert Hartwell's data showing that the tonnage of coal burnt annually for iron production in eleventh-century northern China was already "roughly equivalent to 70% of the total amount of coal

annually used by all metal workers in Great Britain at the beginning of the eighteenth century" ("Cycle" 122). Demographic patterns deemed characteristic of modernity have also appeared in premodernity. Goldstone observes that urban populations in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe – a period of extraordinary growth – amounted to 10 percent of the total population, a ratio not exceeded until the nineteenth century (347).

The work of Eric Jones and Robert Hartwell on the extensively developed water power, iron and steel industries, and shipping of Song China; that of Billy So on China's mass-market industrial production of export ceramics; and that of Richard Britnell and Bruce Campbell, Joel Mokyr, D. S. L. Cardwell, Lynn White, and Goldstone himself on the economic and demographic growth, technology, urbanization, and commercialization of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe (Goldstone 380–9) furnish material for counter-narratives contesting the fiction of sudden, unique arrival, and the discourse of Western exceptionalism.[11] Some historians of science and sociology accordingly prefer to speak of scientific *revolutions* across time, rather than *the* Scientific Revolution – a single, unique instance, in a single unique modernity (Hart, *Civilizations* chapter 2; "Explanandum") – and of industrial *revolutions*, rather than *the* Industrial Revolution.

Even were we to ignore the demographic, economic, and industrial materialities pains-takingly tracked by these historians, the representation of medieval time as wholly foreign to, and unmarked by, modernity intuitively runs counter to the modes of understanding in contemporary theory undergirding the study of culture today. Studies of culture, literature, history, and art that have been open to late twentieth- and twenty-first-century develop-ments in academic theory across the disciplines will not find unfamiliar the notion that the past is never completely past, but inhabits the present and haunts modernity and contem-porary time in ways that estrange our present from itself.

Modernity and the present can thus be grasped as the habitat of multiple temporalities that braid together a complex and plural "now" that is internally self-divided and contamin-ated by premodern time. In public life, the evocation of Crusades and jihad by Jihadi and Salafi ideologues and by the Western political right after 9/11 is one example of the past in the present, marking an internal cleavage in modern time through which premodern time speaks itself as an active presence.[12]

Dipesh Chakrabarty's meditation on how an earlier time reinscribes itself in later periods (always with difference, never in exactly the same way) is useful here:

> humans from any other period . . . are always in some sense our contemporaries: that would have to be the condition under which we can even begin to treat them as intelligible to us . . . the writing of medieval history for Europe depends on this assumed contemporaneity of the medieval [with our present], or . . . the non-contemporaneity of the present with itself.
>
> (109)

If we grant that the present can be nonidentical to itself in this way, we should also grant the corollary: that *the past* can *also* be nonidentical to itself, inhabited too by that which was out of *its* time – marked by modernities that estrange medieval time in ways that render medieval practices legible in modern terms.

If we allow our field of vision to hatch open these moments in premodernity that seem to signal the activity of varied modernities in deep time (Goldstone's "efflorescences"), our expanded vision will yield windows on the past that allow for a reconfigured

understanding of earlier time. Indeed, hatching open such moments in premodernity is what feminists and queer studies scholars have, in a sense, been doing for decades in staking out *their* European Middle Ages – identifying the instances in which a different conscious-ness and practice erupt and effloresce – even as their earliest archeologies suffered slings and arrows hurled in the name of anachronism and presentism. The "contemporaneity of the medieval" with our time, and the nonidentity of medieval time with itself, thus grants a pivot from which the recloning of old narratives can be resisted.

Nonetheless, at present the discussion of premodern race continues to be handicapped by the invocation of axioms that reproduce a familiar story in which mature forms of race and racisms, arriving in modern political time, are heralded by a shadowplay of inauthentic rehearsals characterizing the prepolitical, premodern past. For discussions of race, the terms and conditions set by this narrative of bifurcated polarities vested in modernity-as-origin have meant that the tenacity, duration, and malleability of race, racial practices, and racial institutions have failed to be adequately understood or recognized. With centuries elided, the long history of race-ing has been foreshortened, truncated to an abridged narrative.

But why would we want a long history of race? Like other theoretical-political endeavors that have addressed the past – feminism comes readily to mind as a predecessor moment; queer studies is another – the project of revising our understanding by inserting premoder-nity into conversations on race is closely dogged by accusations of presentism, anachronism, reification, and the like.[13] Why call something *race*, when many old terms – "ethnocentrism," "xenophobia," "premodern discriminations," "prejudice," "chauvinism," even "fear of other-ness and difference" – have been used comfortably for so long to characterize the genocides, brutalizations, executions, and mass expulsions of the medieval period?

The short answer is that the use of the term *race* continues to bear witness to important strategic, epistemological, and political commitments not adequately served by the invoca-tion of categories of greater generality (such as *otherness* or *difference*) or greater benignity in our understanding of human culture and society. *Not* to use the term *race* would be to sustain the reproduction of a certain kind of past, while keeping the door shut to tools, analyses, and resources that can name the past differently. Studies of "otherness" and "difference" in the Middle Ages – which are now increasingly frequent – must then continue to dance around words they dare not use; concepts, tools, and resources that are closed off; and meanings that only exist as lacunae.

Or, to put it another way: the refusal of race destigmatizes the impacts and consequences of certain laws, acts, practices, and institutions in the medieval period, so that we cannot name them for what they are, and makes it impossible to bear adequate witness to the full meaning of the manifestations and phenomena they install. The unavailability of race thus often colludes in relegating such manifestations to an epiphenomenal status, enabling omissions that have, among other things, facilitated the entrenchment and reproduction of a certain kind of foundational historiography in the academy and beyond.

To cite one example: How often do standard ("mainstream") histories of England discuss as constitutive to the formation of English identity, or to the nation of England, the mass expulsion of Jews in 1290; the marking of the Jewish population with badges for three quarters of a century; decimations of Jewish communities by mob violence; statutory laws ruling over where Jews were allowed to live; monitory apparatuses like the Jewish Exchequer and the network of registries created by England to track the behavior and lives

of Jews; or popular lies and rumors like the cultural fiction of ritual murder, which facilitated the legal execution of Jews by the state? That the lives of English Jews were *constitutive*, not incidental, to the formation of England's history and collective identity – that the built landscape of England itself, with its cathedrals, abbeys, fortifications, homes, and cities, was dependent on English Jews – is not a story often heard in foundational historiography.[14] Scholars who are invested in the archeology of a past in which alternate voices, lives, and histories are heard, beyond those canonically established as central by foundationalist studies, are thus not well served by evading the category of race and its trenchant vocabularies and tools of analysis.[15]

For race theorists, the study of racial emergence in the *longue durée* is also one means to understand if the configurations of power productive of race in modernity are, in fact, genuinely novel. Key propensities in history can be identified by examining premodernity: the modes of apparent necessity, configurations of power, and conditions of crisis that witness the harnessing of powerful dominant discourses – such as science *or* religion – to make fundamental distinctions among humans in processes to which we give the name of race.

A reissuing of the medieval past in ways that admit the ongoing interplay of that past with the present can therefore only recalibrate the urgencies of the present with greater precision. An important consideration in investigating the invention of race in medieval Europe (an invention that is always a *re*invention) is also to grasp the ways in which *homo europaeus* – the European subject – emerges in part through racial grids produced from the twelfth through fifteenth centuries, and the significance of that emergence for understanding the unstable entity we call "the West" and its self-authorizing missions.[16]

Premodernists Write Back: Historicizing Alternate Pasts, Rethinking Race in Deep Time

Scholars who have considered race in premodernity have by and large understood race as arguments over nature – how human groups are identified through biological or somatic features deemed to be their durable or intrinsic characteristics, features which are then selectively moralized and interpreted to extrapolate continuities between the bodies, behaviors, and mentalities of the members of the group thus collectively identified. Premodernists subscribing to a view of race as contentions over nature have accordingly focused primary attention on *bodies* in examining the record of images, artifacts, and texts: investigating the meanings of skin color, phenotypes, blood purity and bloodlines, genealogy, physiognomy, heritability, and the impact of environment (including, in the medieval period, macrobian zones, astrology, and humoral theory) in shaping human bodies and human natures, with differential values being attached to groups thus differentially identified.

For antiquity, major studies by Frank Snowden, Benjamin Isaac, and David Goldenberg are among those that consider body-centered phenomena as indicators of race – and in particular, for Snowden and Goldenberg, blackness as a paramount marker of race.[17] Among medievalists, noted studies by Robert Bartlett, Peter Biller, Steven Epstein, David Nirenberg, and contributors to a 2001 issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* edited by Thomas Hahn also suggest that medievalists too have understood race as a