In *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, Geraldine Heng questions the common assumption that race and racisms only began in the modern era. Examining Europe’s encounters with Jews, Muslims, Africans, Native Americans, Mongols, and the Romani (“Gypsies”) from the twelfth through fifteenth centuries, she shows how racial thinking, racial law, racial practices, and racial phenomena existed in medieval Europe before a recognizable vocabulary of race emerged in the West. Analyzing sources in a variety of media, including stories, maps, statuary, illustrations, architectural features, history, saints’ lives, religious commentary, laws, political and social institutions, and literature, she argues that religion – so much in play again today – enabled the positing of fundamental differences among humans that created strategic essentialisms to mark off human groups and populations for racialized treatment. Her groundbreaking study also shows how race figured in the emergence of *homo europaeus* and the identity of Western Europe in this time.

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The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages

Geraldine Heng
To Leah Marcus, David Theo Goldberg, and Susan Noakes
compagnons de route
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4. The “Jewish face.” The King’s Remembrancer Memoranda Rolls, E.159, membranes 10, 12, 4 dorse. Public Record Office, thirteenth century.  
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Audience responses to my talks have shaped book chapters. Answering Barbara Fuchs’s question, What differences were there in race-making before and after Jews were expelled from England? required transhistorical comparison of a cluster of Hugh of Lincoln’s boy-murder stories across more than a century – from an Anglo-Norman ballad to Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale and the Vernon manuscript – to see how the story differed before and after Jewish Expulsion, and why. An astute graduate student at Penn (who did not offer her name) put her finger on why it was imperative to name certain acts and institutions in the Middle Ages for what they were, i.e., racial: not to do so, she averred, would be to destigmatize them, allow them to be seen as less heinous. Jonathan Boyarin pointed to the Fourth Lateran Council as an instantiation of modernity in the West, and Judith Ferster suggested that, were one to track the expulsions of Jews country-by-country across medieval Europe, one would likely be able to establish how early or late a country underwent nation formation, thus gathering a map of comparative medieval nationalisms.

A faculty member in one audience even disclosed her understanding of the disciplinary stakes that underpinned discussions of race: If you are correct, she said, that race was invented in premodernity and not the modern era, then the modern era will become less important, the Middle Ages will become more important, and everyone would be forced to learn about the Middle Ages. Though I may disagree with her prognostications, I admire the unvarnished earnestness of her vision of the academic interests at stake.

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