

## THE INVENTION OF RACE IN THE EUROPEAN MIDDLE AGES

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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Originally from Singapore, Heng has held the Winton Chair (for "paradigm-shifting scholarship") at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. She has received a number of fellowships and grants, and currently holds an ACLS fellowship to begin a new book, *Early Globalities: The Interconnected World, 500–1500 CE*. Heng is also the founder and director of the Global Middle Ages Project: [www.globalmiddleages.org](http://www.globalmiddleages.org).

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GERALDINE HENG



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*To Leah Marcus, David Theo Goldberg, and Susan Noakes  
compagnons de route*

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Two residential workshops at the University of California Humanities Research Institute – “Theorizing Pre- and Early Modern Race,” convened by Margo Hendricks and Karen Bassi, and “Holy Wars Redux,” convened by the unfailingly generous and illustrious John Ganim – offered stimulating environments in which to develop hypotheses and draft chapters on early race. The Friedrich Solmsen Fellowship at the University of Wisconsin’s Institute for Research in the Humanities, two semester-long competitive leaves granted by the University of Texas, and the Winton Chair at the University of Minnesota also afforded important time to think and write among supportive colleagues.

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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.

Two keen-eyed anonymous manuscript readers, likely a literary scholar and a historian, submitted very helpful reviews (twelve single-spaced pages) with indispensable advice for the book. My wise editor at Cambridge, the remarkable Beatrice Rehl, went the extra mile by reading a hefty portion of the manuscript while on vacation, and added her own indispensable advice to ensure “a better reader experience.” Kristy Barker has been an invaluable and tactful copyeditor, and Kaye Tengco Barbaro and Shaheer Anwarali have been exemplary production managers. The consistently high level of courtesy, kindness, and professionalism I've encountered at Cambridge speaks volumes for this outstanding university press.

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