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## Introduction

# PERFORMING MEDIEVALISM, CRAFTING IDENTITIES

ONE OF THE most rewarding aspects of being an educator is learning from students and collectively creating new kinds of knowledge in the classroom. I teach medieval literature among other topics in an urban campus in Washington, DC, with a student body that includes a significant share of international students as well as American students from varied racial, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. Such a campus environment can generate animated conversations—particularly on the topics of race and social justice.

In a recent iteration of my course on the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer and modern-day adaptations of his works, one of our required texts was *Telling Tales*, a literary anthology by Nigerian British poet and spoken-word performance artist Patience Agbabi.<sup>1</sup> In Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, a group of pilgrims varied in gender, age, social rank, geographical origins, and occupations engage in a storytelling contest, and Agbabi transforms Chaucer's medieval pilgrimage into a multiracial cast of storytellers in present-day London. "Sharps an Flats,"<sup>2</sup> Agbabi's spoken-word counterpoint to Chaucer's antisemitic "Prioress's Tale," sparked a wide-ranging class discussion about modern racial violence and harmful legacies of the medieval past.

By this point in the semester, our class had already read Chaucer's "Prioress's Tale" in the original Middle English, and we had discussed our various uneasy reactions to his antisemitic story of violence set in an unspecified multiethnic Asian city inhabited by Christians and Jews.<sup>3</sup> The Prioress recounts the martyrdom of a young Christian boy, and she presents her entire versified performance as if it were an extended song of prayer to the Virgin Mary; all the while, she circulates disturbing medieval stereotypes that vilify her story's Jewish characters and the narrative concludes with a state-sanctioned killing of Jews en masse.<sup>4</sup> Agbabi, by contrast, assigns her spoken-word poem "Sharps an Flats" to a fictive Afro-Caribbean social justice activist in Britain who relates a story that gives posthumous voice to an individual Black victim of unprovoked violence in modern London.<sup>5</sup>

Agbabi's choice to transport Chaucer's story into a radically new sociopolitical context generated a range of responses in the classroom. Some of the students who identified as African American and as Afro-Caribbean, and who were familiar with the conventions of spoken-word poetry in the US, welcomed Agbabi's engagements with social jus-

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1 Agbabi, *Telling Tales*.

2 *Ibid.*, 81–82.

3 Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, "Prioress's Tale," lines 488–94.

4 *Ibid.*, lines 453–87 and 864–90. See Heng, *England and Jews*, 76.

5 Agbabi, *Telling Tales*, 116.

tice activism and her transformation of a medieval antisemitic narrator into a contemporary Black British performance artist committed to social justice.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, some students—whether or not they happened to self-identify as Jewish—expressed concerns that Agbabi’s adaptation could obscure the specific history of antisemitism that we had been discussing as a crucial background for Chaucer’s poem. Does a story that centers a modern Black victim of violence, and foregrounds contemporary racial and socioeconomic injustices, risk displacing what was originally a conversation about medieval English forms of antisemitism?

One student of color, who self-identified in this particular context as Jewish, remarked that she didn’t actually think about Agbabi’s adaptation in terms of “replacing” one particular history for another, but rather she interpreted the modern work as a reminder of how vulnerable groups separated by time and space (Jewish and Black diaspora communities, in this case) can share certain experiences of violence. From this point onward, our discussion turned to the question of how distinct forms of xenophobia and violence in the medieval past—made evident through the texts and artworks that we examine in a classroom setting—can inform careful considerations of racial injustice in our present.

At this point in the class discussion, I felt it was appropriate to acknowledge the heterogeneous perspectives and identities we had in the classroom. I never expect anyone in class to act as the “spokesperson” for some identity category they might happen to embody, but in this particular context I observed that Agbabi’s poem did resonate with me individually as a queer Asian American, and a son of immigrants, who does not identify as Jewish nor as Black. I pointed to one line of “Sharps an Flats” where the posthumous Black British narrator refers to “my spar [i.e., pal, buddy, mate] Damilola,”<sup>7</sup> an allusion to the high-profile murder of ten-year-old Nigerian immigrant Damilola Taylor who was stabbed in southeast London on November 27, 2000, while he was walking home from a library; he had been mocked for his African accent and taunted with homophobic epithets before his killing.<sup>8</sup> Agbabi’s modern Chaucerian poem with its vivid portrayal of the complex conditions of modern-day violence helped me to carefully consider how simultaneous forms of oppression are interrelated. It was through our classroom discussion that I had come to recognize Damilola Taylor as a target of violence not only due to anti-immigrant xenophobia but also the homophobia of his assailants.<sup>9</sup>

Our discussion of Agbabi’s poem alluding to xenophobic and homophobic violence against a young Black immigrant in contemporary Britain, along with Chaucer’s own story of medieval English antisemitism displaced to a city in Asia, opened up a nuanced conversation about forms of violence and injustice across time and space. What does it mean to read medieval literature, or adaptations of medieval stories, not only to understand their historical contexts but also to read in a pursuit of racial justice? How can

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**6** For a videorecording of Agbabi performing this piece, see Agbabi, “The Prioress’ Tale.”

**7** Agbabi, *Telling Tales*, 82.

**8** Peachey, “Damilola African Accent”; Bright, “Damilola ‘gay link.’”

**9** I discuss “Sharps an Flats” further in the “Pilgrimage” chapter of this book.

people of divergent backgrounds come together to address past and ongoing harms of racism and related oppressions?

### Claiming Collective Identities

This book, *Antiracist Medievalisms*, starts with my own account of a classroom experience to indicate that conversations about medieval and modern forms of xenophobia, racism, and oppression never occur in a vacuum.<sup>10</sup> In recent years, public and academic discussions about antiracism in medieval studies have addressed egregious acts of racist violence and overt manifestations of white supremacy. Cord J. Whitaker's *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking* demonstrates how the so-called "alt-right" or ethnonationalist groups throughout predominantly white countries exploit fantasies of a European medieval past in order to vilify blackness (and Muslims) and to nostalgically valorize Christian whiteness,<sup>11</sup> and a longstanding rhetorical and conceptual alignment of blackness and criminality in Western culture has deep implications for anti-Black violence and the global Black Lives Matter movement today.<sup>12</sup> Years before antiracist protests after the killing of George Floyd contributed to a resurgence of grassroots efforts to remove symbols of the Confederacy from public spaces throughout the US, Seeta Chaganti suggested how medievalists can intervene in critiquing the ongoing violence wrought by white nostalgia and Confederate monuments.<sup>13</sup>

The urgency to address racism in the field of medieval studies encompasses not only histories of anti-Black violence but also an interconnected set of social issues worldwide. Dorothy Kim's work names the harms of white supremacy in online medievalist communities and contemporary geopolitics,<sup>14</sup> and Adam Miyashiro reveals how appropriations of Knights Templar iconography in deadly acts of Islamophobic violence in Australasia participate in a long history of white settler colonialism whose origins can be traced back to militant European ideologies of Christian supremacy during what we now commonly call the Crusades.<sup>15</sup> Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh situates contemporary Islamophobic hate crimes in North America and Europe in the context of a harmful history of glamorizing anti-Muslim violence in Western culture (especially in medieval romances), and she connects "the historical representation of Muslims in the Middle Ages" and "violent and painful Islamophobia and racism" evident in medieval "objects of study" to her own "sense of the ever-present threat of attack" on individual Muslims and Muslim communities within predominantly white countries today.<sup>16</sup>

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**10** See also Hsy, "Racial Dynamics"; Kao, "White Attunement"; Kao, "#palefacesmatter?"

**11** Whitaker, *Black Metaphors*, 187–97.

**12** *Ibid.*, 1–3.

**13** Chaganti, "B-Sides"; Chaganti, "Confederate Monuments."

**14** Kim, *Alt-Medieval*; Kim, "White Supremacists."

**15** Miyashiro, "Our Deeper Past."

**16** Rajabzadeh, "Muslim Erasure," 2.

The harms of white supremacy and racist violence that were on display at the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, VA, in August 2017, where white supremacists and neo-Nazis marching to uphold the symbolism of a Confederate statue chanted anti-semitic slogans and held shields featuring modified Knights Templar iconography,<sup>17</sup> marked a watershed moment in galvanizing predominantly white medievalist communities to denounce racism through public statements.<sup>18</sup> Although the events at Charlottesville offered a vital sociopolitical “awakening” for white medievalists who had not publicly taken action against racism before, a deep understanding of the historical and ongoing violence of white Christian supremacy was nothing “new” to Jews, Muslims, or people of color with experience working in medievalist spaces.<sup>19</sup>

For racialized minority groups and for people of color, interpreting the Middle Ages or transforming modern understandings of the medieval past (usually framed as a European Christian past specifically) requires a careful deployment of expertise as well as a complex form of disidentification with the field of study itself.<sup>20</sup> My use of the term “disidentification” refers to a phenomenon named by José Esteban Muñoz, whose analysis of cultural productions by queer people of color attends to “the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate” environments that are hostile, exclusionary, or alienating to people who are deemed to be in the minority relative to a mainstream or dominant culture,<sup>21</sup> and to “disidentify” means “to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject.”<sup>22</sup> People of color who choose to disidentify with a medieval past can work to transform existing norms in order to create new worlds, or in the words of Muñoz, “perpetuate disidentification ... not only as a hermeneutic” (i.e., mode of analysis and interpretation) but also as “a possibility for freedom.”<sup>23</sup>

For scholars of color across all kinds of genders and orientations, acts of disidentification with the Middle Ages, as well as with the academic field of medieval studies, challenge persistent social messaging that we are perpetual “outsiders” to all things medieval. Whitaker, for instance, interprets a fellow person of color’s incredulous response to his own academic self-identification as a medievalist as suggesting that Whitaker had “apparently turned my back on African-American literature and culture.”<sup>24</sup> Even if Whitaker had learned from an early age that “black boys from Philadelphia are not supposed to concern themselves with knights and ladies,” his scholarship on race in European medieval culture refutes the idea that blackness marks him as “out of time and

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**17** Whitaker, *Black Metaphors*, 187–97.

**18** Medieval Academy of America, “Medievalists Respond to Charlottesville.”

**19** Medievalists of Color, “Solidarity With Our Jewish Colleagues.”

**20** See forthcoming publications: Arvas, McCannon, and Trujillo, eds., “Critical Confessions Now”; Rambaran-Olm, Leake, and Goodrich, eds., “Race, Revulsion, and Revolution.”

**21** Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 4.

**22** *Ibid.*, 12.

**23** *Ibid.*, 179.

**24** Whitaker, “Race-ing the Dragon,” 3.

out of place” in the Middle Ages.<sup>25</sup> In *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas remembers being told as a child that the “real world held trouble enough for young Black girls, so there was no need for me to go off on a quest to seek [the] Neverlands, Middle-Earths, or Fantasias” of medieval and fantasy worlds.<sup>26</sup> Even if Thomas enjoyed medieval and fantasy fiction as a Black girl and as an adult, her scholarship on fictional worlds centering Black female characters confronts how often people of color are made to feel we “do not belong either in magical medieval settings or in the spaceships of the future.”<sup>27</sup>

These pervasive feelings of being “out of time and out of place” in the Middle Ages, and the desire to transform understandings of the medieval past accordingly, also affect non-Black people of color. In *Re-Enchanted: The Rise of Children’s Fantasy Literature in the Twentieth Century*, Maria Sachiko Cecire, an American of Japanese-Italian descent, notes a formative moment of “racialized self-alienation” as a young girl seeing her own dark hair and eyes in a mirror and realizing she would never “be a blonde-haired, blue-eyed fairy-tale princess.”<sup>28</sup> Cecire’s study of anglophone American and British children’s literature addresses the “role that actual medieval literature plays in the rise and shape of medievalist children’s fantasy” and idealizing a particular transnational vision of racialized whiteness and social privilege that coldly excludes more people than it includes.<sup>29</sup> Rajabzadeh, self-identifying as an Iranian American and as a Muslim, notes the pains and fears that reading medieval romances glorifying violence against Muslims can create for her even in the process of conducting her own research and scholarship.<sup>30</sup>

Whitaker, Thomas, Cecire, and Rajabzadeh each write from divergently gendered racial and ethnic backgrounds—and they each work within the particular disciplinary conventions of their respective academic fields and intended audiences—but they all perform strategies of disidentifying with the Middle Ages. Each offers a distinct recognition of being (to adapt an idea from Cecire) racially “exiled” from medieval pasts that are constructed as exclusively white, European, and Christian.<sup>31</sup> Such a pervasive feeling of racial exile informs an intellectual drive to understand, and to transform, a profoundly alienating sense of the medieval past.

This book explores how people of color who do not (exclusively) trace their ancestry to Europe can claim and transform divergent racial, social, and intellectual relationships to the Middle Ages—not only in the space of the classroom, but also through scholarship or artistic creations. White medievalists trained in reflective modes of analyzing medieval European literature and culture have produced informative books on the complexities of affect and medieval studies, as well as thoughtful assessments of medieval-

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**25** Ibid.

**26** Thomas, *Dark Fantastic*, 1.

**27** Ibid., 73.

**28** Cecire, *Re-Enchanted*, vii.

**29** Ibid., viii.

**30** Rajabzadeh, “Muslim Erasure,” 1–2.

**31** Cecire, *Re-Enchanted*, vii.

ism and fantasy through the academic field of critical whiteness studies,<sup>32</sup> but this book is not interested in developing approaches to affect and medievalism that rely upon marked or unmarked structures of white feeling. I explore how public understandings of the past can change if a global medievalist community situates the scholarly expertise and lived experiences of people of color at the center of our ongoing discussions about what the Middle Ages can mean today.

Thomas has identified a systemic “imagination gap” in medieval and fantasy genres that craft magical and historically distant worlds by means of excluding or marginalizing characters of color within them, and she observes that the global industries of publishing and popular media have long failed to envision communities of color as their audiences.<sup>33</sup> Thomas calls for a proliferation of “stories [narrated] from the perspectives of readers, writers, fans, and audiences who are racialized” as people of color to counter this longstanding imagination gap,<sup>34</sup> and she emphasizes the importance of “restorying the imagination itself” by centering people of color as protagonists within fictive worlds and also as the creators and audiences of such stories.<sup>35</sup> My account of a classroom discussion of Agbabi’s “Sharps an Flats” offers one example of how the “restorying” of one medieval tale, through a work composed by a contemporary poet of color, can resonate with a racially heterogeneous audience. One of my objectives in this book is “restorying” the past of medievalism itself, showing how people of color have always been part of the history or the stories that can be told about medievalism—even if such contributions have not been widely recognized by the academy nor by a general public.

This book tells stories of people of color engaging in varied forms of medievalism, a phenomenon that I expansively define as drawing inspiration from a medieval past through cultural productions such as visual art, literature, political writings, scholarship, storytelling, or performance.<sup>36</sup> In approaching medievalism in this capacious way to encompass forms of cultural critique as well as works of art, I address the academic study of a historicized medieval past as well as non-academic receptions of the Middle Ages—including interpretations of things understood or “felt” to have medieval origins. *Antiracist Medievalisms* argues that people of color are vital figures in shaping meanings of the medieval past for modern audiences. I examine how medievalism operates at different points in time, from the age of anti-Asian “Yellow Peril” in the late nineteenth century to our current era of Black Lives Matter and related racial justice movements. Whether I address historical contexts or present-day concerns, I situate people of color as political agents, thinkers, and creators in their own right. By tracing medievalism through literature and cultural productions created by people of color, I demonstrate transformative possibilities of decentering whiteness in medieval studies.

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**32** Burger and Crocker, eds., *Medieval Affect*; Prendergast and Trigg, *Affective Medievalism*; Young, *Habits of Whiteness*.

**33** Thomas, *Dark Fantastic*, 6.

**34** *Ibid.*, 11.

**35** *Ibid.*, 163.

**36** Hsy, “Co-disciplinarity,” 43. See D’Arcens, ed., *Medievalism*, for many current approaches.

This book grows out of my longstanding interests in the multilingual and multicultural heterogeneity of the Middle Ages as well as a commitment to addressing race and racism in the present-day field of medieval studies,<sup>37</sup> and it is my hope that the global medievalist community can shift how it addresses racism and cultural appropriation in the public sphere. As Sierra Lomuto has stated on the medieval studies website *In the Middle*, “public medievalist scholarship” that opposes racism must “not only center people of color in their discussions (a bare minimum expectation),” but it must also “identify white supremacy as a power structure” that does not solely “reside in the hearts and minds of individuals, but within oppressive institutions.”<sup>38</sup> Denouncing the “abuse” of the medieval past by extremist groups, as the title of one recent book co-authored by white medievalists conspicuously does,<sup>39</sup> can make it too easy for a global medievalist community to ignore how the overwhelming whiteness of our own institutions and professional structures quietly continue to exclude, alienate, and harm people of color.<sup>40</sup>

Critical race scholar and cultural theorist Sara Ahmed has observed that the “reduction of racism to the [externalized] figure of ‘the racist’ allows structural or institutional forms of racism” such as the longstanding whiteness of academic publishing itself to remain unchallenged, and by “projecting racism onto a figure that is easily discarded ... as someone who is ‘not us’” (such as the open racist or modern-day extremist),<sup>41</sup> white medievalists can create a falsely reassuring sense of progressive collective identity that leaves longstanding racial power structures unchanged. Moreover, earnest calls by white medievalists to defend an “abused” Middle Ages can misleadingly send a message to the public that medieval Europe was somehow “innocent” of historical forms of racism, xenophobia, or prejudice in its own right.<sup>42</sup>

Rather than trying to “rescue” a medieval European past from unsavory connections to present-day racism and violence, I trace how people of color have long confronted racist legacies of the European Middle Ages and have powerfully rejected medievalizing endorsements of white supremacy. Just as importantly, I take up Thomas’s call for “restorying” medievalism itself, attending to how people of color and racialized minority communities have long repurposed medieval pasts in order to build new forms of solidarity and to create a more just world.

This book, in other words, attends to the sophisticated strategies that people of color employ in order to disidentify with the Middle Ages and to disprove the notion

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**37** Hsy, *Trading Tongues*; Barrington and Hsy, “Chaucer’s Global Orbits”; Hsy, “Antiracist Medievalisms”; Hsy, “Language-Networks”; Hsy and Orlemanski, “Race and Medieval Studies”; Hsy, Pearman, and Eyley, “Disabilities in Motion”; Hurley, Hsy, and Kraebel, “Thinking Across Tongues.”

**38** Lomuto, “Public Medievalism.”

**39** Kaufman and Sturtevant, *Extremists Abuse the Medieval Past*.

**40** Medievalists of Color, “Race and Medieval Studies”; Chaganti, “Statement Regarding ICMS”; Chan, “White Supremacy”; Coles, Hall, and Thompson, “BlackKKKShakespearean”; Otaño-Gracia, “Lost in Our Field”; Otaño-Gracia and Armenti, “Constructing Prejudice”; RaceB4Race Executive Board, “End Publishing Gatekeeping”; Rambaran-Olm, “Misnaming the Medieval.”

**41** Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 150.

**42** Whitaker, *Black Metaphors*, 191 and 193. See also Wekker, *White Innocence*, 139–67.



that the medieval past is exclusively white property. In an essay foundational in critical race theory entitled “Whiteness as Property,” Cheryl I. Harris demonstrates how (in societies structured by white supremacy) whiteness is not only inextricably tied to and invested in property rights, but whiteness itself is also a form of property; that is, “the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset,” and whiteness is a property to be claimed, cherished, possessed, and defended.<sup>43</sup> In her analysis of race in the context of Shakespeare studies, Kim F. Hall has observed that race in the premodern past, as well as the present, is “a social construct that is fundamentally more about power and culture than about biological difference,” and white anglophone discourses of race have “been used invariably to rationalize property interests, either in the use of humans as property, as in slavery, or the appropriation of land or resources, as in colonization.”<sup>44</sup>

In the context of academic Shakespeare studies, Arthur L. Little, Jr., asks if there’s an unspoken “working assumption in the field” that the entire Renaissance or early modern period itself is, “as a field, white property.”<sup>45</sup> My own approach to medieval literary and cultural analysis seeks to dislodge a pervasive felt understanding, or deeply entrenched social encoding, of the entire time and place of the European Middle Ages as white property. I’m interested in how the critical project of “restorying” medieval pasts by people of color can help everyone—especially but not exclusively people of color—to interrogate our own identities and to deeply self-reflect on our sociopolitical positions. Just as importantly, I recognize that academic medievalists are never dispassionate interpreters of historical phenomena.

Although my professional training is in literary and cultural analysis and most of the materials discussed in this book are literature or related texts, I maintain that medievalism always constructs cultural understandings of a medieval past regardless of the media it uses: visual art, historical narrative, architecture, political discourse, scholarship, or performance. As I have stated elsewhere, “academic studies of medievalism span a number of established disciplines and modes of inquiry,” including “literary criticism, art history, and [media and performance] studies, to name just a few.”<sup>46</sup> The academic field of medieval studies and the creative practices of adapting medieval materials are all “about” constructing (or reconstructing) a medieval past—so I don’t draw a rigid distinction between academic medievalism and so-called amateur, non-academic, or popular medievalism. Instead, I suggest that professional academic scholarship about the Middle Ages and the cultural reception of the medieval past are two sides of the same coin. I attend to what medievalist and queer theorist Carolyn Dinshaw calls a “shared desire in both amateurs and professionals” to re-create a medieval past, and in sympathy with Dinshaw, I explore the racially heterogeneous and “complex interplay of

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**43** Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1713.

**44** Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 6.

**45** Little, “Re-Historicizing Race,” 88.

**46** Hsy, “Co-disciplinarity,” 43.

nonacademic and academic agents” that drives intellectual, artistic, and public forms of medievalism.<sup>47</sup>

In a foundational essay on race, affect, and religion in medieval studies, Dinshaw asks “[what] the medieval European past [might] have to do with my Asian American present,” and she situates a contextually rich reading of “India” in the Middle English *Travels of Sir John Mandeville* within long histories of Western colonialism and first-person reflections on her own “pale and fair” Indian background.<sup>48</sup> Dinshaw notes that the “paleness of my face” not only creates a complex “affect” within predominantly white medievalist professional spaces but her paleness is also “a racial/religious mark that affords me a feel for the sedimentation of times in the present, the medieval in the modern,” and this “‘feel’ is constitutive of me as ... a queer medievalist” who hopes that “‘the pale’ of our disciplines can be expanded, redefined, to engage with the challenging heterogeneity of our times.”<sup>49</sup> Dinshaw elsewhere expresses a feeling of “kinship with the amateur [medievalist] that I can only call queer,” and not just because “I am a queer—a dyke and only sort of white,” but also because “I am a medievalist” and “studying the Middle Ages is, finally, about desire—for another time, for meaning, for life.”<sup>50</sup>

My own thinking about the past as a queer Asian American medievalist also grapples with the heterogeneity of our present, but my approach diverges from Dinshaw’s in a few respects. As a person who does not share Dinshaw’s paleness and who is typically recognized as “Asian” in some way due to my facial features and seemingly unpronounceable monosyllabic surname, my presence in medievalist professional spaces doesn’t produce the particular kinds of affect that Dinshaw so thoughtfully explores.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, my interest lies not so much in the question of what the medieval past might mean to me as a particular queer Asian American medievalist but rather the significance of medieval pasts for racialized communities more broadly. *Antiracist Medievalisms* asks what is at stake when communities of color create things (texts, stories, objects) that “feel” medieval, and I examine how people from heterogeneous racial positionings create urgent feelings of pastness or reinvent a distant past for present-day concerns.

Affective bonds with the past are never innocent nor neutral; they can be fraught and perpetuate harmful ideas and practices—or they can set the stage for transformative futures. This book explores divergent strategies of claiming or disidentifying with a medieval past (whatever “medieval” means in any given context) to question received notions of history and to pursue racial justice. I hope this book opens up space for new stories of medievalism and what it achieves—in the past and the present.

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47 Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?*, 38–39.

48 Dinshaw, “Pale Faces,” 20.

49 *Ibid.*, 40–41.

50 Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?*, 32.

51 Hsy, “Racial Dynamics.” See also Kao, “White Attunement”; Kao, “#palefacesmatter?”

## The Knights Templar Go to Chinatown

I start with some stories of medievalism in a seemingly unlikely space of interracial encounter and racialized identity performance: Chinatown theaters. In 1883 local chapters of the Knights Templar, a “social brotherhood” with a mission to “defend the Christian faith,” made “pilgrimages” from various points across the United States to gather in San Francisco, CA.<sup>52</sup> These white Knights were welcomed with pomp and pageantry at various sites along the way, and commemorative programs hawked a range of souvenirs and gilded chivalric artifacts.<sup>53</sup> After converging from their various points of origin, the Knights marched in San Francisco under Gothic and Norman arches with the cross and motto “in hoc signo vinces” [the imperial Latin phrase meaning “in this sign you shall conquer”] in a celebration of co-called “Anglo-Saxon” Christian identity.<sup>54</sup> In one speech, Grand Master Benjamin Dean declares there was “nothing” significant in California, Indigenous nor Hispanic, “before the Anglo-Saxon came.”<sup>55</sup>

The grand ball held in Boston on January 31, 1883, to announce and raise funds for the pilgrimage itself had taken place in an elaborate building decorated with a “large painting in heroic style of the warrior who, in the days of early knighthood, clove through the Saracens—Richard the Lion-hearted.”<sup>56</sup> It is worth noting that these modern-day Knights Templar traveling across the country didn’t openly present themselves as violent; they rhetorically distanced themselves from the anti-Muslim warfare of the medieval past by claiming a well-intentioned mission of “peace and good-will among all men” and presented their transcontinental journey as one “undertaken for pleasure, profit, and friendship.”<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, writings produced by the Knights—and contemporary accounts of their travels—assert the perceived superiority of white Christian masculinity over everything (and everyone) else.<sup>58</sup>

Fusing medieval themes of crusade, pilgrimage, and adventure, *The California Pilgrimage of Boston Commandery Knights Templars, August 4–September 4, 1883* reads as much as a travel account and record of medievalizing performances as an ethnographic study affirming the inferiority of non-white and non-Christian communities. Its chapter

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**52** Roberts, *California Pilgrimage*, 6.

**53** *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, August 18, 1883, 8. The front page of *The Seattle Daily Post–Intelligencer*, August 12, 1883, describes the Centennial exhibition display of “magnificent bronzes” including “Mounted Knight on a Pedestal” in bronze, silver, and gold, “Knights Templar armor in silver and bronze, with a shield bearing a cross, and the other the coat-of-arms of California,” and a globe of silver and gold with a “knight in armor with drawn sword” (information attributed to *S.F. News Letter*).

**54** Roberts, *California Pilgrimage*, 169.

**55** *Ibid.*, 249.

**56** *Ibid.*, 22.

**57** *Ibid.*, 6.

**58** Upon the departure from Boston, four Knights, “dressed in women’s clothes, gave a minstrel show on the cars as the ‘colored quartet,’” and even if they were all “prominent business men” they “cracked original jokes and make the excursionists roar.” *Ibid.*, 163. Such performances assert a collective white identity by exploiting racial and gendered stereotyping.

on San Francisco's Chinatown describes the neighborhood's physical layout and demographics (including race, gender, and professions of its inhabitants) and a white "Sir Tristram Burges, a notable guide in Chinatown" leads the Knights through the "'Celestial' quarter" on a festival day to witness a "dark-visaged pagan" burning "cheap paper" and offered up as "golden prayers," and the gutters produced a "pungent odor and lighted up the scenes of barbaric peculiarity."<sup>59</sup>

The Knights' ethnographic "pilgrimage" not only exoticizes Chinatown; it also exhibits an unwitting irony rivaling Mark Twain's travel narrative *Innocents Abroad*.<sup>60</sup> The account of the Knights' visit to the Chinese opera on August 17, 1883, at the Grand Chinese Theatre on Washington Street reveals more about the entitlement of the white audience members than it does about the Chinese performance itself. The Knights fill the entire space (angering Chinese who have been waiting to enter) and applaud its "acts ... from military dramas," stories of "heroes [and] strong men," and acrobatically "stag[ed] fights between ... warriors" via "whirling," "tumbling," and "gymnastics."<sup>61</sup> The Knights enjoy the masculine athleticism on display but find it "all strange, unintelligible, and queer."<sup>62</sup> Moreover, they laugh at inappropriate moments, disconcerting the Chinese actors.<sup>63</sup>

However curious these Knights might be in observing this performance, they show little appreciation for the conventions of Chinese theater or appropriate forms of audience behavior within such a cultural space (even if an official program could have prepared them better).<sup>64</sup> The Knights arrayed in "Templar jewels and badges" with "ladies [in] opera hats and diamonds"<sup>65</sup> made their own presence conspicuous, asserting their entitlement to a Chinese social space and displaying ignorance of an alien performance tradition, enacted in this context exclusively by Chinese men and boys, which they dismiss as "queer." Popular news coverage of the "pilgrimage" transformed the Knights themselves into a strange spectacle and an unnerving occupation of Chinese space. One newspaper reported that Chinatown was "uncomfortably full of white people" during the Knights' visit, with "special performances given at the theaters" from which Chinese "were excluded."<sup>66</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 157. Sir Tristram Burges is elsewhere identified as the Grand Senior Warden of the Grand Commandery of California, viii et passim.

<sup>60</sup> Twain, *Innocents Abroad*.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 154–55.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ira G. Hott's *Pacific Coast Guide and Programme of the Knights Templar Triennial Conclave* (San Francisco, CA, 1883) describes "Chinese Theatre" (89–91), comparing its minimalist staging to historical Shakespearean practices (89). For an account of performances in this particular theater on Washington Street, see Arthur Inkersley, "The Chinese Drama in California," *The Strand Magazine*, May 1898, 402–9.

<sup>65</sup> Roberts, *California Pilgrimage*, 154.

<sup>66</sup> *Japan Weekly Mail* (citing *St. Louis Globe Diplomat*), 77.

Stylized battle and Chinese exclusion weren't innocent play in the day's political climate.<sup>67</sup> At the height of restrictive and discriminatory Chinese Exclusion laws in the United States and Canada, the casual racism of the Knights in the theater embodies a performance of toxic medievalism.<sup>68</sup> San Francisco experienced anti-Chinese violence in 1877 when white men rallied under the cry "The Chinamen Must Go!" and supported agitators embarking on a "crusade" against Chinese laborers and their employers.<sup>69</sup> Inflammatory rhetorics of the Knights of Labor and militant white brotherhoods, at times supported by police, incited anti-Chinese massacres and expulsions in 1885 (Rock Springs, WY; Tacoma, WA), and 1886 (Seattle, WA; Vancouver, BC).<sup>70</sup> In the lead-up to one of the notorious incidents of anti-Chinese violence (in Tacoma), an opera house served as the staging ground for incendiary rhetoric.<sup>71</sup>

In the geopolitical climate of 1883, white Knights entering a Chinatown theater—and forcing the Chinese to be "excluded"—are not innocent tourists. The Knights and ladies "occup[ied] the whole auditorium," according to the *California Pilgrimage*, and "the unobstructed entrance of 'white folks' and their ladies enraged the Chinese theatre-goers, whose violence called the police."<sup>72</sup> The written account of the white Knights' occupation of Chinese space and reliance upon police force attributes the idea of "violence" to the Chinese, but not to the white intruders themselves. In their disruptive "medieval" self-presentation and calling of police in order to clear the space for their own exclusive use, these Knights perform an assertion of white supremacy and pose a threat to Chinese safety.

### Spectacular Solidarity: Fighting Antisemitism and Sinophobia

I move to New York City's Chinatown for another instance of white audiences filling a Chinese theater—but this time, they were invited. On May 11, 1903, a Chinese theater in Doyers Street hosted a performance fundraiser for Jewish victims of the recent Kishinev pogrom (a massacre of Jews, enabled by local authorities, in what is now Chişinău, Moldova, and at the time part of the Russian Empire).<sup>73</sup> The atrocity attracted international outrage, and the Chinese community joined American Jews in response. Joseph H. Singleton, the Chinese American manager of the theater, said to the Jewish relief society: "We want to help you. We believe in liberty and want to aid those who suffer from bigotry."<sup>74</sup>

<sup>67</sup> "Next the President of the United States, decked out more fantastically than ever chief of the various tribes of redskins in war paint, partook of a supper with the Emperor of China, this scene, too, ending up with fire and bloodshed" (Roberts, *California Pilgrimage*, 155).

<sup>68</sup> I expand on my term "toxic medievalism" and its relationship to sinophobia in particular in the "Plague" chapter of this book.

<sup>69</sup> Perlman, "Anti-Chinese Agitation," 254–55. See also Lew-Williams, *Chinese Must Go*.

<sup>70</sup> Gomez et al., "Mapping Anti-Chinese Violence."

<sup>71</sup> Morgan, *Puget's Sound*, 294–97.

<sup>72</sup> Roberts, *California Pilgrimage*, 154.

<sup>73</sup> Seligman, "Chinese for Jews."

<sup>74</sup> "Evidences Chinamen are Mentally Broadening," 5.

News reports confirmed the Kishinev massacre was provoked by “blood libel” narratives falsely blaming Jews for the death of a young Christian man,<sup>75</sup> and such propaganda has its origins in medieval “blood libel” traditions that instigated acts of antisemitic violence throughout Europe.<sup>76</sup> In raising funds and awareness for pogrom victims, this act of solidarity across communities confronted one of the most harmful legacies of the medieval past.

Even more remarkable than the act of solidarity itself is the historical context for the Chinese-language drama performed that night. Entitled *The Lost Ten Tribes* (seemingly evoking the biblical dispersal of Jews), the Chinese play staged a traumatic event for the Han Chinese: their subjugation by the Tartars, and the imposition of the queue (i.e., long braided hairstyle) with its origins in medieval Eurasia.<sup>77</sup> One journalist characterized the play as depicting “the times of the bloody Tartars, when the Chinese were first made to wear the queue by their savage conquerors as a token of subjection,”<sup>78</sup> with Manchu domination in the early Qing Dynasty resonating with histories of Jewish oppression by imperial rulers.<sup>79</sup>

Some (white) journalists at the time sneered at this alliance of Chinese and Jews: “As Shakespeare might have said, one touch of abuse makes the alien races kin.”<sup>80</sup> For Chinese Americans, the global harms of urban antisemitism and sinophobia were undeniable, and this apparent “unholy alliance” (or kinship) of two diaspora communities grew out of shared experiences of prejudice and marginalization. Chinese American civil rights activist Wong Chin Foo (1847–1898) conjoined the legacies of medieval anti-semitic “blood libel” to modern anti-Chinese violence when he critiqued “rat libel”—a term that Wong’s primary biographer has coined to refer to the dehumanizing and ubiquitous “Yellow Peril” discourses and visual art of the Exclusion era equating Chinese with filth, infestation, disease, and barbarity.<sup>81</sup> A long history of “libel,” discourses of contamination and plague, and experiences of urban violence conjoin the historical phenomena of antisemitism and this era’s sinophobia. To modify a phrase from Edward W. Said, modern sinophobia—insofar as it is rooted in European modes of discursive “othering”—emerges as a “strange, secret sharer of Western anti-Semitism.”<sup>82</sup>

Wong’s repurposing of “blood libel” to critique “rat libel” speaks to some of his other forays into autoethnography and fictive forms of medievalism. Wong’s autoethnographic writing, most pointedly, inverted white-authored tropes of Chinatown travel. In “The Chinese in New York” (1888), Wong assumes the position of a “native informant” while

**75** Seligman, “Chinese for Jews.”

**76** Heng, *England and Jews*; Rubin, *Gentile Tales*.

**77** Seligman, “Chinese for Jews.”

**78** “Evidences Chinamen are Mentally Broadening,” 5.

**79** Seligman, “Chinese for Jews.”

**80** Untitled, *The Indianapolis Journal*, evoking Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*: “One touch of nature makes the whole world kin” (3.3.181).

**81** Seligman, *First Chinese American*, 101. See also Tchen and Yeats, *Yellow Peril!*

**82** Said, *Orientalism*, 27.

strategically employing an objective third-person voice; his text describes Chinese hygiene and grooming, religious worship, food preparation, and rich food traditions.<sup>83</sup> Wong's medievalism took shape through the historical romance "Poh Yuin Ko, The Serpent-Princess" (1888) and serial novel *Wu Chih Tien, The Celestial Empress* (1889), incorporating allusions to the fourteenth-century Chinese *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三國演義) and Tang Dynasty figures.<sup>84</sup> Wong's fictions were presented as if they were English "translations" of Chinese originals, with each narrative featuring a healthy dose of heroism.

As literary critic Hsuan L. Hsu observes, the novel *Wu Chih Tien* "[takes] as its protagonist the handsome, robust, intelligent, and sympathetic prince," and it "resists the equation of whiteness with imperial manhood" so pervasive in the era's historical romances.<sup>85</sup> Such works offered Asian-inspired alternatives to the historical romances of Sir Walter Scott and contemporaneous forms of medievalism such as Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.<sup>86</sup> By using autoethnography to subvert a white gaze and to craft his own brand of medievalism, Wong created new spaces for Chinese Americans in lieu of imperial white Christian masculinity.

Perhaps anticipating the alliance of Chinese Americans and Jewish Americans in the Chinese theater on Doyers Street in 1903, Wong himself had sought to encourage cross-cultural understanding by using Chinese theater for social change. In 1883, Wong wrote a few articles promoting Chinese theater. One essay outlined how theatrical traditions of Chinese and Western cultures diverge, with Chinese productions using minimal staging and props without adhering to Eurocentric expectations of "realism."<sup>87</sup> Another of Wong's publications proposed taking a Chinese troupe "on the road" to encourage cross-cultural understanding: "I have an idea that will help each people to understand the other. I will establish the Chinese theatre in the United States for the presentation of the Chinese drama, the oldest in the world, going back to the first stages of recorded history."<sup>88</sup> Although Wong's vision went unrealized, his advocacy aimed to make a seemingly alien, "strange," or "queer" art form into something that could be appreciated on its own terms—and respected as a cultural tradition with a legacy predating foundational works of medieval Europe.

These concurrent medievalisms in Chinatown theaters suggest divergent deployments of the medieval past. Toxic medievalisms can exoticize, intimidate, and incite violence, but antiracist medievalisms can confront prejudice, increase understanding, and build solidarity. The complex duality of medievalism is made clear by the actions of the white Knights Templar and contemporaneous Chinese Americans.

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**83** Wong, "Chinese in New York."

**84** Wong, "Serpent-Princess"; Wong, *Celestial Empress. Wu Chih Tien* takes place in the time of Tang Dynasty figure Wu Zetian (武則天), China's only female ruler.

**85** Hsu, *Comparative Racialization*, 132.

**86** *Ibid.*, 109–38.

**87** Wong, "Chinese Stage."

**88** Wong, "Chinese Drama," September 2, 1883.

## Scope and Focus of this Book

In my discussion of medievalism and Chinatown theaters, I have shown how white Knights Templar and contemporaneous Chinese Americans aimed to reinvent the medieval past. In *The Black Middle Ages: Race and the Construction of the Middle Ages*, Matthew X. Vernon has argued that the “adoption of medieval texts” by nineteenth-century African Americans created a “surrogated kinship,” a feeling of connectedness with the past that is not based on notions of lineal descent nor direct ties to European cultural heritage.<sup>89</sup> I have described how early Chinese Americans crafted their own kinds of surrogated kinship via medievalism—through the space of the Chinatown theater and genres of historical romance. The surrogated kinship that Chinese Americans expressed with Jewish Americans challenges the idea that the medieval past is the exclusive property of white Christians. At the same time, this collective act of communities coming together in the performance space of a Chinatown theater produces what Muñoz might call transformative disidentifications across race, religion, language, and culture.

Within academia, an appreciation for the complexity of medievalism around the globe is expanding, including foundational work on the appropriation of Western medieval materials in contexts beyond Europe,<sup>90</sup> as well as beyond a privileged predominantly white “inner circle” of anglophone societies.<sup>91</sup> Cultural studies of global medievalism, racial representation, and the sociopolitical engagements of fan communities inform the scholarship of Kavita Mudan Finn and Rohit K. Dasgupta, to name a few.<sup>92</sup> This book focuses on people of color and racialized minority groups within predominantly white anglophone societies. African American and Afro-Caribbean scholars such as Maghan Keita, Barbara Lalla, Kofi Omoniyi Sylvanus Campbell, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, Matthew X. Vernon, and Cord J. Whitaker,<sup>93</sup> as well as non-Black medievalists,<sup>94</sup> have explored how European medieval artistic traditions inform anglophone Black contexts. *Antiracist Medievalisms* expands on this body of scholarship on medievalism by people of color by putting Black and non-Black communities in conversation with one another. Divergent critical and historical perspectives operate in solidarity to illuminate shared struggles.

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**89** Vernon, *Black Middle Ages*, 29.

**90** Davis and Altschul, eds., *Medievalisms in Postcolonial World*; Momma, “Medievalism—Colonialism—Orientalism”; Kabir and Williams, eds., *Postcolonial Approaches*; Warren, *Creole Medievalism*.

**91** Barrington and Hsy, “Chaucer’s Global Orbits”; Kearney and Medrano, *Mexican American Borderlands*.

**92** Finn, “Decolonizing Popular Medievalism”; Finn, “Queen of Sad Mischance,” 30–31; Finn, “Introduction,” 11–12; Dasgupta, “Queer Intimacies.”

**93** Keita, “Race”; Lalla, *Postcolonialisms*; Campbell, *Black Atlantic*; Thomas, *Dark Fantastic*; Vernon, *Black Middle Ages*; Whitaker, ed., “Making Race Matter”; Whitaker, “B(I)ack in the Middle Ages”; Whitaker, *Harlem Middle Ages*.

**94** Barrington, “Dark Whiteness”; Forni, *Chaucer’s Afterlife*; Wallace, “New Chaucer Topographies”; Warren, “Chaucer in Caribbean.”



Most of this book discusses the later nineteenth century through early twentieth century, with its “center of gravity” in the anglophone United States and Canada. This period coincided with the era of Chinese Exclusion in North America as well as anti-Chinese sentiment globally, and much of this book is indebted to Edlie L. Wong’s nuanced account of how American polemics of Black inclusion in civic life after Reconstruction were inextricably tied to discourses of Chinese exclusion.<sup>95</sup> This historical period was also, of course, an age of proliferating forms of medievalism throughout anglophone societies—across literature, visual art, and architecture. As Whitaker elegantly states: “Medievalism and the idea of the idyllic Middle Ages has continued to permeate popular ideas of the period since at least the eighteenth century,” and white nineteenth-century figures such as “Thomas Carlyle or Sir Walter Scott, especially in his *Ivanhoe*—took up the charge in the so-called medieval revival ... fictionaliz[ing] medieval historical events [and] emphasizing chivalric heroism.”<sup>96</sup> Non-Black scholars have noted how medievalism intricately shaped predominantly white expressions of national belonging before and after the Civil War.<sup>97</sup>

Acknowledging these broader contexts, this book centers manifold forms of medievalism crafted by people of color. Much of this book addresses the Chinese diaspora throughout North America, and I put Chinese Americans in dialogue with contemporaneous groups: African Americans, self-identified Eurasians (multiracial people of European and Asian ancestry), free black Creoles in Louisiana (*gens de couleur libres* or free people of color), as well as Arab and Jewish diaspora communities. The terminology used to refer to particular racial and ethnic identities will vary depending on context, as I aim to respect how people self-identify in their own time and place (in the historical past or today).<sup>98</sup>

As a general term I refer to “people of color” or “communities of color” not to erase the distinct histories of racialized ethnic groups but rather to foreground the power of coalitions, and to honor the multiracial solidarity movements through which the term “people of color” first arose.<sup>99</sup> In this context, the term “people of color” expresses racial identities in positive and affirming terms, rather than as a mere negation or “absence” of whiteness (as the term “nonwhite” can imply). I also respect the validity of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) and BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) as formulations used throughout anglophone North America and in the UK respectively. My use of the descriptor “minority” only signals how communities of color are outnumbered by white people within certain environments, and it does not imply that people of color are inherently “minor” or “lesser than” white people in any given multiracial context. My terminologies for particular communities of color vary throughout this book,

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**95** Wong, *Racial Reconstruction*.

**96** Whitaker, *Black Metaphors*, 194. See also Whitaker and Gabriele, “Ghosts of Nineteenth Century.”

**97** Barrington, *American Chaucers*; Moreland, *Medievalist Impulse*.

**98** I capitalize Black to signal contemporary sociopolitical identities shaped by African diaspora experiences, but the adjective “black” is not always capitalized in earlier historical instances or in quotations.

**99** Grady, “Why ‘BIPOC.’”

but what remains constant is an awareness of global white supremacy as a power structure that disadvantages and harms racialized minority groups.

Due to my disciplinary training in medieval British literature, my focus is communities of color within anglophone societies, but I seek to disrupt a pervasive form of white anglocentrism in medieval literary and cultural studies more broadly. This book pluralizes English across race and space by attending to heterogeneous racialized varieties of English such as Jamaican Patois (Patwa or Patwah), Black English, Spanglish (code-switching mixture of Spanish and English), Singlish (Singaporean English), Chinglish (English language influenced by Chinese), and poetic reinventions of Old English and Middle English—alongside poetry composed entirely in Chinese, as well as works by francophone and polyglot authors of color. Challenging what Shyama Rajendran calls “English raciolinguistic supremacist structures,”<sup>100</sup> the heterogeneous contents of this book invite readers to question the privileged or normative status of forms of English literary expression that are culturally coded as white.

I hope this book, in all its variety, can appeal to readers beyond academic medievalists. For readers with interests in the field of Ethnic Studies, these chapters trace how a received (or imposed) cultural repository of medieval materials shaped the formation of early minority literatures. My comparative approach to reception history puts communities of color in conversation, but I do not assume that all the authors I discuss directly knew each other’s work (even if they draw from similar influences). Some of my readings are exploratory, leaving room for future study. I hope this work models a mindful engagement across fields and creates dialogue across communities that are too often segregated.

### **Aims of this Book**

This book, simply put, makes three arguments.

First, academic medievalists who oppose racism must move beyond merely critiquing the most spectacularly violent forms of white medievalism and avoid casting the European Middle Ages themselves as somehow in need of defending. To talk of an “abused” medieval past implies that medieval Europe was somehow innocent of racism, and critiques of “bad” medievalism often emphasize white feelings and white audiences rather than the historical (and present) targets of racism. I am profoundly uninterested in whether the self-identified Knights Templar who occupied San Francisco’s Chinatown had any access to “accurate” information about the phenomena commonly called the Crusades nor how they got facts “wrong” in discussing the past. I focus on how these modern Knights Templar used the memory and fantasy of an illustrious past in order to assert and enforce Christian white supremacy—and I attend to the effects of these actions once they entered Chinese spaces.

Second, academics must value rich forms of medievalism practiced by and for people of color. The European medieval past in particular has complex meanings for racialized minority groups traditionally excluded from—and harmed by—forms of medieval-

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**100** Rajendran, “Raciolinguistic Supremacy,” 2.

ism prevalent in predominantly white cultural environments, and medievalism can be deployed for liberatory aims such as critiquing racism or combating exclusion and discrimination. My objective is not merely to make medieval studies more “inclusive” by incorporating more people of color into existing frameworks of study but rather to ask how the whole field transforms once people of color drive the conversations.

Third, medievalism by and for communities of color helps to tell a fuller story of multiracial solidarity and social justice activism from the late nineteenth century to today. In the spirit of Yuichiro Onishi’s scholarship on antiracism and Afro-Asian solidarity movements, I trace how medievalism has played a role in developing strategies for communities of color to work together toward ending the global “theory and practice of white supremacy.”<sup>101</sup> My discussions of nineteenth-century struggles against white supremacy are mindful of what Lisa Lowe calls the “intimacies” of four continents: Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Europe.<sup>102</sup>

My research methods and approach to opposing racism follow Tania Das Gupta, who notes that antiracism “names, analyzes, and provides the frameworks to engage in a process of ending racism and with it a multiplicity of other oppressions.”<sup>103</sup> My mode of antiracist analysis honors the methods of intersectional Black feminist and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw as well as queer and feminist scholars of color who examine how interrelated systems of oppression operate on the basis of race, gender, class, and disability (to name a few such phenomena).<sup>104</sup> If you need to educate yourself regarding antiracist work more broadly, *Dismantling Racism Works* defines concepts grounded in critical race theory in terms applicable to the US and predominantly white countries (see also the bibliography of readings at the end of this book).<sup>105</sup> The ensuing chapters in this book recognize medievalism as a productive means for racialized minority groups to engage with one another and address shared struggles.

The overall message of this book is that medievalism is always polemical. When anyone invokes the Middle Ages, they are making an argument about the past or its meanings for the present. This book is not about critiquing the “abuse” of the Middle Ages but rather understanding the social consequences of medievalizing rhetoric and imagery. For communities of color and racialized minority groups so often excluded from, and damaged by, predominantly white power structures, embracing medievalism can enable acts of resistance to oppression and help to dismantle systems of racial injustice.

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**101** Onishi, *Transpacific Antiracism*, 13 and 30. Afro-Asian alliance in the era of W. E. B. Du Bois and Black/Asian solidarity in the Civil Rights era are richly documented elsewhere. Bae and Tseng-Putterman, “Black-Asian Internationalism”; Blain, “Roots of Afro-Asia”; Itagaki, *Civil Racism*; Ossa and Lee-DiStefano, eds., *Afro-Asian Connections*; Wu, *Radicals on the Road*.

**102** Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*.

**103** Das Gupta, “Teaching Anti-Racist Research,” 456.

**104** Crenshaw, “Intersectionality”; James and Wu, “Race, Ethnicity, Disability”; Kafer and Kim, “Edges of Intersectionality.” See also Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 258; Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*.

**105** “Racism Defined.” *Dismantling Racism Works* (dRworks) Web Workbook.

## What's Medieval? Time, Space, Genre, Worldbuilding

This book sometimes uses “medieval” and “medievalism” in reference to cultural and literary contexts beyond Europe. By disassociating the term “medieval” from an exclusively European framework, I signal the interconnectedness of peoples, ideas, and cultures across Afro-Eurasia throughout the time period broadly recognized as coinciding with a European Middle Ages (generally the years ca. 500 to 1500 in the Common Era). This recognition of a mobile and networked medieval world acts in conjunction with literary and cultural historian Geraldine Heng’s capacious approach to the “early globalities” of medieval trade, travel, and exchange.<sup>106</sup>

My use of “medieval” does not merely impose a European framework onto non-European cultures, since people who do not identify as European have their own modes of expressing relationships to some idea of a medieval past.<sup>107</sup> Within conventions of Chinese literary historiography in East Asia, for instance, the English word “medieval” as a translation of the Chinese characters 中世 for “Middle Period/Era” can designate a dynamic time after a classical age of antiquity and before the emergence of modernity (regardless of how that modernity is defined).<sup>108</sup> Historians of Africa such as Michael A. Gomez use the term “medieval” in order to acknowledge African cultures and peoples as active participants in world history and to recognize Africa as profoundly interconnected with Asia and Europe throughout what Heng would call a global Middle Ages.<sup>109</sup> This approach to medieval Africa in history counters racist deployments of the “medieval” (in the pejorative sense of backwardness or barbarity) that Simon Gikandi in an African postcolonial context observes were “imposed on Africa by the agents of European modernization.”<sup>110</sup> In a recent collaborative essay addressing art history and literature, Andrea Myers Achi and Seeta Chaganti explore the function of medieval Africa in shaping the intellectual thought of W. E. B. Du Bois and the early foundations of Black Studies.<sup>111</sup>

When I discuss the heterogeneous claiming of medieval pasts by individuals of (for instance) African or Asian descent in predominantly white anglophone environments, I will be careful to signal when they are deliberately rethinking some idea of the European Middle Ages, or a medieval past beyond Europe, or some combination of the two. I maintain throughout this book the strategic flexibility of the “medieval” as a geotemporal construct, an idea that situates a person or audience in space as well as time. In sympathy with Sharon Kinoshita’s reflections on varied instantiations of medievalism as theorized around the globe, my discussions of antiracist forms of medievalism stress the “capital importance of attention to *context* [emphasis in original], whether chronologi-

**106** Heng, “Early Globalities”; Heng, “Early Globalism.” See also Ganim and Legassie, eds., *Cosmopolitanism*.

**107** Heng, “Early Globalities”; Altschul and Davis, eds., *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World*.

**108** Tanigawa and Xiong, “Medieval China.” See also the “Place” chapter of this book.

**109** Gomez, *African Dominion*; Fauvelle, *Golden Rhinoceros*, 11–12.

**110** Gikandi, “Africa and Medievalism,” 371.

**111** Achi and Chaganti, “Medieval African Art.”

cal, geographical, social, cultural, or even generic" (i.e., genre-based).<sup>112</sup> As such, chapters in this book use genre-specific methods to discuss novels, short stories, journalism, theatrical performance traditions, and particular forms of poetry. I respect the divergent strategies that people of color employ to disidentify with some notion of a medieval past, whether or not such a past is coded as European.

By disassociating the "medieval" from an essentialized connection to Europe and its associations with white Christian identity, I avoid what Vernon calls the disciplinary practice of framing "questions of medievalism and the Middle Ages" as if they were "the province of whiteness"<sup>113</sup> or using medievalism to enact "a uniform and clearly-defined means of consolidating white identity."<sup>114</sup> That is, I discuss medievalism through questions posed by and for people of color, and as such this book furthers an ongoing strategy of what Thomas calls "restorying time and place."<sup>115</sup> The chapters in this book explore medievalisms by communities of color concurrently, shifting focus even within a chapter to explore flexible alignments in thought and divergent affective relationships to medieval pasts.

My use of scholarship by queer people of color such as Muñoz and Dinshaw in "restorying time and place" is not solely due to my positioning as a person of color who happens to be queer. One benefit of queer theory for everyone—beyond any particular identity category—is offering frameworks for questioning linear and progressive models of time. As I have written previously in reference to Dinshaw and Muñoz among others, "contemporary queer theory amply demonstrates that time need not be conceived as entirely straight—in all senses of the word,"<sup>116</sup> and "[t]hinking critically about medievalism invites us to reassess the boundaries of modern academic disciplines and explore manifold conceptual approaches to the past."<sup>117</sup> Queer people of color are well situated to critique white supremacy and Eurocentric norms of history and desire through asynchronous modes of cultural analysis, and such scholarship enacts a mode of thinking that I have characterized elsewhere as a "channel-flipping orientation toward time" that moves across historical periods.<sup>118</sup>

Queer medievalist Wan-Chuan Kao, also developing upon Dinshaw's scholarship, observes that maintaining a sense of "[t]emporal heterogeneity" in analyzing the medieval past offers a "more intimate and queer understanding of the interconnections among objects, persons, and events,"<sup>119</sup> and Kao advocates for thinking critically beyond notions of time, space, and affect that assume Eurocentric racialized forms of white-

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**112** Kinoshita, "Deprovincializing Middle Ages," 74.

**113** Vernon, *Black Middle Ages*, 23.

**114** *Ibid.*, 29.

**115** Thomas, *Dark Fantastic*, 159.

**116** Hsy, "Co-disciplinarity," 44. Note also Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?*

**117** *Ibid.*, 43.

**118** *Ibid.* See also Hsy, "Distemporality."

**119** Kao, "#palefacesmatter?"

ness as their point of orientation.<sup>120</sup> It is this geospatial plurality and flexibility of affect across time, as expressed through medievalisms, that informs the writing of this book.

### Outline of Chapters

Each chapter in this book is structured by a theme pertaining to literary and artistic forms of medievalism. Four chapters are “historical” (focusing on the later nineteenth or early twentieth century), and two are “contemporary” (exploring works by present-day poets of color).

The first chapter, on the theme of “Progress,” shows how the *Bildungsroman* (narrative of intellectual and personal growth), informed by the genre of historical romance, structures early ethnic minority writing on national belonging and citizenship in the United States and global struggles against white supremacy. I focus on the racialization of masculinity in works by the formerly enslaved African American abolitionist and author Frederick Douglass (ca. 1818–1895), the Chinese American journalist and public speaker Wong Chin Foo (1847–1898), and the foundational Arab American writer Ameen Rihani (1876–1940), who published books in Arabic and in English. Each author composes a narrative about a masculine hero’s development while also critiquing gendered discourses of “progress” and “civilization” that underlie ideologies of white settler colonialism and imperialism.

The second chapter, on the theme of “Plague,” examines how medievalizing discourses of public health and contagion harm racialized immigrant communities. I situate discourses of toxicity in the context of the global fears of “Yellow Peril” at the turn of the twentieth century, especially through xenophobic and homophobic responses to the emergence of bubonic plague in Chinatowns around the world. I show how two writers of Chinese ancestry, Wong Chin Foo and Sui Sin Far (1865–1914), address anti-Chinese discourses of contagion in North America—and I reveal how modern sinophobia disturbingly revives medieval antisemitic traditions that arose after the so-called Black Death. The intricate relationships between Jewish and Chinese diaspora communities in urban spaces create novel forms of homosocial intimacy and queer domesticity.

The third chapter, on the theme of “Place,” considers the mostly anonymous poetry that Chinese detainees composed and inscribed into the wooden walls of the men’s barracks of Angel Island Immigration Station, located on an island in San Francisco Bay, between 1910 and 1940. This repository of poetry composed by incarcerated migrants attests to the pains of indefinite detention and the injustices of racial discrimination, and these poets collectively adapted the gendered and formal conventions of medieval Chinese lyric forms that were originally associated with literati scholars in exile in order to suit their harsh new American geopolitical environment. I trace how the Angel Island barracks themselves have become a locus for cross-racial activist movements and now serve as an enduring reminder of the harms of racist immigration policies and indefinite detention.

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**120** Ibid. See also Kao, *White Before Whiteness*.

The fourth chapter, on the theme of “Passing,” shows how two multiracial female authors at the turn of the twentieth century experiment with flexible forms of racial positioning, in particular through stories about women of color who deliberately or ambiguously pass (present themselves and live in the world) as white. I examine medieval-themed stories and “local color” sketches by free black Creole journalist and author Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875–1935), whose fictive protagonists include racially ambiguous characters in Louisiana; and Sui Sin Far, whose fictive first-person narrators (male, female, white American, Chinese, Chinese American, and “Eurasian”) manifest complexities of the author’s biracial ancestry. Both authors use Marian imagery and the figure of Joan of Arc to embody nuanced performances of disidentification with medieval archetypes and unsettle dominant social codes of gender, sexuality, and race.

The final two chapters center present-day authors of color and show how poets can disidentify with medieval European poetic traditions through strategic disclosures of racial subjectivity. The fifth chapter, on the theme of “Play,” attends to humor and irony across Native, Black, Latinx, and Asian American adaptations of Old English alliterative poetry and Middle English poetic forms. Poets in this chapter include Carter Revard (Osage and European American), Yusef Komunyakaa (African American), Timothy Yu (Chinese American), Natalie Diaz (Latina and Mojave), Karenne Wood (Monacan Indian), Cedar Sigo (Suquamish), and Julian Talamantez Brolaski (Latinx, Apache, and European ancestry).

The sixth chapter, on the theme of “Pilgrimage,” explores how Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* is adapted in multicultural environments throughout the Americas, Australasia, Europe, and African diaspora contexts. Chaucerian poets of color experiment with flexible first-person racial positionings and move Chaucer’s pilgrimage structure into new hemispheric, transatlantic, and transpacific orbits. Poets in this chapter include Jean “Binta” Breeze (Jamaican), Marilyn Nelson (African American), Patience Agbabi (Nigerian British), Frank Mundo (Mexican American), and Ouyang Yu (Chinese-born Australian). These chapters demonstrate how “new” forms of Old English and Middle English poetry exploit the unfixed potential of medieval language as a vehicle to express racial and cultural hybridity today.

The book ends with a list of further readings that suggests future areas of study. Taken as a whole, *Antiracist Medievalisms* explores what it means for people of color and racialized minority groups to disorient or disrupt preexisting notions of the medieval past—no matter how that past might be situated in terms of time, space, or desire. Divergent medievalisms crafted by people of color can work to transform some idea of the European past that is typically coded as white and Christian—but at other times people of color can be indifferent to Eurocentric frameworks altogether. The sociopolitical project of “restorying” medievalism will never be complete. It is my hope that medievalist communities will maintain the centrality of people of color in our reassessments of what the Middle Ages can mean in our ever-changing present.