CHAPTER 18

Decolonizing the Medieval Literary Curriculum

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> Not a single tea plantation exists within the United Kingdom. [Tea] is the symbolization of British identity – I mean, what does anybody in the world know about an English person except that they cannot get through the day without a cup of tea? Where does it come from? Ceylon/Sri Lanka, India. That is the outside history that is inside the history of the English. There is no English history without that other history.
>
> Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Histories," *Essential Essays: Identity and Diaspora*

The call to decolonize the teaching of premodernity – and especially the European Middle Ages – has assumed increasing urgency lately. As everyone knows, White supremacist and alt-right groups in the United States and Europe have in recent years aggressively weaponized the symbols, histories, material culture, and expressive culture of the European Middle Ages – so as to build a fantasied past of White racial purity and superiority, prelapsarian Christian homogeneity and harmony, and a religiopolitical supremacy that, for these extremists, characterized premodern Europe (Christendom/the Latin West) – in order to make their version of the past the basis of authority for reproducing the past anew in today's world (see, e.g., Kim, Miyashiro, Rambaran-Olm, Perry).

From the deployment of symbols such as the Nordic god Thor's hammer and the imperial eagle of the Holy Roman Empire to the celebration of medieval Crusades (the crusader cry, "Deus Vult," or "God Wills It," has found new popularity in the twenty-first century) and the eleventh-century settler colonization of North America by Greenlanders and Icelanders ("Hail Vinland!" has nearly replaced "Heil Hitler"), right-wing extremist groups increasingly marshal the cultural legacies of premodern Europe to awaken a specific strain of fantasied nostalgia for the past among majority-White populations, so as strategically to mobilize, channel, and direct public emotions toward militancy and violence in their

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drive to claim, and reenact, the putative glories and triumphs of the Christian West.

Christian extremist and White supremacist movements thus ironically parallel Islamist and Salafist groups such as Al-Qaeda, the so-called Islamic State, Al-Nusra Front, and others, who are themselves also strategically recalling the past, to urge a renewal of the early days of the Islamic empire under the Prophet Muhammad and the Rashidun (the first four rightly guided caliphs), in order to recreate the seventh-century Islamic Caliphate in the twenty-first century. Islamist nostalgia of this kind is equally alive and virulent in draconian state-sponsored sociopolitical cultures like Saudi Arabia's and Iran's, and that animates Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's devout desire for an Islamist new Ottoman empire of the twenty-first century.

Concomitant with the resurgence of populist extremism, however, are important counterforces.

Among these are the changing population demographics of twenty-first-century societies in the West (these changes being themselves a trigger for White extremism) – transformations that are, in turn, responsible for new and transformed demographics of current and emerging cohorts of students in higher education. Like the societies in which they live, contemporary cohorts of students in higher learning have diversified substantially in terms of their race, class, countries of origin, sexualities and genders, and physical, cultural, and psychosocial composition. And students, more than faculty, are among those who have called for curricular transformations responsive to the exigencies of the day.[1]

Medieval studies, an academic field once considered sleepy and "ornamental" by some – a field that has been diagnosed as urgently requiring decolonization because of its entrenched conservatism – has thus been experiencing a wake-up call on several fronts.[2] In spring 2021, the University of Leicester in the United Kingdom announced an administrative decision to cut medieval authors from its English curriculum altogether, as part of an attempt to decolonize the university's curricular offerings – a process that renders the university's medievalists in English obsolete and jobless.[3] Suddenly, premodernists who were ignoring sociocultural and political exigencies in the societies where they live and work began to pay attention – because now, it seems, their jobs may be coming undone.

Some premodernists, however – primarily led by those who are part of the antiracist collective, the Medievalists of Color, and allied groups and individuals – have been undertaking the critical teaching of the past now

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for some years. I have taught a critical canon, and a countercanon, for nearly three decades. In 1994 – long before September 11, 2001 – I began the critical teaching of the so-called holy wars known as the Crusades, followed by premodern critical race courses, courses in critical early global studies, and courses aimed at countering anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. The work I undertake is, of course, contested (see Heng, "Why the Hate," "On Not Reading," and "Before *Race*").

Another example of such teaching is Dorothy Kim's "Toxic Chaucer," a course on the dead White male dubbed the Father of English Literature, and one that confronts head-on the racism, Islamophobia, misogyny, anti-Semitism, coloniality, and classism visible in the Chaucerian corpus.[4]

The pedagogical trajectories, strategies, and curricular offerings I focus on below are thus best seen as distillations and summaries of the kind of work undertaken today by a number of us in a dispersed community of largely premodernists of color working to teach a decolonizing curriculum, a community whose members are profoundly engaged in transforming how the deep past is taught and studied in the twenty-first century academy.

A *decolonizing curriculum* is a term that fittingly captures the *en procès* character of the evolving, unfinished pedagogy we undertake. Given that varieties of neocolonialism around the world today are coterminous with and comfortably complicit with postcolonial regimes and conditions, the lesson that decolonizing is a process *sans fin* – a process that of necessity remains open-ended, urgent, and unfinished – is a lesson that is rapidly, if grimly, learnt.

A decolonizing *medieval* curriculum is also necessarily *en procès* – in process and on trial, subject to testing, revision, adaptation, and transformation as needed. Keeping in mind the volume's focus on *English* literature, my essay will address the challenges of teaching a critical canon in a decolonizing curriculum that concentrates on English and a few European texts. It will conclude with a coda on countercanonical teaching that decenters Europe altogether by introducing students to a premodern globalism and its literatures that are scarcely cognizant of Europe's existence at all.

A Critical Canon: Teaching Race, Empire, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in English and European Medieval Literature

I have argued in *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* and elsewhere that international wars and territorial invasions, slavery and human trafficking, transnational migrations, trade and commerce,

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pilgrimage, colonization, settlement, all bear witness to a medieval Europe that contained people from everywhere – Jews, Arabs, Turks, "Gypsies," Africans, Indians, Mongols, steppe peoples and others – and an encounter with the historical and cultural archives of the European Middle Ages refuses the fiction that a singular, homogenous, communally unified Caucasian ethnoracial population existed in an early Europe that was still Latin Christendom. The notion that an all-White Europe existed as a historical *fact* – and not as a *fiction* manufactured by centuries of assiduous identity construction – is thus a fantasy of contemporary politics and political factions in the West.

Bioarcheology attests that even in the far northwestern corner of the medieval Latin West, in insular England, there was a sizable population of non-White people. In their pathbreaking study "'Officially Absent, but Actually Present': Bioarcheological Evidence for Population Diversity in London during the Black Death, AD 1348–50," Rebecca Redfern and Joseph T. Hefner's meticulous analysis of genomic and biomorphic evidence from the graves of the interred in an East Smithfield cemetery in London during the plague years of 1348–1350 finds that fully 29 percent of those interred had African, Asian, or Afro-Eurasian ancestry.

Any teaching of race in texts from the long centuries of the European Middle Ages should thus begin by unmasking the fantasy of an all-White West in an early Europe that was supposedly the opposite of Europe today, a continent containing global populations from everywhere and a diversity of faiths. A variety of archives offer ample evidence.[5]

For instance, medieval archives attest that *Jewish communities* existed in virtually every country of Europe, intimately ensconced in cities and towns of the heartlands of Christendom (*Invention of Race*, chapter 2). *Islamicate settlements* in Andalusian Iberia and southern Italy and Sicily give the lie to the pretense that Muslims in Europe are a recent phenomenon (*Invention of Race*, chapter 3). *Black Saharan Africans* were seemingly everywhere in the European Middle Ages – in Roman Britain and medieval England, post-invasion Al-Andalus, in the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II's Lucera in Italy, all around the Mediterranean, and according to the abbot of Nogent-sur-Coucy, the crusade historian Guibert, even in northern France (*Invention of Race*, chapter 4).

The diaspora of the *Romani* ("Gypsies") from northwestern India in the eleventh century spread a dark-skinned race of *Asians* across the face of western Europe. In southeastern Europe, especially Wallachia and Moldavia – territorial polities that later joined to become Romania in

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1859 (with Transylvania added at a later date) – Romani became enslaved and supplied servile labor for the monasteries and the boyars, and "Gypsy" became the name of a slave race, till they were finally manumitted in the nineteenth century (*Invention of Race*, chapter 7).

Human trafficking, a flourishing trade undertaken by many medieval peoples, and at which the Italian republics particularly excelled, also ensured the dispersal of a variety of ethnoraces – Turks, Africans, Arabs, Mongols, Indians, and others – as domestic, military, and commercial labor around the Mediterranean. Reading the archive of slavery, we see that even so-called White Christian Europeans fail to be homogenously "White" people: because young female enslaved persons of all races, deployed predominantly as domestic labor and intruded into households – as historians have repeatedly demonstrated – furnished sexual recreation for their masters and bred new, mixed races.

Higher prices paid for young females of reproductive age, and their disproportionate representation in the slave markets and records of sale, over males, means that an unfathomable number of today's "White" Europeans (including those White supremacists themselves) have descended from inter-mixed human DNA, so that future generations of ostensibly White Europeans were less than White (*Invention of Race*, chapter 3).

Scientists have even discovered shared DNA between Native Americans and Icelanders. Among all the ethnoracial groups in the world, the C1e gene element is only shared by Icelanders and Native Americans, a discovery that will not surprise those who teach the *Saga of Eirik the Red* – one of two surviving Vinland sagas narrating the failed settler colonization of the North American continent half a millennium before Columbus – which tells of the abduction of two Native boys by Greenlanders and Icelanders who, after their defeat by the Native population, forcibly take the Indigenous children back to Europe, teach them Norse, and Christianize them (*Invention of Race*, chapter 5).

Any critical teaching of premodernity must needs recognize that *religion* forms the magisterial discourse and knowledge system of the medieval period – just as *science* forms the magisterial discourse and knowledge system of modern eras – and supplies the formative matrix of race-making in the long centuries of the European Middle Ages. The teaching of medieval literature thus needs an understanding of race that is apposite for the period, and a minimum working hypothesis such as this one:

> Race is one of the primary names we have – a name we retain for the epistemological, ethical, and political commitments it recognizes – for

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> a repeating tendency, of the gravest import, to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, so as to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups. Because race is a structural relationship for the management of human differences – a mechanism of sorting, for purposes of prioritizing and hierarchizing – rather than a substantive content, the differences selected for essentialism will vary in the *longue durée* of human history, from the premodern eras well into late modernity and the twenty-first century: fastening on bodies, physiognomy, and somatic differences in some instances; on social practices, religion, or culture in other instances; or a multiplicity of interlocking discourses elsewhere.

Racial thinking, racial acts, racial laws, racial institutions, and racial phenomena emerge across a range of registers and crucibles of instantiation in the medieval period: invasion and occupation, nation formation and state formation, political theology, the imperatives of mercantile capitalism, holy war, settler colonization, economic adventurism, empire formation, contact and encounter, slavery, the consolidation of universal Christendom, and epistemological and epistemic change.

Eyewitness crusade chronicles, and accounts of Pope Urban II's address at the Council of Clermont in 1095, supply ample invasion-and-occupation narratives for in-class analysis of how Muslims were racialized. Robert the Monk's report of Urban's address offers up Muslims as an abominable, polluting, infernal race poisoning the Holy Land, torturing and eviscerating Christians, raping women, forcibly circumcising men, and defiling church altars and baptismal fonts with the blood of the victims. In fact, Robert's account is precisely where the rallying cry of the pilgrim militia of the First Crusade – and popularly parroted today by White extremists – is recorded: *Deus vult!* God wills it! (*Invention of Race* 114).

The late eleventh-century racialization of an enemy in the killing fields of war births a panoply of twelfth-century ways to dehumanize enemy combatants. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who cowrote the Rule of the Knights Templar, reassured those who might feel ambivalence toward the killing of fellow humans – an act so contrary to the commandments and teaching of Christ – that to kill a Muslim was not, in fact, to kill a fellow human. Rather than constitute *homicide* – the murder of a person – slaughtering a Muslim was really *malicide*, the extermination of incarnated evil. Muslims were not only unspeakably vile, abominable, and accursed, as Urban had said; they were not to be seen as human at all, but as personified evil. In his tract *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, St. Bernard thus saw no

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difficulty in calling for genocide to extirpate from the earth these enemies of the Christian name (*Invention of Race* 115).

Religioracial strategies exercised against Muslims ingeniously herded a multiplicity of Near Eastern, Eurasian, and Asian peoples into a single collectivity defined by their religion, Islam, and characterized Islam as founded on lies, with its founding figure of the Prophet as the ultimate liar and heresiarch.

Although a number of names existed for the international enemy that Latin Christendom fought – Ishmaelites or Ismaelites, Agarenes or Hagarenes, Moors, Turks, Arabs, Persians, Ottomans, Mohammedans, or, more pejoratively, infidels, heathens, pagans, and even heretics – the preeminent name by which the enemy was known in the Latin West for centuries was *Saracens*.

A word of Greco-Roman origin that in late antiquity referred to pre-Islamic Arabs, *Saracens* streamlined a panorama of peoples – of diverse geographic origins, linguistic communities, and ethnoracial affiliations – into a single demographic defined by its adherence to Islam alone. To the Christian authors of the West, Islam thus became an essence-imparting machine that conferred essential identity. Made over into an instrument of essentialism, Islam raced all Muslim believers into a singular, homogenous whole.[6]

I point out to students – to show them how the past is never completely past but inhabits and troubles the present, rendering the present nonidentical to itself – how the medieval racialization of Islam rapidly reemerged in the twenty-first century, after 9/11, when airport security checkpoints, Western political leaders, and public discourse *again* began treating Muslims – of all races, nationalities, and linguistic communities – as a singular, undifferentiated whole once more.

The medieval racing of a heterogeneity of Muslims as *Saracens* also embedded a lie at the heart of the raced identity. The name *Saracens* is first used by St. Jerome (347–420 CE), the church father who says Arabs took for themselves the name of *Saracens* in order falsely to claim a genealogy from Sara, the legitimate wife of Abraham, to hide the shame that their true mother, Hagar, was a bondwoman. Islam's arrival in the seventh century and its rapid succession of territorial conquests then induced a ramification of the fake etymology: Muslims now, not just Arabs, became *Saracens*.

Attributing the name "Saracens" *to* the enemy, as a sly act of self-naming *by* the enemy, is thus not only an ingenious lie, but a lie that ingeniously names the enemy as wily liars, in the very act of naming them as enemies.

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Herding diverse populations into a single race defined as originating a collective lie, Christian political theology turned on a panoply of lies that aggregated the racial character of Muslims as a collectivity of liars. Half a millennium later, in the nineteenth century, we see Muslims *still* bearing the name of liars, *Saracens*, in Walter Scott's *The Talisman*.

"Saracens" are everywhere in medieval literature. In English literature, they are depicted as bloody, ruthless, and homicidal, like the mother of the "Sultan of Syria" in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* in the *Canterbury Tales*, who has everyone slaughtered because her son wants to marry a Christian princess (Heng, *Empire of Magic*, chapter 4). They are also monstrous Black giants who battle Charlemagne and his elite Twelve Peers in romances such as the Middle English *Sultan of Babylon*, and in the French epic genre known as the *chanson de geste*.[7]

Medieval romance, the foremost narrative genre of the European Middle Ages, is rife with "Saracens." If they are targets for eventual conversion to Christianity, they appear as fair and feisty princesses or martially skilled princes. If they are there to be killed, they appear as hideous, monstrous Black enemies (often giants). In 2003, I argued that the genealogical history of medieval romance is intricately intertwined with the colonial history of the Crusades, and romance is a narrative literature replete with depictions of race and crusader colonization (*Empire of Magic*, chapter 1).

Two Middle English crusade romances that are excellent to dissect with students are *Richard Coer de Lyon* and *The King of Tars*. In *Coer de Lyon*, the putative hero of the Third Crusade, the English king Richard Lionheart, becomes an unwitting cannibal when his men feed him the stewed head of a "Saracen" boy when he falls ill while on crusade. The narrative presents this as a kindly joke played on their king by his people when the English king's desire for pork cannot be met, since they are in the Near East.

Richard instantly grows well and strong from his salvific repast, and, on discovering the source of the delicious healing remedy, the English king gleefully decides to eat other Muslims too and hosts a feast where the ambassadors of Saladin (Salah ad-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub) – the leader of the countercrusade who historically wrested Jerusalem back from the Latin West in 1187 – are served, piping hot, the cooked heads of their freshly killed and plucked relatives, while King Richard himself devours with relish and a hearty appetite his own Muslim head, before their horrified eyes. The Muslim heads are black, with grinning white teeth – a conventional color trope in medieval romances.

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An unabashed racist-imperialist-cannibal, the King of England then boisterously announces that henceforth all English Christian men will be cannibals and will consume the territory of Muslims even as they consume Muslims themselves: jubilantly, literary fantasy thus solves a historical problem of supply for Christendom's invading armies. Literalizing a metaphor of colonization, the trope of cannibalism in this romance marshals the power and dynamics of the joke – first, in the form of a healing ruse visited by his men on Richard, then in Richard's immediate expansion of the joke into a collective racial-colonial aggression unleashed on the Muslim enemy, whose sons and youths are devoured by a cannibal-king who uses the occasion to define all Christian Englishmen as the cannibal-conquerors of the East.

Teaching *Richard Coer de Lyon* alongside postcolonial criticism and Freud on the politics of the joke – especially political jokes that draw tight the circle of group identity – and crusader chronicles and letters allows students to unravel intersecting weaves of race, imperialism, colonization, nationalism, and gender and sexual identity in the medieval literature of England. The Richard of *Coer de Lyon* is also hypermasculine, wielding gigantic phallic weapons, and the text positions sly jokes on how Richard thrusts into his enemy from the rear.[8]

Middle English romances are thus excellent to include in syllabi of colonial texts, since they supply ample examples of how religious conversion can function as cultural capture and cultural imperialism, at a time in Europe's history – the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries – when it is clear, after one crusading army after another has failed to recapture Jerusalem, that military-territorial invasions are meeting with no success.

Accordingly, the late Middle English romance called *The King of Tars* fantasizes the successful conversion and cultural capture of a Black and "loathly" Sultan of Damascus by a fair, white-skinned Christian princess of Tars. The nuptial union of this Muslim sultan and Christian princess births a lump of flesh – without face, bone, or limbs – till, upon baptism, the shapeless lump transforms into the fairest child ever born.

This miraculous transformation arranged by a Christian sacrament persuades the sultan himself to be baptized, whereupon he instantly transforms from Black and "loathly" to White "without taint" – a spectacular performance of race-changing that amply demonstrates, for students, the politics of color in the European Middle Ages. The freshly whitened sultan then becomes a crusading king who slaughters any of his own people who refuse to become Christians too.

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When religion is an essential defining factor of ethnoracial identity, successful conversion to Christianity signals racial death: the extinction of an earlier religioracial identity, upon entrance into a new religioracial formation. In literature, of course, a conversion can be confirmed as successful by a sensational miracle pivoting on color and somatic transformation.[9]

When the religious other is transformed into the same, a compensatory victory of sorts is snatched from the failure of geoterritorial military invasions; and, in literature, as in history, the conversion of kings and populations is seen to be best secured by key royal women. Evidently, there are gender-specific roles for women in cultural colonization, and medieval stories of conversion are useful to teach alongside modern colonial literatures thematizing the conversion of native others, and the role of native women subjects, under later, modern, imperial conditions.

That *white* is the color of Christian sanctity, and *black* the color of sin, the demonic, and the infernal – as *The King of Tars* resoundingly demonstrates – is commonplace in medieval theological understanding; and the politics of color are amply displayed in literature and art (*Invention of Race*, chapter 4). Beyond *English* literature, German, Dutch, French, and Scandinavian literatures treat with equal enthusiasm the politics of color, religion, and ethnoracial identity.

Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, arguably the finest romance of the German Middle Ages, plumbs a nexus of economic feudalism, color, and religion, when an opportunistic White Arthurian knight seeks economic gain in Islamic lands, sires a piebald son on a Black queen in the land of the Blacks, Zazamanc, and returns to European Christendom decked in the opulent wealth of the Islamic and Black East, as Zazamanc's king.

The Middle Dutch *Roman van Moriaen* follows a Black knight from Moorland who has been Christianized but economically and sociopolitically disenfranchised because his White Arthurian father failed to marry his Black mother, so that the Black knight arrives in Europe seeking redress. In the Middle High German *King of Moorland*, Christian European knights travel the opposite route of conversionary politics depicted in *The King of Tars*, by becoming Black when they are seduced by Black women and converted to "heathenry."

These literary texts highlighting the politics of color can be supplemented in the classroom by medieval art. From the end of the twelfth century and all through the thirteenth – an era of intense anti-Black virulence – the portrayal of sinners, demons, and devils as black is joined by lifelike representations of Black Saharan Africans who are dramatically

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staged as torturers of Christ and killers of John the Baptist. Generations of Christians in Europe were thus conditioned to see Black African men torturing Christ and slaughtering his saints.

Beyond the Crusades, a course on colonization should also scrutinize what has been called England's first empire – accomplished with the invasion and occupation of Ireland, Wales, and, less successfully, Scotland. Undertaking the work of colonial ideology, Gerald of Wales's ethnographic *History and Topography of Ireland* features lengthy descriptions of the Irish as savage, barbaric, and quasi-human, situating a twelfth-century example of the logic of evolutionary racism wherein colonial masters must tutor conquered natives to enter a civilized future on a timeline with an ever-vanishing horizon (*Invention of Race*, chapter 1). Paired with Edmund Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, students can see, in a transhistorical curriculum, England derisively lamenting its primitive, uncivilized, backward, savage Irish subjects across four centuries of English colonial tutelage.

Across centuries of English literature, then, the lesson imparted here to students is that evolutionary racism of the colonial kind pivots on a language of colonialism in which the "not-yet" of an evolutionary logic that seems to promise the attainment of civilizational maturity by a subject population that will guarantee equality with colonial masters becomes a perpetual deferment, a "not yet forever" (Ghosh and Chakrabarty 148, 152).

Across the Atlantic, the settler colonization of North America by Icelanders and Greenlanders narrated in two Vinland sagas – the *Greenlanders' Saga* and *Eirik the Red's Saga* – furnishes stories of Northern Europeans swindling the Natives of the Americas in trade half a millennium before Columbus. The colonists amass valuable furs, pelts, and skins from the Indigenous and offer in return sips of milk and ever more paltry strips of red cloth. Consequently, the leader of the foremost expedition – Thorfinn Karlsefni – returns to Europe a wealthy man, lionized by the elites of Norway, buys a farm and homestead in Iceland, and – *Eirik the Red's Saga* tells us – relates and controls the story of the incursions into Vinland (*Invention of Race*, chapter 5).

Despite the Vinland sagas' racing of Native North Americans as naive Stone Age savages with primitive weaponry, however (in pitched battles, Native arrowheads and catapults are up against the Norse colonists' swords and steel), what is important to emphasize to students is the *abject failure* of northern Europe's eleventh-century settler colonists, for all their trade swindles and Europe's so-called advanced metallurgy.

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"Hail Vinland!" is thus a vacuous and hollow rallying cry if, unlike White extremist groups in the United States, you are acutely aware that the Natives thoroughly routed the settler colonists, forcing them to evacuate their settlements and return to Europe with their tails between their legs. Even the abduction and kidnap of the two Native boys, we see, is a compensatory squib resulting from the settlers' failure to capture or kill the adults who are with the children.

Moreover, when we pair the Vinland sagas with a twentieth-century novella about this failed settler colonialism – *The Ice Hearts*, authored by a Native American, Joseph Bruchac – or a twenty-first-century Young Adult novel such as *Skraelings*, coauthored by a pair of Indigeous authors, Rachel and Sean Qitsualik-Tinsley, students gain a countercanonical view of medieval colonization that depicts what the standpoint of the Indigenous themselves might look like.

The vantage point of the Indigenous can also be taught through resistant reading of the dominant narratives in medieval texts. Just as Shakespeareans have taught *The Tempest* not from the viewpoint of the settler colonist Prospero, but from that of the displaced Indigenous – Caliban and Sycorax – and the enslaved – Ariel – the Old English epic *Beowulf* can be taught from the perspective of the Indigenous inhabitants in the story, Grendel and his mother, who are portrayed by the text as biblical descendants of the so-called accursed "line of Cain."

In *Beowulf*, these fen-and-bog inhabitants are troubled in their ancestral homeland and habitats by the Danes, who are the settler colonists in the poem, and, with their lives disrupted, wreak revenge on the Danish king, Hrothgar, and his retainers at the royal hall, Heorot, the symbolic heart of the territorial incursions. The presumptive heroism of the young titular protagonist, Beowulf, and his later presumptive tragedy as an aged king, assume an altogether-different cast when this epic is taught as a narrative of displacement and land theft.

Finally, a decolonizing curriculum would be incomplete without a substantial component on anti-Semitism, and Europe's treatment of an internal minority of raced aliens ensconced for centuries in the heartlands of the Latin West in all the major cities and towns: medieval Jews.

Medieval Jews were racialized for their putative somatic differences as well as religiocultural differences. Somatically, Jews were said to give off a special stench from their bodies, to possess a peculiar facial physiology, even to have horns and a tail. Jewish men were said to bleed congenitally from their nether parts, like menstruating women: a fictional blood loss that conveniently fed another fiction, the popular lie that Jews needed the

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blood of Christian children, whom they putatively mutilated and crucified in reenactments of the deicide of Christ (*Invention of Race*, chapter 2).

Simultaneously, Jews were also racialized by Christian political theology representing them as God killers, as tormentors of the consecrated host or the Virgin Mary, and as coconspirators of Satan and the Antichrist. At best, they were to be allowed to exist conditionally, according to the Augustinian tradition of relative tolerance, till the last days, at which point they would transform into Christians via conversion and cease to exist as Jews, in a mass extinction of their religioracial identity.

In England, Jews were forced to wear a badge on their chest to set them apart from the rest of the local population; forced to live in cities with a registry by which their livelihoods and economic endeavors could be monitored; forced to hew to a panoply of laws that circumscribed their movements, from the ability to walk in public during Holy Week and the ability to socialize in the homes of Christian neighbors, to the ability to pray at a permissible volume in synagogues.

Imprisoned disproportionately for coinage offenses, periodically slaughtered by mobs, and judicially executed by the state for trumped-up charges of child murder, Jews also had conversionist sermons preached at them, were taxed to the edge of penury, and, once impoverished, were manipulated in a final exploitation that produced their mass expulsion in 1290.

An extraordinary surveillance system – an economic panopticon – was devised by the state to monitor their livelihoods, a panopticon that ramified into sociocultural control well beyond economic rationality, so that by the time of their expulsion, English Jews needed permission to establish or to change their residences and were forbidden to live among Christians, in a segregation of urban geography that suggested the beginnings of the ghetto (*Invention of Race*, chapter 2).

With just one example – medieval Jews – before our eyes, we thus see how racial formation functioned both biopolitically, religioculturally, and socioculturally in the European Middle Ages, essentializing and defining an entire community as fundamentally and absolutely different, in interimplicated ways.

England has the well-earned distinction, I have argued, of constituting the first racial state in the history of the West (*England and the Jews)*. Racial politics in England, producing Jews as a raced internal minority through a variety of mechanisms, formal and informal, facilitated the emergence of England as an imagined political community – a medieval-style nation.

As culture, art, literature, architecture, and popular opinion functioned in the service of nation formation, state instruments and apparatuses

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devised for the surveillance and control of the Jewish population sped the intensification of English state formation. The realization of a totalizing edifice for the intensive sorting, manipulation, and control of Jewish lives and bodies through a panoply of measures thus cumulatively saw the de facto formation of an early racial state in the West.

One skein of English anti-Semitism is summarized in child-murder stories that depict how malignant Jews torture, crucify, stab to death, or nearly behead hapless English children, usually boys at the vulnerable age of seven or eight. The most famous of these child-murder stories is, of course, in Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale* of his *Canterbury Tales*. This tale can be taught as part of a cluster of child-murder stories that include a thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman ballad, *Hugues of Lincoln*, set down soon after the so-called murder of a young boy in Lincoln, and Marian miracle tales such as *The Chorister* (also known as *The Child Slain by Jews*), featuring a beggar boy with a sweet voice who is killed by a Jew when he sings a Marian hymn.

Chaucer's skilled retelling of the child-murder story is extraordinary to teach, in part because the story materializes *all* Jews as Satan's people, while Christians themselves are raced through a shared blood inheritance as Christians-by-descent. In this retelling, Christians are *born*, not just *made* through conversion or baptism, and they share DNA: they are *y-comen of Crysten blode* ("descended from Christian blood"), as Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale* puts it.

Coda: Beyond England and the West, or Decolonizing the Premodern Curriculum by Teaching the World

The teaching of a critical, revisionary canon is best paired with a countercanonical teaching that shunts aside Western literature altogether.

In 2003, I coined the term, the *Global Middle Ages*, in devising a spring 2004 transdisciplinary graduate seminar on early globalism, collaboratively taught by five faculty members at the University of Texas, and two visiting scholars. That pedagogical experiment, now nearly two decades old, birthed the Global Middle Ages Project (G-MAP: www.globalmiddleages.org), an international consortium of scholars engaged in research, pedagogy, digital humanities, workshops, and publications on early globalism, as well as a Cambridge University Press Elements series and an MLA volume called *Teaching the Global Middle Ages*.[10]

That history, and the work undertaken by scholars from several disciplines – archaeology and the sciences/social sciences, literary and cultural studies, the arts and humanities, digital and computational studies – is too long to

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rehearse here. One skein of the work being accomplished does matter, however, for decolonizing literary curricula in the academy today. In the MLA volume *Teaching the Global Middle Ages*, I argue for teaching an early globalism that uncenters the world through a curriculum of texts wherein every place is the world's center, and that effectively shunts aside the hegemony of Western literature ("The Literatures of the Global Middle Ages").[11]

The guidelines and texts I offer there are not without shortcomings. The sheer variety of texts, gathered from around the world across several centuries, cultures, and languages, means that translations are essential to the project of pedagogy. Such translations, of course, need not be in Western languages – they might be in Arabic, or Chinese, or Malay, or whatever language is apposite for one's classroom, wherever one is located in the world. Nonetheless, translation studies have taught us that the politics, epistemologies, and ethics of translation haunt all projects involving translations and must be addressed.

Moreover, these texts are often authored by sociocultural, political, or religious elites – as is common for premodern texts – and are marked by elite, perhaps imperial, interests and perspectives. They may be concerned with the establishment of key non-Western empires, such as the West African empire of Mali (taught through the epic *Sundiata*), or the Malacca sultanate (taught through the *Sejarah Melayu*, or *Malay Annals*).

We may garner precious knowledge of lives lived in Central Asia and on the Eurasian steppe in Ibn Fadlan's *Mission to the Volga*, but only through the condescending eyes of an envoy from the Abbasid empire, who assumes the superiority of his own civilization over that of the peoples he encounters. Or an ambassador from the Timurid empire of Shah Rukh, grandson of Timur Lenkh (Tamerlane to the West) – Kamaluddin Abdul-Razzak Samarqandi – gazes with disdain on the "Black, naked savages" of India, despite admiration for the empire of Vijayanagar, in the text known as *Mission to Calicut and Vijayanagar*.

A monk of Uighur or Ongut ethnicity from Beijing, Rabban Sauma, travels to the lands of the West, all the way to Rome and France, and discourses on Latin Christianity, but his erstwhile travel companion becomes the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East (the "Nestorian" Church), pointing to the fact that these are not underclass accounts, or histories-from-below, but the narrative accounts of political, intellectual, cultural, and religious elites, like the medieval Western literatures they displace.

Fortunately, there are also more demotic records: for example, mariners' accounts, such as those compiled in Buzurg ibn Shahriyar's *Book of the*

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Wonders of India; merchants' accounts, in Abu Zayd al-Sirafi's *Accounts of China and India*; and, of course, the *Thousand and One Nights*, a story compendium accumulated over centuries and featuring the exploits of fisherfolk and farmers, women and slaves, urban citizens and merchants (alongside kings, magistrates, jinn, demons, and the like).

In decolonizing pedagogy, a global premodern curriculum will thus need critical strategies not dissimilar to the teaching of a critical and revisionary canon of Western literature. But its advantage, relative to the English and Western canon, is that it unhinges the grip of the West and its literatures *avant la lettre*.

And today, when students are from everywhere around the world, surely its time has come.

Notes

1. On my campus, where I am the sole premodernist teaching pre-1600 courses that thematize race, class, colonization, empire, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism, in an English department where students of color have complained there are too few such courses, I was told, before 2020–21 – which brought changes in departmental administrative culture in response to #MeToo, the movement for Black lives, anti-Asian hate, and a post-Trumpian era – that I should teach more traditional "Brit. Lit."
2. A 2003 article by Kate Galbraith reported *The Guardian* quoting Charles Clarke, Great Britain's then-Secretary of Education, declaring unctuously at University College, Worcester: "I don't mind there being some medievalists around for ornamental purposes, but there is no reason for the state to pay for them." Clarke was apparently of the camp that held medieval studies to be a field concerned with obscure interests, comprising academic antiquarians performing custodial functions for archives of little urgency to anyone else. British medievalists were stung by Clarke's condescension and insult but floundered in trying to argue for their work's significance. A Cambridge medievalist was quoted as falling back on an old academic vagueness, when she indignantly defended medievalists as "working on clarity and the pursuit of truth." On medieval studies' entrenched conservatism and urgent need for transformation, see, e.g., Chan, Miyashiro, and Rambaran-Olm.
3. On neoliberal appropriation of the rhetorics of decolonial and progressive movements to further the agendas of late capitalism in academic institutions, see, e.g., Chaganti.
4. Nahir Otaño Gracia, Jonathan Hsy, Adam Miyashiro, and Cord Whitaker are other Medievalists of Color active in undertaking the critical teaching of canons and countercanons. Since it's impossible to list everyone and their teaching, these names merely function as stand-ins for the larger community of scholars who are actively decolonizing the premodern curriculum today.

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5. *Invention of Race* substantively expands on the terse descriptions below, in detailed discussions across several chapters.
6. Arabs and Near Easterners who were *Christians* were not called "Saracens" but were flexibly allowed a play of ethnoracial identity. By contrast, Arab and Persian writers did not group all Europeans under a singular collective rubric defined by Christianity but continued to refer to Europeans as Romans, Franks, Greeks, Slavs, and so forth.
7. Since the purview of this volume is English literature, that is the focus in this section of the essay, rather than European literatures in general.
8. In its sly play on phallicism, the romance even deploys a neologism attested only in this one text in Middle English, "cuyle," which alludes to the "fundament" – the body's nether zone, backside, or rear. For the historical Richard's fluid sexuality, see *Empire of Magic*, chapter 2.
9. By contrast, in life on the ground, conversion is impossible to verify, and medieval history is replete with accusations of crypto-conversions on the part of Jews and Muslims, whose conversions to Christianity continued to be disbelieved, often leading to various kinds of persecution (*Invention of Race* 77–80).
10. See Heng, *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction*. The first eleven titles in the Cambridge Elements in the Global Middle Ages series can be found here: www.cambridge.org/core/publications/elements/global-middle-ages.
11. The literature of early globalism is not the same thing as "world literature." World literature courses amalgamate a miscellany of texts to represent disparate cultures and locales and look for organizational coherence through themes, motifs, and so on, that can suture together a miscellany of texts. By contrast, early global literatures thematize the interconnectivity of the early world. For a detailed argument, see my essay in the MLA volume.

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