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Place and Time: Medievalism and Making Race

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Place and Time: Medievalism and Making Race

Helen Young, University of Sydney

The idea that “medievalness” does not merely justify, but necessitates multiple kinds of violence permeates popular culture; the much-touted “grit” and “reality” of HBO’s *Game of Thrones* and the novels on which it is based depend on the notion that they are authentically medieval. Studies of modern medievalist political rhetoric show that the same idea stretches far outside the realms of popular entertainment: from the Ku Klux Klan, who style themselves as crusading knights, to (both sides of) the War on Terror, reference to the Middle Ages is variously used to legitimize violence in contemporary political rhetoric.¹ Scholarship, however, has largely failed to explore the close entanglements between race and medievalism.

Studies of medievalism skirt around the edges of contact with race, but only rarely do more than dip their toes in those difficult waters. Defining group membership through a real or supposed relationship with the past, coupled with common descent, is so common as to be a hallmark feature of human cultures across millennia; it is not a feature of the modern world alone. Medievalism, however, is one of the most significantly and widely used paradigms of identity formation since the Reformation, and no period has been more widely located as a point of collective origin since medieval peoples across Europe traced their origins back to survivors of the fall of Troy. Patrick Geary shows that in Europe—even to today—the medieval period is considered the defining moment in the formation of the essence of a people: “the process of ethnogenesis took place at some moment during the Middle Ages, but then ended for all time.”² From the late eighteenth century onwards, the Middle Ages has been considered the formative crucible for specific ethnic nationalisms. Explorations of ways in which medievalisms and nationalisms overlap in the modern period are familiar territory to scholars of medievalism,³ but the same cannot be said of the racial formations to which many of those nationalisms continue to be tied.

The medieval legend of the Trojan diaspora eventually fell out of fashion across Europe, descending into the realms of myth; in England, it was replaced by the idea of national descent from the pre-Conquest English—eventually known as the Anglo-Saxons. Although ethnic nationalisms are based on lineages which are just as mythical, the diaspora of Europeans around the globe, driven by imperialism and colonization, was and is very real. Modern constructions of race which take the Middle Ages as the originary moment developed in large part to justify the global expansion of European powers and peoples by creating racial hierarchies. Modern English-speaking nations,

¹ E.g., Bruce Holsinger, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2007); Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl, *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

² *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 11.

³ E.g., John M Graham, “National Identity and the Politics of Publishing the Troubadours,” in *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper*, ed. by R Howard Bloch and Stephen G Nichols (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 57–94; Tim Machan, “Chaucer and the History of English,” *Speculum*, 87 (2012): 147–75 <doi:10.1017/S0038713411003885>; David Matthews, *The Making of Middle English, 1765–1910* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

including the USA and Australia, owe the nature of their current existence to a historical belief in the mental, moral, physical, and political superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race. Studies of Anglo-Saxonism in colonial and postcolonial contexts offer some close engagements with race.⁴ Anglo-Saxonism and medievalism—in either academic or creative work—are not the same thing, however; in colonial contexts especially the medievalness of the former can easily be obscured by the new, non-European, location, as Andrew Galloway suggests.⁵

Bruce Holsinger remarks that “the War on Terror has transmogrified the medieval into something well beyond the grasp of our expertise;”⁶ medievalism, however, has always reached into fields which are not commonly the domain of the humanities scholars who are most likely to study it. Humanities scholars are reasonably likely to have encountered—or at the very least been aware of—nationalized curricula: American History, Australian Literature, and so on. They are relatively unlikely to receive training at either undergraduate or graduate level in fields that consider race directly or to have been encouraged to bring any such training they did receive to Medieval Studies. Although the departments and fields which now structure the academy foreground nation, decoupled at least semantically from race, as Gerald Graff asserts, “one cannot minimize the importance of ... theories of “race” in the formation of language and literature departments in the 1880s.”⁷ Almost 150 years later, the influence remains significant. Institutional and disciplinary concentration on “national” literatures in which race is implicated but secondary to constructs of nationhood since the end of the nineteenth century is one reason that nation has outstripped race in studies of medievalism.

Critical histories of race are also implicated in the silence because they widely consider it to be a modern—that is, post-medieval—construct, “the most efficient instrument of social domination produced in the last 500 years,”⁸ but one which did not meaningfully exist before European contact with the Americas in the late fifteenth century. A significant amount of work in the past decade or so has shown that race was a meaningful concept during the Middle Ages,⁹ but the relatively new

⁴ Andrew Galloway, “William Cullen Bryant’s American Antiquities: Medievalism, Miscegenation, and Race in The Prairies,” *American Literary History*, 22 (2010): 724-51 <doi:10.1093/alh/ajq052>; Louise D’Arcens and Chris Jones, “Excavating the Borders of Literary Anglo-Saxonism in Nineteenth-Century Britain and Australia,” *Representations* 121 (2013): 85–106 <doi:10.1525/rep.2013.121.1.85.85>.

⁵ Galloway, 727.

⁶ Holsinger, 14.

⁷ *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, Revised (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 70. The process of building race-thinking into the academy has begun much earlier. Nell Irvin Painter argues that Thomas Jefferson “institutionalized his interest in Anglo-Saxon as the language of American culture, law, and politics,” as well as race, when he founded the University of Virginia. *The History of White People* (New York: Norton, 2010), 112..

⁸ Aníbal Quijano, “Questioning ‘Race’*,” *Socialism and Democracy* 21 (2007): 45-53 (45) <doi:10.1080/08854300601116704>.

⁹ Geraldine Heng, “The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages I: Race Studies, Modernity, and the Middle Ages,” *Literature Compass* 8 (2011): 315-31 <doi:10.1111/j.1741-4113.2011.00790.x>; Geraldine Heng, “The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages II: Locations of Medieval Race,” *Literature Compass* 8 (2011): 275-93 <doi:10.1111/j.1741-4113.2011.00795.x>; Lisa Lampert, “Race, Periodicity, and the (Neo-) Middle Ages,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 65 (2004): 391-421; e.g., Thomas Hahn, “The Difference the Middle Ages Makes: Color and Race before the Modern World,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001): 1–38.

developments are yet to have significant impact outside Medieval Studies. The dominance of the idea that the Middle Ages were somehow “pre-race” in intellectual and institutional terms has meant that for decades most academic medievalists were not trained in fields within their disciplines, such as Postcolonial Studies, which do encourage engagement with issues around race.¹⁰

Holsinger observes that Medieval Studies encompasses a “vast expanse of history, whether Eastern or Western,”¹¹ emphasizing the diversity of time, place, culture and people that are now grouped together as “the Middle Ages,” but medievalist discourses—in political rhetoric and popular culture—are a strong homogenizing force. As he argues, medievalizing the War on Terror places “the [Christian] West on the side of modernity and Islamism on the side of the primitive, the archaic, the premodern.”¹² Drawing heavily on his work, Tison Pugh and Angela Weisl observe that the Islamic Other thus created has a racialized body,¹³ but they consider this, briefly, more in the light of the War on Terror itself than of medievalism. Popular culture absorbs the Otherness of the Middle Ages, but also assigns its own meanings, engaging far more overtly with race than political medievalism does in ways which reveal the gaps in existing scholarship on medievalism.¹⁴

The fantasy genre is one of the most significant channels through which the Middle Ages are drawn into twenty-first-century popular culture. As Ursula le Guin remarks, two of the main assumptions made about fantasy fiction are that “(1) the characters are white; (2) they live sort of in the middle ages.”¹⁵ The association of the two is no co-incidence. Imitation of the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, whose creative output was directly shaped by his personal and professional interest in the medieval history and culture of north-western Europe, accounts in large part for the whiteness of medievalist fantasy. Through imitation and repetition, oversimplified versions of his Middle-earth have become conventional in the genre.

George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series of novels, and their attendant franchise, are the most visible example of the so-called “gritty” fantasy sub-genre. In interviews, Martin constructs his imagined world, Westeros, in opposition to the kind of medievalism he finds in Tolkien and his

¹⁰ This said, the twenty-first century has seen a steady stream of scholarship which brings together the medieval and the postcolonial, although even here race is invariably considered within the framework of another discourse, such as ethnic nationalism e.g., Michelle R. Warren, “Medievalism and the Making of Nations,” in *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of “the Middle Ages” Outside Europe*, ed. by Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 286-98., or periodization Steven F. Kruger, “Fetishism, 1927, 1614, 1461*,” in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 193-208..

¹¹ Holsinger, 5.

¹² Holsinger, 7.

¹³ Pugh and Weisl, 148.

¹⁴ Studies of popular culture furnish some examples of medievalism studies which do engage with race including: e.g., Lynn T. Ramey and Tison Pugh., ed., *Race, Class, and Gender in “Medieval” Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Ilan Mitchell-Smith, “The United Princesses of America: Ethnic Diversity and Cultural Purity in Disney’s Medieval Past,” in *The Disney Middle Ages: a Fairy-Tale and Fantasy past*, ed. Tison Pugh and Susan Aronstein (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 209-24.

¹⁵ Ursula K. Le Guin, *Cheek by Jowl* (Seattle: Aqueduct Press, 2009).

imitators. Martin argues that his are the “real Middle Ages”;¹⁶ they are violent, misogynist, muddy and bloody, sexually violent, and not only emphatically European but anachronistically white.¹⁷ In works like Martin’s, the Middle Ages retain their ultimately Tolkienian temporal and geographical boundaries. Although Martin takes some of his characters to parts of his imagined world which are not analogues for medieval north-western Europe, the story arcs so far suggest that these are merely transitions, journeys which will ultimate circle them back to the (white) center of their world. In the genre-culture of fantasy, some historical and geographical locations outside Europe can be termed “medieval,” but the word is always used as a modifier, as in “medieval Japan” and “medieval Asian.”¹⁸ *Medieval*, when used on its own to describe a fantasy world, is always a marker of time *and* place.

Martin invokes the idea of “the real Middle Ages” to defend against charges of misogyny, but has not done so in response to accusations that his world lack racial diversity. His fans, however, do so frequently. One thread from *Westeros.org*, the largest and most well-known fan-site for Martin’s novels and *Game of Thrones*, offers some representative examples of commonly held beliefs. It begins with two questions from the original poster: why there are “no Asian characters or race” and “no Australian influenced race too” in Martin’s world.¹⁹ There is a series of telling trends in the responses: one argues that the imagined world *has* Asian-influenced places and cultures but that the stories do not take place there because: “in medieval times, or the Westerosi equivalent of that... Europe was not the place to be. Asian cultures frankly had it better during that period.” The implication here is that nothing worth basing a story on happened in the entire Asian continent for over a thousand years, and by extension, only the muddy, bloody Europe had a Middle Ages. A comment about Australia is even more telling: “because there is no Australian medieval culture. Or really much of Australian culture.” When another poster responded with “what about the natives? They arrived in Australia 50,000 years ago,” a third replied to that comment “~~And invented a stick.~~ Never mind, they’re pretty interesting on reading about them.”²⁰ The medievalism of Martin’s fantasy and his claims to historical authenticity are repackaged into a discourse which centralizes Europe in world events, albeit an imagined world—and ranks other places and races hierarchically.

¹⁶ Christina Radish and George R. R. Martin, “George R. R. Martin Interview GAME OF THRONES,” *Collider*, 2011 <<http://collider.com/george-r-r-martin-interview-game-of-thrones/86337/>> [accessed 26 September 2012].

¹⁷ As Painter points out, only some of Europe were populated by the forebears of people who are now considered white, and the category of whiteness had very different denotations and connotations to those it now carries.

¹⁸ Various, “Favorite Non-Western SF/F Book Settings,” *Goodreads*, 2013 <<http://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/1628773-favorite-non-western-sf-f-book-settings>> [accessed 24 February 2014]; Imogen Russell Williams, “Fantasy Writers Take Us East to New Worlds,” *The Guardian - Books*, 22 June 2010 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2010/jun/22/fantasy-japan-china>> [accessed 4 October 2012].

¹⁹ Various, “Why No Asian Race?,” *A Forum of Ice and Fire*, 2012 <<http://asoiaf.westeros.org/index.php/topic/76902-why-no-asian-race/>> [accessed 23 January 2013].

²⁰ Various, “Why No Asian Race?”. Strike-through text in the original.

The idea that the Middle Ages was a kind of “pre-race utopia,”²¹ where discursive constructs of race did not exist, but the races themselves—as biologically related cultural groups—did is very strong in Western culture. It stems chiefly from the ethno-nationalist discourses which developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and saw the Middle Ages as a chaotic, but essential originary crucible. Holsinger emphasizes the temporal nature of medievalist discourses which divide the world into modern and pre/anti-modern, but popular culture reveals that that temporal division is also a geographical one: only Europe was medieval at the right time and in the right place; thus, non-Europeans or those descended from non-Europeans are always already uncivilized, savage because of their race.

²¹ Helen Young, “‘It’s the Middle Ages, Yo!’: Race, Neo/medievalism, and the World of Dragon Age,” *The Year’s Work in Medievalism* 27 (2012): 9. <<http://ejournals.library.gatech.edu/medievalism/index.php/studies/article/view/11>>.