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ANTIRACIST MEDIEVALISMS

**FROM “YELLOW PERIL”
TO BLACK LIVES MATTER**

by
JONATHAN HSY

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For Dad, Viv, and Colin
and to family,
in all senses of the word

"[This book] makes the crucial move of tying medievalism studies readings to social and racial justice work explicitly. It is innovative and greatly needed in the field."

Seeta Chaganti, author of *Strange Footing: Poetic Form and Dance in the Late Middle Ages*

"[An] extraordinary book – written in beautiful prose, with passionate conviction – a major accomplishment that belongs on the shelves of every person who believes in antiracism."

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Timothy Yu, author of *100 Chinese Silences*

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Preface

COALITIONS, SOLIDARITIES, AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS BOOK TELLS stories of collective struggle against racism, from campaigns against xenophobia during the global era of anti-Asian “Yellow Peril” in the late nineteenth century to the transnational Black Lives Matter movement today. In this study, I use medievalism—which I define as a critical analysis of the Middle Ages, as well as the artistic reinvention of medieval pasts in literature and culture—to trace efforts by communities of color to critique longstanding systems of white supremacy and to advance new forms of social justice.

As I discuss in this book’s introduction, the coopting of medieval imagery and rhetoric by modern extremist groups for racist, antisemitic, and Islamophobic aims has been carefully contextualized and resoundingly denounced by scholars of color in recent years.¹ *Antiracist Medievalisms* shows that people of color have been addressing the relationship between white supremacy and the historical or imagined Middle Ages for a very long time, and nuanced intellectual and artistic forms of antiracist critique by people of color date as far back as the very emergence of medieval studies as a discipline.

When I first set out to write this book, I had assumed that academics in the predominantly white field of medieval studies would comprise my primary audience. I did, after all, write this book in English, the *lingua franca* of my disciplinary training in medieval British literature and the cultural reception of medieval traditions—and the conventional centers of power and prestige in medieval studies are still located within predominantly white anglophone countries. Over time, my sense of the book’s audience began to shift. What would happen if I wrote a book about antiracism in my discipline that directly addressed people of color and racialized communities more broadly, wherever such readers are situated? Could I bring my academic and cultural background as a queer Asian American not only to the professional field of medieval studies in which I happen to work, but also to the concurrent marginalized communities in which I belong? This book, which draws upon the writings of queer scholars of color and intersectional feminist scholarship, has become an effort to reshape the field of medieval studies from how it is conventionally configured by bringing academic and activist communities together.² My work tells a range of stories of communities of color working collectively to advance racial justice.

¹ See this book’s introduction.

² For first-person reflections by medievalists from intersecting marginalized communities, see: Arvas, McCannon, and Trujillo, ed., “Critical Confessions Now”; Rambaran-Olm, Leake, and Goodrich, ed., “Race, Revulsion, and Revolution.”

My research related to this project and my writing of this book was completed prior to two significant geopolitical events in the first half of the year 2020: the global spread of the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, and the transnational resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement with protests against anti-Black racism and police violence that were set in motion after the killing of George Floyd. As I write this preface (in July 2020), these conjoined worldwide events continue to impact communities of color in complex and divergent ways. As the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread internationally beyond its first reported cases in the city of Wuhan in China, the wide circulation of xenophobic and anti-Asian phrases such as “Chinese Virus” and “Kung Flu” throughout the UK, Canada, the US, Australia, and European countries have contributed to an atmosphere of racist scapegoating and hostility toward people perceived to be of East Asian ancestry.³ Those of us living in predominantly white countries who identify as Asian in some way (or who could be perceived as such) can find our fears of racist violence confirmed not only by our own lived experiences,⁴ but also by quantitative studies documenting a rise in anti-Asian hate incidents including acts of physical harm.⁵ Within these same predominantly white countries, Black communities remain vulnerable not only to police violence on a daily basis but also to disproportionately high rates of death (relative to white peers) due to the coronavirus pandemic. Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities are especially harmed by both the medical and socioeconomic impacts of the crisis in the US,⁶ while Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups in the UK have been found to be, according to an analysis of data by the University College London, “two to three times more likely to die from COVID-19 compared to the general population.”⁷

In the midst of these ongoing crises, I find myself encouraged by how communities of color are supporting one another locally and globally in collective struggles—even if the particular combination of harms that each group faces is not identical. In my own neighborhood of Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, leaders of cultural institutions representing Black communities and histories have expressed solidarity with Asian Americans by publicly denouncing anti-Asian hate. Lonnie G. Bunch III, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and the founding director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), stated in the context of commemorating Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month in May 2020 that “Asian Americans are facing increased racism and hate crimes while also serving on the front lines in this [pandemic] crisis.”⁸ In the context of promoting NMAAHC’s new online resources

3 Zhang, “Racism Hinders the Fight against COVID-19”; Wong, “Sinophobia Won’t Save you from the Coronavirus”; Chao-Fong, “Anti-Chinese Abuse”; Yu Danico, “Anti-Asian Racism During COVID-19.”

4 Chao-Fong, “Anti-Chinese Abuse”; Kambhampaty and Sakaguchi, “I Will Not Stand Silent”; Lau, “On Virality.”

5 Raukko and Poon, “Asian American Outlook”; Ong and Zhang, *Anti-Asian Racism*.

6 APM [American Public Media] Research Lab Staff, “Color of Coronavirus”; Oppel et al., “Racial Inequity of Coronavirus”; Taylor, “Black Plague.”

7 Godin, “Black and Asian People,” referring to England specifically.

8 Lonnie G. Bunch III, Twitter post, May 19, 2020, 10:06 a.m., <https://twitter.com/SmithsonianSec/status/1262746438204657666>.

for national conversations about race and racism since the George Floyd protests began, Bunch remarked: “We find ourselves in a period of profound social change, grappling with the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and deep-rooted racism” (the words “we” and “ourselves” in this instance inviting a range of potential racial and social positionings inclusive of Black Americans as well as allied communities).¹

During local Black Lives Matter marches and community rallies since the George Floyd protests began here in Washington, DC, I have witnessed fellow Asian Americans among varied non-Black protestors from disparate racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds coming together to take a collective stance against anti-Black violence, and Asian Americans are seeking to address anti-Blackness within our own communities and act in solidarity with Black communities against systemic racism.² Meanwhile, webinars and crowdsourced reading lists on Black/Asian solidarities such as those organized by Black Women Radicals and the Asian American Feminist Collective foreground multiple genealogies of Black/Asian coalitions within the US and across the globe,³ and scholarship on such solidarity movements among people of color more broadly is vital for understanding how communities can work together against the combined harms of systemic racism, socioeconomic and gender injustice, and global white supremacy.⁴

The dynamism of solidarity endeavors in the current geopolitical and cultural landscape has made me think very carefully about the seeming incompatibility of my professional identity as a medieval literary and cultural historian with my personal identity as an activist committed to antiracist movements today. In a time of global pandemic and ongoing struggles against systemic racism (literally urgent issues of life and death), why should I—or anyone—make a “retreat” into the past, or engage in the apparent luxury of researching historical phenomena so distant from the here and now? My hope is that this book, which explores divergent forms of medievalism from the late nineteenth century to the present day, demonstrates that thinking about the Middle Ages need not entail a nostalgic escape from modernity into an allegedly simpler time (with all the racial, gendered, and classed implications thereof). Rather, this book promotes a deeper understanding of the medieval past as heterogeneous and complex in its own right, and my work centers a long and underacknowledged history of literary and cultural reimaginings of medieval pasts—crafted by people of color—in pursuit of racial justice.

It remains to be seen where the international Black Lives Matter movement will head from this point, and how the longstanding systems of socioeconomic and racial inequality and so-called “health disparities” that disproportionately impact Black communities and other communities of color will be addressed on a global scale.⁵ It is my hope that this book’s focus on Black and non-Black communities of color, among other

1 Bunch, “Recovery and Resilience.”

2 Ebrahimji and Lee, “Asian Americans Uproot Racism”; Basu, “Asian Americans Explain Racism.”

3 Black Women Radicals and the Asian American Feminist Collective, “A Reading List” (see “Further Readings and Resources” at the end of this book).

4 Bae and Tseng-Puterman, “Black-Asian Internationalism”; Blain, “Roots of Afro-Asia”; Itagaki, *Civil Racism*; Onishi, *Transpacific Antiracism*; Wu, *Radicals on the Road*.

5 Brooks, “African Americans Struggle”; Randall, “Asian Americans Suffer.”

vulnerable racialized groups, can offer readers a fuller appreciation for the vitality of solidarity movements across time and also serve as a reminder of the transformative potentials of navigating past and present.

Some of my initial research and writing related to this book has been presented at academic conferences, such as the MLA (Modern Language Association) International Symposium on “Remembering Voices Lost” in Lisbon, Portugal (July 2019), “Race in the Middle Ages: A Symposium,” hosted by Saint Joseph’s University in Philadelphia, PA (March 2019), and the conference entitled “Celebrating Belle da Costa Greene: An Examination of Medievalists of Color within the Field,” organized by Tarrell Campbell and held at Saint Louis University, in Saint Louis, MO (November 2018). My research was partially supported by grants from The George Washington University, including a Columbian College Facilitating Fund Award and an Enhanced Faculty Travel Award from the Columbian College of Arts & Sciences.

Additional research for this book was conducted at the Angel Island Immigration Station (San Francisco), Chinese Historical Society of America Museum (San Francisco), Migration Museum (London), Chinese American Museum of Chicago, Le Musée de f.p.c. (New Orleans), Museum of Chinese Australian History (Melbourne), Museum of Chinese in America (New York), and Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience (Seattle).

I would like to acknowledge and thank scholars of color whose in-person and virtual conversations related to this project—in addition to considerable intellectual, institutional, and emotional support in “doing the work” of antiracist activism—have proven invaluable as I wrote this book: Seeta Chaganti and Cord J. Whitaker especially. I also thank Patricia Akhimie, Tarren Andrews, Daniel Atherton, Manu Samriti Chander, Jennifer Chang (and students in our team-taught “ABCs of Poetry” course in Fall 2015), Patricia P. Chu, Kavita Daiya, Amrita Dhar, Marisa Galvez, Kim F. Hall, Carissa M. Harris, Geraldine Heng, Lynn Mie Itagaki, Jennifer C. James, Wan-Chuan Kao, Dorothy Kim, Travis Chi Wing Lau, Erika T. Lin, Sierra Lomuto, Myra Lotto, Afrodesia McCannon, Kimberly D. McKee, Adam Miyashiro, Erin O’Malley, Lisa Page, Atiba K. Pertilla, Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh, Shyama Rajendran, Ayanna Thompson, and Sydnee Wagner—and many more who will find themselves cited throughout this book.

I give thanks not only to individuals but also to communities working to support academic and activist endeavors concurrently: the Medievalists of Color, the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship, and the Queerdievalists; the #RaceB4Race, #MedievalTwitter, #ShakeRace, #Bigger6, and #LitPOC communities on Twitter; the translators, poets, artists, and scholars throughout the *Global Chaucers* network; my fellow co-bloggers at *In the Middle* and its online network; the Crip/Queer Reading Group at The George Washington University; and the Association for Asian American Studies Feminisms Workshop.

Thanks also to Gabriel García Román for permission to use a work from the luminous “Queer Icons” series on the cover of this book. To find out more about the artist, this series, and the subject depicted in this particular work, see “About the Cover.”

I am grateful to Arc Humanities Press for the careful and attentive reader reports that I received for this book, which all helped me to improve its overall structure and

arguments. The press's support for this book reflects a generous and open-minded intellectual mindset, particularly in contrast to other responses to this project that found its medievalist orientation too restricted for a general study or perceived lesser-known Chinese diaspora authors and anonymous migrants as insufficiently canonical by Eurocentric standards to merit close attention. I am hopeful that this book will introduce readers to a wide range of authors, and critical conversations, that they have not yet previously considered.

Washington, DC, July 2020

About the Cover

The image on this book's cover is used with the permission of queer "left-handed Mexican-Amaricón artist" Gabriel García Román,⁶ whose "Queer Icons" series portrays contemporary people of color "drawn from many facets of the gender and queer spectrum" in a visual style that incorporates influences from premodern religious iconography.⁷ "From the queer Latina fighting for immigration rights to the non-binary disabled Trans Filipino, the artist perceived these figures as heroes in their own right,"⁸ and just as "traditional religious paintings conferred a sense of safety and meditative calm on a home," so does this series "aspire to provide a similar sense of refuge that's drawn from the inner grace of the subjects and projected outwards onto a world that might not be safe."⁹ For more, visit <http://www.gabrielgarciaroman.com/queer-icons-home>.

The subject of this artwork and creator of the text incorporated into the image, Alán Pelaez Lopez,¹⁰ is a queer Black Zapotec poet and multimedia artist from the Coastal Zapotec community of what is now known as Oaxaca, México.¹¹ Their writings include *Intergalactic Travels: poems from a fugitive alien* (The Operating System, 2020) and *to love and mourn in the age of displacement* (Nomadic Press, 2020). They are on Instagram and Twitter as @MigrantScribble.¹² For more, visit <http://www.alanpelaez.com>.

A Note on Citations

This book foregrounds the intellectual labor, cultural perspectives, and sociopolitical investments of communities of color. Authorities and authors named in the body of the text are all people of color, with the exception of a few individuals (such as nineteenth-century authors or politicians) who are quoted as background context. As queer theorist and critical race scholar Sara Ahmed states in her book that exclusively cites feminists of

⁶ García Román, "About."

⁷ García Román, "Queer Icons."

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. See also Singh, "Not Your Mother's Catholic Frescoes"; Glasgow, "Q&A."

¹⁰ García Román, "ALAN: Alán Pelaez Lopez."

¹¹ Pelaez Lopez, "About Me." See also Twitter post by @MigrantScribble, July 23, 2020. <https://twitter.com/MigrantScribble/status/1286398717105340416>

¹² On the art and activism of Pelaez Lopez, see Noel, "Queer Migrant Poemics."

color: "Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow." Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 15–16.

A Note on Hyphens

In this book, I use hyphenated identity terms only in quotations or if I refer to historical terms with significance for communities of color (e.g., "Afro-Caribbean," "Anglo-African," etc.). In order to acknowledge the flexibility of identities that cannot be constrained by national borders nor reduced to subcategories of a mainstream culture, I never hyphenize compound identity phrases in my own prose (e.g., "African American," "Chinese American," "Arab American," etc., in all instances).

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.¹ 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,"² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵

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-

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.⁶ 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,”⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹

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

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.