Book Review

Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, UK/USA: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Key Words: Race, Racism, Europe, Middle Ages

Karen Ferreira-Meyers

Institute of Distance Education, University of Eswatini, Eswatini

Geraldine Heng delves into the sensitive topic of race with knowledge, experience and understanding. She divides her grand overview—507 pages on this “enormous and immensely complex” (p. 2) subject—of the invention of the concept of race in the European Middle Ages in seven chapters, all well documented and highly intriguing.

Race has been and will remain a difficult, debatable and disturbing notion as it has a profound and pervasive impact on our daily interactions as human beings. While many of us celebrate diversity and embrace the idea of people being part of one human race, we cannot think away the concept of racial division. And so, it is important to question where it comes from, how it has evolved and where it will lead us. History, as my parents, who are both historians, would say is one of the ways—if not THE way—to understand contemporary issues, mindful too of the fact that “race is not as easily recognizable for those who inhabit a majority race” (p. 1). Heng takes us back to the European Middle Ages, to premodernity, in order to give us an insight on how certain stereotypes and misunderstandings started. It is not necessary here to remind us how much race and all its, mostly, negative aspects has had diverse and often scary consequences. We just have to think of the cruelties meted out to many Black, Asian and other ‘racial’ groups throughout the world.

In her *Acknowledgments*, Heng notes the time it took her to finalise her book: twelve years! And the contributions of historians, literary scholars, editors, critical readers, ... The list is long. In her introductory chapter, entitled *Beginnings*, Heng explains the ‘working hypothesis’ at the basis of her book. I cite it in full here because it truly constitutes a whole ideological program:

“Race” is one of the primary names we have—a name we retain for the strategic, epistemological, and political commitments it recognizes—that is attached to a repeating tendency, of the gravest import, to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups. Race-making thus operates as specific historical occasions in which strategic essentialisms are posited and assigned through a variety of practices and pressures, so as to construct a hierarchy of peoples for differential treatment. My understanding, thus, is that race is a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content. (p. 3).

The present volume demonstrates how the construction of race in the countries of Latin Christendom over the centuries that are part of the so-called Middle Ages (12th to 15th century) was not “uniform, homogenous, constant, stable, or free of contradictions or local differences in all localities, regions, and contexts” (p. 4). It has the intention to show that race-making did not start in modern times—contrary probably to popular belief—but was present much earlier.

As indicated above, the book has seven chapters, in addition to a list of illustrations, an extensive bibliography and a user-friendly index. Each chapter has a title and a subtitle which assist the reader to identify the main topic. Chapter 1, Inventions/Reinventions, is subtitled Race Studies, Modernity, and the Middle Ages Race Theory. In this chapter, we find out that early on “white” was seen as a symbol of superior class and noble bloodlines, while “black” represented devils and demonic possession. Heng successfully argues that, while for a long time the general public attributed racial hierarchies to conditions of labor and capital, including state formation, in modernity (plantation slavery, slave trade, the rise of capitalism or bourgeois hegemony), similar attitudes were found way before, in the form of discrimination, xenophobia and prejudice:

... race makes an appearance in the Middle Ages not only through fantasmatic blackness, Jews, Saracens, Mongols, Africans, Indians, Chinese, tribal islanders, “Gypsies,” indigenes in the Americas, and the collections of freakish and deformed humans pressing upon the edges of the civilized world, but is also to be found at the center of things, in the creation of that strange creature who is nowhere yet everywhere in cultural discourse: the white Christian European in medieval time (p. 44).

In this first chapter, Heng discusses which aspects of race (biological or somatic features) were used by scholar to identify and differentiate racial groups.

Chapter two, State/Nation, carries the following subtitle: A Case Study of the Racial State: Jews as Internal Minority in England, while Chapter three focuses on War/Empire and has Race Figures in the International Contest: The Islamic “Saracen” as its subtitle. In her second chapter, Heng focuses on the link between state, political power, religious power, money and race. As a case study, the chapter zones in on the Jewish minority in England over 400 years of medieval times. The close scrutiny afforded by the case study methodology affords Heng the opportunity to develop in detail parts of what she identifies as race-making in her first chapter: Jews are identified as a separate group, who through legislation was prohibited of movement even on the English territory (p. 69) and was full of “thieves”, “userers” “agents of capital” who have to be massacred, assaulted, chased, discriminated against, expelled from England if they do not want to convert to Christianity. Literary texts form an important source of documentary evidence in Heng’s work, in particular in this chapter: one such example is the

Anglo-French ballad which describes the murder of Hugh of Lincoln (1255) by a group of wealthy Jews; the verses “collectively marked” the Jews “as a population that destroys Christian children” (p. 82). The Muslims or “Saracens” as they were known in the premodern era became the “international foe” of the Latin West. This is what Chapter three examines: the how and why of the start and continuation of the crusades. All along this chapter, Heng demonstrates how “racialization of the Saracen is a multilayered phenomenon.” Here is how she summarizes how Muslims were described: “At its most demonic Saracens appear monstrous by being fused with animals, [...] monstrous in entirely human ways: their “law” advocates unbridled, insensate lust and polymorphous perversity [...], monstrous [because of their] habitual embrace of lies. (p. 118). Race-making sets groups of people against each other, so once there were Jews and Saracens, there were also Christians, and then the ‘race’ for further ‘races’ continued through conquests, slave trade, mixed marriages and their offspring, for example.

Chapter four is subtitled Epidermal Race, Fantasmatic Race: Blackness and Africa in the Racial Sensorium, under the general title Color. Today we often equate race with color, but as seen in the first chapters of Heng’s oeuvre this was not necessarily the most prominent feature of racial typifying. Nevertheless, it became an important feature even in those ‘dark’ medieval days. Heng cites Madeline Caviness as a scholar who has done a lot of work in this area. According to Caviness as read by Heng, “the mid-thirteenth-century shift in artistic conventions—the “dramatic change in representational code”—that results in Latin Christian European flesh being imagined and visualized as white, and not flesh-colored, was an artistic response built up from accumulated encounters with palpably non-white peoples” (p. 184). Premodern visual art and literature exemplify the emergence of whiteness as a stylized, idealized representation of Western European human beings, with the notable exception of the African St. Maurice, whose different visual representations are discussed by Heng. Chapters five, six and seven are titled World I, World II and World III and their respective subtitles, A Global Race in the European Imaginary: Native Americans in the North Atlantic, The Mongol Empire: Global Race as Absolute Power, and “Gypsies”: A Global Race in Diaspora. Clearly, the reader travels around the world to discover race-making aspects such as religion (Church, State, Law), disability, politics, economics and mercantile capitalism, ideology, biopower, sex and gender, slavery, Othering, strategic essentialism, expulsion and exile, fear, desire, DNA, historical ecology, language, imagination and imaginary, the global and the local, difference and diversity. A vast endeavour thus. Heng notes the following when she starts her discussion:

In a world of differences, physiognomic taxonomy’s categories had to make room for the physiology of indigenes in the Americas (the paleo-ancestors of the First Nations, Inuit, and Native Americans of today); myriad ethnoraces in the Mongol confederation; Han and non-Han Chinese of the Middle Kingdom; and the Jat, Rajput, or other races of India, groups of whom made their way westward in the Middle Ages – dark-skinned peoples who turned into “Gypsies” and “Egyptians” in the course of their migrations. (p. 257)

It is impossible, in a review such as this, to do justice to Heng’s discussion. The last three chapters answer a series of questions, as Heng notes on page 259:

Is race in a world of differences still fundamentally religious race, as we saw in Chapters 2 and 3 with Jews and Muslims? Under what conditions can racial divides be bridged—a question we asked and explored in Chapter 4, on Africans and epidermal race? Are there new configurations of the racial that we have yet to see

in Europe's encounters with alien otherness across the globe? Finally, in a global economy of mercantile capitalism, might race itself become irrelevant: When profit is the driving force, and trade capitalism webs the world in a network of intertwined relations, is race shunted aside as no longer of import?

Particularly inspiring in the latter part of Heng's analysis is the discussion on gypsies or Romani peoples. She notes the lack of historical data from within the Romani groups and highlights the fact that the history of these peoples, troubled by expulsions and widespread discrimination against them, has all too often been described from an outsiders' point of view.

In all, Heng's colossal work is aplenty with information, details, descriptions, examples, beautifully drafted transitions from one chapter to the other, from one concept to the next, from one historical fact to another overview. Her chapters start with citations and end with conclusions that both assist the readers in understanding and encourage us to continue on our quest for comprehension. With scholarly humility, the author acknowledges that her work is not a final, conclusive conversation of the topic of pre-modern race. She positions herself on a path, starting from what other scholars have discovered and examined before her and proposing another chapter in the search for truth so that future researchers can use her work as a stepping stone, a building block. She also highlights the fact that her focus on Europe does not mean that there was no racism outside this continent or that Europe should be the only one to blame when it comes to racism.

The volume is well edited, has a useful list of tables and figures, a complete reference section and an index (not limited to names of authors only). Each chapter ends with several pages of endnotes, "proving" certain statements, indicating further readings, clarifying how and why specific points were highlighted. The one thing I regret is the lack of a concluding chapter. Nevertheless, this remains an oeuvre to be read (and cited) widely, by historians, anthropologists, ethnographers, literary critics, comparatists, theologians,