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Article

# Confronting whiteness: antiracism in medieval studies

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**Abstract** The field of medieval studies exists and functions under structural racism. The pervasive whiteness of the field treats the white perspective as ‘neutral’ and authoritative to the exclusion of alternate perspectives. This treatment not only drives people of color away from medieval studies, it also signals that white bodies are the rightful occupants of spaces associated with the Middle Ages. However, as the medieval past is increasingly politicized and utilized by violent white supremacists from beyond the academy, there is a growing need for medievalists to confront the whiteness of the field and respond by being antiracist. This article illustrates how practices within medieval studies uphold whiteness by excluding, silencing, and dismissing scholars of color, and how these practices inadvertently reinforce the views espoused by white supremacists outside the academy who co-opt the medieval past. It further argues for antiracist practices that challenge the association of whiteness with authority and make for more equitable academic spaces and intellectual engagement. By confronting whiteness and practicing antiracism, medieval studies can begin to dismantle the structural racism within the field and better respond to racist uses of the Middle Ages from beyond the academy.

*postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* (2020) 11, 493–502.  
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41280-020-00200-w>

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‘In a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist,  
we must be antiracist.’  
– Angela Davis

Medieval studies is enveloped in whiteness. From the voices we are taught to respect in the field to the bodies we allow to belong, whiteness is everywhere. As such, whiteness is treated as a ‘neutral’ default rather than a privileged position. This, of course, is racist, but racism is not just a matter of individual acts; it is pervasive and systemic (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, 80). Because spaces devoted to the study of medieval Europe have been predominantly occupied by white people (Rambaran-Olm, 2018a), structural racism within the academy falls most heavily on the few people of color in the field and is easily ignored by the white majority. Racism in medieval studies is further aggravated by the issue of white supremacists from beyond the academy who obsess over the myth of a monolithic white Middle Ages and use it to justify their violence. ‘Groups like Identity Evropa, the Proud Boys, and the rebranded American Nazi Party, the National Socialist Movement (NSM), have all used medieval imagery to promote their particular vision of pan-European whiteness’ (Miyashiro, 2019; see also Kao, 2020). In order to adequately address the racism linked to the medieval, both in and outside the academy, scholars must confront the presence, status, and influence of whiteness in the field. Medieval studies operates within a white supremacist structure, so it is not enough for scholars to be non-racist. If we want to counter the harm produced when we center whiteness in our work, a harm that reverberates far beyond the academy, then we must confront whiteness and be actively antiracist.

Antiracism requires scholars to consider how to navigate whiteness in medieval studies because the status quo in the field is racist. That is not to say that medieval studies is full of racist individuals, but rather that the field operates under structural racism, ‘and it’s often those structural elements that aren’t taken into consideration when there is discussion about ending racism or challenging racism’ (Davis, 2016, ch. 3). Because medieval studies assumes whiteness as a norm, it structurally isolates and alienates scholars of color. The field’s exclusion of people of color has been noted by white supremacists from outside the academy who have accused scholars of color of ‘invading’ medieval studies when publicly correcting misconceptions about the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> If we are to be antiracist medievalists, we must be mindful of, and take responsibility for, how our work and our actions resonate beyond academic spaces. It is off-putting to consider that our academic practices are linked to white supremacy, but antiracism requires critical self-inquisition. Rather than becoming defensive over perceived attacks to their moral characters, allies should own up to past errors and focus on doing better by listening to the grievances of people of color, standing up for marginalized people, acknowledging the contributions of marginalized scholars to the field, recognizing blind spots, and finding new ways to dismantle structural white supremacy. Antiracism is not comfortable, but in a structurally racist environment, antiracism is necessary.

1 The whiteness of the field has been noted and taken as a given by many people outside the academy. Rambaran-Olm has tweeted screenshots in which she has been called an ‘invader’ to the field and labeled as an outsider for being ‘non Anglo’ (<https://twitter.com/ISASaxons/status/1175823789898260480>).



## Whiteness and authority

Regardless of expertise, medievalists of color are more likely to be perceived as outsiders to the field than as authorities in it. Mary Rambaran-Olm described being a person of color working on early medieval England as being like ‘a speck of pepper in a sea of salt’ (Rambaran-Olm, 2018a), yet most white scholars working on early medieval Europe seem unaware of the overwhelming whiteness of medieval studies. This is because ‘whiteness tends to be visible to those who do not inhabit it’ (Ahmed, 2012, 3). The default for medieval studies has always been white – in how the field has historically been studied, taught, and represented. This historical default has major implications for which bodies and which voices are recognized as belonging in the field.

Because the whiteness of early medieval English studies has largely existed as an unquestioned norm, its exclusionary tendencies go unnoticed by those inhabiting, and more specifically embodying, whiteness. As Sara Ahmed has pointed out, ‘some bodies become understood as the rightful occupants of certain spaces’ (Ahmed, 2012, 2), and in spaces devoted to the study of early medieval England, those bodies have been white. The whiteness of early medieval English studies is reinforced by its bibliography and citation practices. For example, two of the most prominent resources used by graduate students studying early medieval England are edited exclusively by white men. *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, second edition, is edited by four white men, and *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, fourth edition, is edited by three white men. This is not to say that the editors of the volumes mentioned above have not produced significant and influential scholarship, but when we platform them exclusively, we again signal that white bodies are the rightful occupants of spaces devoted to our field.<sup>2</sup>

Just as structural racism teaches us to accept whiteness as authority, antiracism requires that we unlearn much that we take for granted. As Angela Davis says, to do antiracist work, we have to ‘try to unlearn racism’ (Davis, 2016, ch. 8). Academia generally, and medieval studies specifically, teaches us to see whiteness as authority, and we have to unlearn that. The white – and usually masculine – perspective is privileged as ‘neutral’ and ‘objective,’ and scholars of color are expected to emulate the white perspective if they want to be accepted as authorities in medieval studies. As Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh articulates in ‘The Depoliticized Saracen and Muslim Erasure,’ ‘the depoliticized observational and analytical objectivity that we have learned to value as reliable, authoritative, and accurate in scholarly academic inquiries asks me to decenter my Muslim, Iranian heritage’ (Rajabzadeh, 2019). By expecting scholars of color to set aside their identities in order to achieve ‘objectivity,’ we continue to accept whiteness as a ‘neutral’ default perspective. Antiracist medievalists must challenge the assumed

2 Replacing white men with white women does not address the racism at the core of this lack of diversity.



authority of whiteness and recognize diverse perspectives as equally valid in the field.

In addition to recognizing diverse perspectives as authoritative, antiracist scholars must reevaluate which mediums we choose to value, and who is allowed to participate. In recent years within medieval studies, the labor of educating would-be allies on racial justice and challenging whiteness as authority has fallen disproportionately on women of color responding most often via social media. Their work is rarely acknowledged formally by the academy because of the narrow and elitist definition of what is considered 'academic,' and so, their own authority is undermined. This lack of recognition impedes on their academic advancement. Academia has historically denied the unique challenges faced by women of color as a group by pointing to the success of a few highly visible individual women of color (Wallace, 1990, 214). However, when we allow the success of a few to erase the gatekeeping faced by women of color categorically, we enable tokenism instead of inclusion and acknowledgement. An antiracist medieval studies is one in which we not only listen to people of color, but we acknowledge the intellectual labor being produced outside of conventional academic publishing.

We can challenge the authority of whiteness in the field by engaging with the work of women of color and ensuring that they receive due credit. This engagement calls for more than passive reading. Cite their work in your field; if their work is beyond your field, circulate it. When we do not amplify the voices of women of color working in a system that is stacked most significantly against them, we contribute to the erasure of their intellectual contributions. The field benefits from the intellectual labor done by women of color online or otherwise, so allies should ensure that these scholars are recognized as the authorities that they are, and that their work is acknowledged in academic spaces.

As antiracist scholars, we must challenge the whiteness of the field through ethical citation practices that acknowledge and credit the work of marginalized scholars. Furthermore, we must ensure that scholars of color are present as more than tokens in the syllabi we assign our students. Assigning the works of scholars of color identifies them as sources of knowledge in the discipline and helps students of color visualize themselves as potential future authorities in the field. When we do not acknowledge the work done by people of color, we perpetuate the erasure of their voices, and we cede ground to white supremacists who claim ownership over the medieval past. However, when we platform, and engage with, scholars of color, we challenge the perception that the Middle Ages belong to white people, and we demonstrate that anyone can belong in medieval studies.



## Navigating whiteness

To navigate whiteness as a person of color working in medieval studies is to be constantly subjected to microaggressions, which Derald Wing Sue defines as ‘brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership’ (Sue, 2010, 24).<sup>3</sup> Ibram X. Kendi prefers to call microaggression ‘racist abuse,’ because ‘a persistent daily low hum of racist abuse is not minor’ (Kendi, 2019, 46). Many scholars of color choose to leave the field rather than continue to be subjected to these various aggressions (Rambaran-Olm, 2018b). White aggression in academic spaces takes a physical and emotional toll on people of color and an intellectual toll on fields like medieval studies. By driving away people of color from the field, we perpetuate the whiteness of medieval studies and the optics that the Middle Ages belong to white people, thus inadvertently reinforcing the position espoused by fascist, white supremacist organizations.

Although many factors contribute to power imbalances in academia, white scholars live with privilege no matter their rank, and conversely, will never be subjected to the racial abuse scholars of color encounter. Antiracist allies, even those *without* tenure, must be willing to speak up regarding racial injustice in medieval studies. Because this is an oppressive system, there is no neutrality concerning racial justice. Commitment not to repeat abuses is not antiracism; we must actively combat racism in academic spaces. When we do not hold each other accountable, we become complicit in the abuse. However, as Ahmed, citing Fiona Probyn-Ramsey, points out, ‘complicity can be a starting point; if we start with complicity, we recognize our “proximity to the problems we are addressing”’ (Ahmed, 2012, 5–6). When we admit our complicity in inaction, we recognize that we can do better. Rather than deny past complicity in racism, we should seek to learn from it so that we can better respond in the future. It is never too late to commit ourselves to antiracism. ‘Racist’ and ‘antiracist’ are not fixed identities; rather, our actions determine which of the two we are being in any given moment (Kendi, 2019, 10). An antiracist medieval studies is one in which scholars actively combat the inherent racism within the field.

An important step in combatting racism is listening to scholars of color about their experiences. Privilege obscures perception, so scholars holding white privilege should not assume that racist abuses have not taken place simply because they have not observed them. Instead, those holding white privilege should navigate academic spaces with the understanding that their colleagues of color will have legitimate concerns that may not be immediately apparent to more privileged individuals. When we dismiss the safety concerns of scholars of color in academic spaces, as was the case at the ICMS in 2018 when a scholar of color asked that a known harasser of theirs not be allowed to their panel, we prevent scholars of color from free intellectual engagement (Chaganti, 2018).

3 Common forms of microaggressions include white people telling people of color that ‘our firmness is anger,’ mistaking us for other people of color in spaces where there are not many of us, ‘assuming we are the help,’ asking us to speak for our entire race – and in medieval studies often asking us to speak for all people of color – while at the same time ‘not giving us the benefit of the doubt’ (Kendi, 2019, 45). I bring attention to these iterations of microaggressions because I have both experienced and witnessed these regularly in academic spaces.

4 White fragility refers to the ways in which discussions of race and racism trigger a range of defensive responses in white people including fear, anger, and removal of self from the stressful situation. As Robin DiAngelo notes, ‘these responses work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our [i.e. white people’s] racial comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy[. . .] [White fragility] is a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage’ (2018, 2).

The urge to dismiss accounts of racism in medieval studies is simply a manifestation of white fragility.<sup>4</sup> Disregarding accounts like this prevents racist structures from being challenged, thus perpetuating white advantage. Furthermore, by dismissing the safety concerns of marginalized individuals at conferences, we continue to limit the voices allowed to participate in medieval studies, and equally, the field’s intellectual diversity suffers. Antiracist medievalists must be willing to listen in good faith to the scholars of color who speak about racial abuse and prejudice.

When people of color discuss issues of racism and discrimination where whiteness is prevalent, they are often treated as the cause of said problems (Ahmed, 2012, 152). Critiques of racism, in both public and academic spaces, are dismissed as angry outbursts and derailed by demands for civility. Such was the case during, and in the immediate aftermath of, IMC 2017, when several scholars of color responded on Twitter to a racist joke made during the introduction to a keynote plenary on ‘Otherness.’ The tone and manner of the criticism by scholars of color, to both the racist joke and other problematic panels at the conference, were dismissed on blog posts, social media, and professional listservs (Medievalists of Color, 2017). However, civility is an oppressive tool used to silence dissenting voices (Nyong’o and Tompkins, 2018). Moreover, anger is an appropriate response to racism (Lorde, 2007, 124). Antiracist medievalists should express anger in the face of racism. Anger and rational critique are not mutually exclusive. To navigate whiteness as antiracist medievalists, ‘we need to contest [the] understanding of emotion as “the unthought,” just as we need to contest the assumption that “rational thought” is unemotional’ (Ahmed, 2015, ch. 8). When white medievalists publicly dismiss as irrational the anger that scholars of color express against racism, they send the message to those outside the field who are interested in the Middle Ages that that anger is invalid. Antiracist medievalists need to listen in good faith to scholars of color, especially when what they hear makes them uncomfortable.

Beyond listening, antiracist medievalists must educate themselves on issues of race. It is not the responsibility of scholars of color to educate white scholars on racism and racial justice; rather, medievalists must read theoretical work beyond our narrowly defined fields. There is an extensive body of literature on critical race theory; thus, there is no excuse for antiracist scholars not familiarizing themselves with critical race discourse and praxis. In creating an antiracist learning environment, it is imperative that medievalists understand race concepts, like white privilege, that influence classroom power dynamics (Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides, 2019, 11). Medievalists do not have to become experts in critical race theories to be antiracist, but they should educate themselves on how to recognize and navigate the whiteness of the field. Becoming acquainted with current discussions of race and putting into practice knowledge gained will foster more equitable scholarly environments for colleagues and students of color.



## Beyond the whiteness within

This essay has thus far examined how widespread silence and silencing by the privileged have perpetuated racist practices and reinforced racist structures within medieval studies. However, antiracism in the field cannot be limited to the academy alone. In addition to the micro- and macroaggressions that scholars of color endure within academic spaces, outspoken marginalized scholars risk becoming public targets for white supremacists who use the Middle Ages to advance their racist agendas, often in very violent ways.<sup>5</sup> Many scholars of color have been the targets of online harassment for speaking about race. To be antiracist, medievalists must confront the racist medievalism present beyond academic spaces.

The violence of white supremacists coopting the Middle Ages can be lethal. In March 2019, a white supremacist terrorist attacked two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing over 50 people and wounding dozens more. The terrorist gear used during the attacks was covered in quotes, including at least 18 references to the Middle Ages and the Crusades (Brockell, 2019). White supremacists frequently point to the Crusades to justify their Islamophobia. This is facilitated by limited approaches to history. As Audre Lorde argued, ‘Much of Western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior (Lorde, 2007, 114). This approach to history is narrow and produces a dangerously distorted image of the past, like that of an opposition between Islam and Christianity. As Tamar M. Boyadjian notes, control over Mediterranean cities during the Middle Ages frequently switched hands ‘even within the same ethnoreligious group, despite the historical representation of the Crusades by a majority of Western scholars as battles purely between Christianity and Islam’ (Boyadjian, 2018, 3). As antiracist medievalists, we must acknowledge the complexities of history and dispel frameworks that reduce difference to simplistic good/bad binaries not only in the academy, but also in public discourse.

Medievalists have the tools and knowledge to correct white nationalist misinformation and misuse of the medieval past, and as educators it is our responsibility to correct these falsehoods. Sierra Lomuto has argued, ‘When white nationalists turn to the Middle Ages to find a heritage for whiteness – to seek validation for their claims of white supremacy – and they do not find resistance from the scholars of that past [. . .] our complacency becomes complicity’ (Lomuto, 2016). White supremacists’ narratives and ideas about the Middle Ages are built on misinformation and falsehoods. However, these erroneous views are reinforced by whitewashed depictions of the Middle Ages in the media (Gabriele, 2016). Antiracist medievalists must correct these

5 Erik Wade has tweeted screenshots of threats and vitriolic racism, homophobia, and antisemitism leveled against marginalized scholars who have spoken publicly about racism and medieval studies: [https://twitter.com/erik\\_kaars/status/1189149930419642368?s=12](https://twitter.com/erik_kaars/status/1189149930419642368?s=12).



misconceptions and misrepresentations of the medieval past publicly lest white supremacist narratives go uncontested.

As we witness a resurgence of fascist propaganda across the globe, a resurgence that normalizes everyday racism and emboldens lethal violence, it is evident that medieval imagery remains a favorite of white nationalist organizations. This is not new. Historically, white supremacists have used ideas of the Middle Ages to advance fascism, as was the case in Nazi Germany. There are white nationalists who are drawn to medieval studies because they subscribe to the myth of a united white medieval Europe, and white supremacist groups like the American Identity Movement (AIM), formerly Identity Evropa, exploit that myth by spreading propaganda on college campuses that reinforce their racist agendas (ADL, 2020). Much like the racism present inside the academy, racist uses of the medieval past by white supremacists will not disappear by being ignored. When white supremacist groups deploy medieval imagery for recruitment, and when white supremacist terrorists link their violence to myths about a whitewashed past, antiracist medievalists must recognize that issues of race in medieval studies have consequences beyond the field. If we remain silent, fascism wins (Morrison, 2019, 262).

## Conclusion

In light of the resurgence of white supremacist movements and their uses of the medieval, it is time for our field to confront our complicity in upholding structural racism. The overwhelming whiteness of medieval studies has exposed people of color to a range of abuses, and white fragility has silenced the voices that point out abuse with calls for civility. These circumstances have driven people of color away from the field, thus perpetuating its whiteness and reinforcing the perception of an all-white Middle Ages. To enact change, medievalists must actively practice antiracism. We must overcome fragility and ask ourselves how we can do better. We must listen to people of color speaking difficult truths, we must challenge limiting frameworks within our disciplines, and we must acknowledge all of the work being done in the field, even beyond traditional academic media. *An antiracist medieval studies is one in which we confront white supremacy together.*

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