

BOOK FORUM

The Invention of Race and the Postcolonial Renaissance

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An academic generation before mine, early modern studies, although primarily based in the global north, became the beneficiary of ground-making work along two key intellectual strands emerging from wider connections. First, there was the rich scholarship in premodern critical race studies, with Kim Hall, Ian Smith, Margo Hendricks, and Ayanna Thompson, among others, using the towering intellectual energies of US-based but transatlantic-movement-informed inter-sectional Black studies. Second, there was the influence of globe-spanning, globe-questioning, postcolonial studies—with Eldred Jones, Imtiaz Habib, Ania Loomba, Jyotsna Singh, and Poonam Trivedi, among others, variously using the works of such intellectuals as Stuart Hall, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, C. L. R. James, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. It is impossible to overstate how deeply this energization of early modern studies as a field has contributed to its continued presence and appeal, even urgency, in the twenty-first century. Without these late-twentieth-century foundations in critical race and postcolonial studies, early modern studies today would have been a far more provincial field than it is, and even more invested in white supremacist fantasies of insular excellence. And arguably, none of the new and generative directions of study, such as of eco-critical early modernisms, transnational early modernisms, borderland and migration studies, global performance studies, food studies, critical book history, Chicana studies, Dalit Shakespeares, Indigenous studies, and critical disability studies would have found a substrate here on which to grow and build. (See, for instance, new and emerging work by scholars such as Ashley Sarpong, Lubaaba Al-Azami, Noémie Ndiaye, Ruben Espinosa, Alexa Alice Joubin, Amrita Sen, Jennifer Park, Brandi K. Adams, Laura Lehua Yim, Vijetha Kumar, Justin Shaw, and others operating in these emerging streams of study.)

However, one of the challenges of scholarly work along the UK-US-axis—and this axis remains the most powerful in my field—is the resistance to widespread discussions of the interlocked legacies of colonialism and capitalism that still shape our world. The United Kingdom, with its deep colonial bequest, is so eager

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to assure the world that we live in *postcolonial* days that it still peddles the myth of a commonwealth. I had best not enter here into the matters of whose wealth, how it was created, where it resides, and how common it is. The United States, which is effectively the most powerful settler-colony of the United Kingdom, similarly ensures that from school textbooks all the way to policy, we never address in public discourse the matters of continental-level theft and the astounding erasure of memory, language, and culture that have been the fundamental legacies of colonialism. Indeed, the current global empire of the United States survives on a subscription, often across race and ethnicity of US citizens, to an idea of US exceptionalism (which is tellingly often termed *American exceptionalism*, in another display of that very exceptionalism) that makes it difficult for it to reckon with its complicity in the continued colonialist-capitalist enterprise that composes the global north. Thus, early modern scholarship is still overwhelmingly conducted in English—if it has to have any visibility. Thus, even now, there is not much scholarship on caste as a factor in early modernity and its afterlives. Thus, a richly granular picture of the hundreds and thousands of worldwide incarnations of Shakespeare gets bunched under a term often deliberately empty of political sharpness: *global*. And so on.

To someone like me, whose terminal degree is just over three years old, and who spent their graduate career wishing for greater dialogue between critical race and postcolonial studies *within* early modern studies, Geraldine Heng's *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2018) sets an invigorating example for such work. Heng's assessment of her postcolonial subjecthood as a means through which to understand race-making begins this book, and throughout her various case studies of European medieval race-formation, she keeps in sight the intertwined reality of racial-colonial privilege that has historically allowed European institutional powers both to operate *and* to render themselves invisible—even innocent—while operating. (Think, for instance, of the rhetorically claimed blamelessness of “trade” that almost accidentally and by strange necessity turned into empire, *quite* by chance. Lamentable, perhaps, but unaccountable. Or, as another guild in England had it, the matter of “merchant” “adventuring.”)¹ Heng's achievement is in providing a closer look at many formative moments of insidious, parasitic, European power. Thus, even as I read in *The Invention of Race* about the European Middle Ages, I see more clearly three key aspects of European early modernity: first, its inheritances in ideas of general European—which is increasingly, in this period, being solidified as white and Christian—superiority; second, the fashioning of institutions and policies that make it easy to render “new” worlds and geographies “useful” by potential for extraction or/and settlement; and third, continuities back in time of the very lines of discriminatory and disqualifying-from-complete-human-subjecthood thought that persist to our own day.

¹ The Company of Merchant Adventurers of London was founded in the fifteenth century. Similar groups of investors and traders—the Virginia Company, the Plymouth Company, for instance—were developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to develop overseas trade and colonies in the “new” world.

In the paragraphs that follow, I lay out a few generative critical affordances of Heng's work, especially underlining what it facilitates for early modernists in our research, pedagogy, and modes of thought. As I proceed, I also name early modern scholarship that works toward similar goals of responsible and inter-sectional anticolonial work. I end with some observations about the uses of the postcolonial renaissance for the study and teaching of that most widely traveled man and matter of European and especially English early modernity, Shakespeare, and our urgencies toward rigorous and thoughtful decolonization.

First, Heng's book resists and challenges the notion that history is a thing that the West makes in its interaction with "Others." As Heng's analyses make clear, the European Middle Ages are composed of mutual encounters among Europe, Asia, the Mediterranean, the African continent, and the North Atlantic. What we are looking at in the Middle Ages is a dialogic relationship based on encounters and the formation of discourse. This is important for me to stress because neither is early modernity a thing that happens/happened "in" the West. Early modernity, too, is a function of encounters and assessments, affiliations and divergences, spread over geographies across the globe. To us in early modern studies, then, *The Invention of Race* does service comparable to that performed by the TIDE Project (led by Nandini Das), which delves deep into questions of migration, belonging, and race in England in the wake of England's multiple encounters with various parts of the world.² Similarly, and along the lines of US Native scholarship that emphasizes the creation of early modernity not "out there" in Europe but as an active result of grappling with the "new" world (see, for instance, Scott Manning Stevens on this topic), Heng's work clarifies how Europe's many "contacts" result in both a push toward shoring up its own bounds and its nervous eagerness for more inter-/ex-change.

This brings me to my second point: that this book succeeds in bringing a degree of political sharpness back into the analytic of the "global." That is, by example of this book (for Heng does address the *Global Middle Ages*), the global is no longer the clumped "outside" and "elsewhere" of the "real" and "central." I am comparing Heng's work, perhaps predictably, yet with a clear preference for Heng's methodology, to all the global Shakespeares I am constantly asked to teach for my students to "complete their diversity requirements in the English major." The understanding at most US institutions is that there's the "real" Shakespeare, and then there are all those "global" ones. And while it is non-negotiably important for any study of the "global" to know the "real," it is not necessary for the scholar of "real" Shakespeare, who simply calls themselves a scholar of Shakespeare, by the way, to know of the "global." Thus, to this day, most Shakespeareans in the global north remain scholars but of the "real" thing. For a contemporary Bengali Shakespearean, for instance, it is imperative to know something of Shakespeare as performed in, say, Stratford-on-Avon or to know current Shakespeare scholarship in English. But it is not imperative for a

² "Travel, Transculturality, and Identity in England, c. 1550–1700" is a five-year European Research Council-funded multi-disciplinary project that "aims to investigate how mobility in the great age of travel and discovery shaped English perceptions of human identity based on cultural identification and difference." See <http://www.tideproject.uk/>.

Shakespearean at the Shakespeare Institute, in Stratford, to know that Shakespeare still lives and works in Bengal or that he first entered *any* university curricula, in the world, in Calcutta, Bengal, or to know Bengali scholarship on Shakespeare.³ No, I am not demanding that everyone should know everything. I am pointing out the imbalance in what knowledge is prioritized and how the UK-US academy increasingly uses “global” as a shorthand for what is effectively rendered peripheral. With its willingness and ability to evaluate that history is literally composed of historians’ points of view, Heng’s book, for a change, manages to reclaim something of the political power of what is truly global—a genuine set of consciously interconnected energies, but *without* a sense of foregone conclusion about how power sits among the participating entities. In early modern studies, especially Shakespeare studies, Alexa Alice Joubin’s work on global Shakespeares comes to mind as another example of such generative, powerful, work. Similarly, the writings of scholars such as Eldred Jones, Jyotsna Singh, Ania Loomba, and Poonam Trivedi clarify for us what should long have been obvious: that without postcolonial Shakespeare(s), there would be no global Shakespeare(s).

Third, Heng’s project explicitly takes on and invalidates the charges of presentism and anachronism that are leveled at *all* premodern studies that explicitly engage with current political matters such as race, disability, nationality, even gender and sexuality. Of all the threats to maintaining the present twenty-first-century power of whiteness, the greatest is the historically accurate and rigorous study of race—especially the kind of work in Heng’s book, where *myriad* machineries of historical racial formation are laid under scrutiny and studied, and where there is evidence-based questioning of whether the racisms of our twenty-first-century world are truly all that novel, or if they have considerably longer and historically sanctioned presence. Heng does for medieval studies what scholars such as Kim Hall, Imtiaz Habib, Ania Loomba, and Olivette Otele have done for early modern studies and transhistorical race studies: she lays open the principles of *race-making*, or *race-ism*, that intertwine opportunistically with various vectors of power in different geographies and circumstances in order to establish human hierarchy.

Heng also addresses the myth of a “prepolitical” premodernity; indeed, her book may be read as a monograph-long assertion of the Middle Ages as a consciously multifaceted political reality. Unsurprisingly, Heng’s kind of work makes skittish everyone who does their premodern studies such that they may keep safe the “alterity” of the past, or, in other words, who choose to *not* have the past matter consequentially for the political present. It is safer and easier that way, after all. Scholars who see the past as firmly in the past may choose to do their academic work as a kind of shelter from the mess of the present. That way, things get clearer, simpler, more academic, and less liable to be drawn into

³ By 1822, Shakespeare was part of the English curriculum in Hindu College (established in 1816; this institution is now Presidency University), Calcutta. Although Shakespeare had occasionally been engaged with—mostly informally, it is worth adding—in UK and US universities before this time, this early-nineteenth-century colonial insertion of Shakespeare into the college curriculum is the first inclusion of Shakespeare in programmatic university courses anywhere.

fraught contemporary debates around identity, politics, or identity politics. In practical terms, too, it is less work for everyone, surely, if modernity can be dated back at most to the nineteenth century—and postcolonialists, for instance, needn't bother with premodernity. I see the appeal. I just don't respect it. I remain of the opinion that if our scholarship in premodern studies or modern/postmodern studies is to matter in the worlds we live in, we need to see the long connections across time and place. Thus, I turn to work such as Heng's for an example of scholarship that makes present political conversations emphatically more historically responsible, as an exercise in archival expertise that deepens our sense of history itself, and as work that remains attentive to the just futures that we can use the past to build. Heng never quite says this, but her work, to a junior scholar such as myself, is ultimately activist, in the best sense.

My fourth mention of early-modernist-indebtedness to *The Invention of Race* is as a teacher. I note as a scholar how this book serves as a model for layering textual evidence toward substantiating big claims. But I note, too, as a teacher, the pedagogical uses of the many, many examples that Heng uses in her seven detailed chapters. Because of this book's patient collation of primary materials, its courtesousness toward its reader's wishes to see the texts that underlie its arguments, and its dedication to building its arguments in increments of meaning, this book is a pleasure to recommend to graduate and undergraduate students. Also, this book makes me a better instructor of the early English literature "survey" simply by its exposition of the global interrelatedness of medieval Europe. (In most US universities, the survey is structured as a course that "covers" landmarks from *Beowulf* to *Paradise Lost*.) In our twenty-first-century moment, when terrorist white supremacy keeps looking toward the medieval to prop up its myth of a "pure," meaning white, past, I recommend without reserve *The Invention of Race* to all instructors of this bread-and-butter course in English literature, this "survey" of the first thousand or so years of significant works in the English language.

Finally, *The Invention of Race* is an important contribution to the ongoing discussion of decolonization in premodern studies. The book models a confidence paired with humility that makes a genuine reevaluation of dominant interpretations possible, shows and tells through its examples and analyses, and understands and pushes the limits of academic discourse. I mention Heng's ability for critical self-reflexivity here precisely because I see in it a valuable prototype for how we might truly work toward decolonizing the early modern, say, or Shakespeare, and also use the early modern, perhaps especially Shakespeare, toward decolonizing English and European curricula and institutions. No matter how fashionable it currently is, following activist movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, for UK and US university administrations to suddenly claim their great drive-to-decolonize, it remains a fact that decolonization cannot begin without a genuine engagement with the anti- and post-colonial. For it is in the erstwhile colonies that decolonization began many centuries ago. However imperfect and flawed our world's postcolonial reality might be, it is important to remember that it is precisely because of a degree of success in decolonization and anticolonial action that erstwhile colonized geographies are now *erstwhile* colonized geographies. I say this not to claim that we

inhabit a postcolonial reality worldwide in the twenty-first century. In fact, I assert that we don't. Everywhere that was once colonized, the most disenfranchised have only ever changed masters with any political "post"-colonialism." The reality of "post"-colonialism has been neocolonialism. And many places of the world, including where I work, the United States, simply continue in a state of advanced-capitalist colonization. Yet, I find this worth stressing: that our lessons in decolonization cannot come out of the air we breathe in the global north, where even intellectual and activist movements are up for consumption by fundamentally colonial establishments such as corporatized universities, privately owned and privately (un)regulated social media, and white-subscribing organizations that call themselves our keepers of "standards" and "excellence." The work of decolonization, necessarily ever unfinished, inescapably ever in process, happens every single day, but in places we don't always think to look: Adivasi and Indigenous forests (think central India, or the heart of the Amazon rainforest, where governments attack their own people who simply want to protect the land and water and air); gatherings that refuse to give up on a starved language (listen to the voices of tribal and Indigenous elders in Alaska, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Australia); archives without walls (consider the crisp shadow of a granite face in the Himalayan mountains, which is where I go to hear the stories of the Sherpas, Gurungs, Tamangs, and others who formed the backbone of every single big mountain expedition in the twentieth century); remains of blasted rooms, ceilings open to the sky (remember the school in Gaza where more than 3,000 sheltered after a ceasefire proved *not* to be a ceasefire); the homework that a teenager makes for herself at the limits of textbooks (think of Indigenous Water Protectors, who see trajectories of our planet's future clearer than most formal policymakers). To be clear, then, the colonizing global north is not and will never be a leader in decolonization. And this is why we especially need work from the global north that both rigorously does its own antiracist and anticolonialist homework, *and* paves the way for radical work from less privileged geographies and experiences. By her own admission, Heng's book is unfinished (*The Invention of Race*, p. 13). It invites engagement, extension, even challenge. A good few academic generations after mine will therefore continue to benefit from the wealth and reach of the materials and arguments in Heng's book—and by her example, the work of decolonization will continue along the multiple strands that it necessarily must if it is to make a real difference in dismantling the colonizing impetus of the academy.

This, then, is where I turn to Shakespeare. Shakespeare might appear to be a strange place to go from Heng's book and its emphases on subaltern lives of the European Middle Ages. And it might similarly appear to be a strange destination for a discussion of decolonization. For is Shakespeare not the arch-example of the colonizing enterprise, the matter that was sermonized, indoctrinated, beaten, and brainwashed into "natives" to make "civilized" persons of them? Has Shakespeare not been an "irrefutable" stand-in for British cultural and literary superiority, the very "proof" of what makes England "great"? Has Shakespeare not been vaunted as evidence for why colonies needed to remain colonies, after all—for what colonial entity could ever hope to produce something as magnificent as Shakespeare? Indeed, yes. However, that is only half the story. Because

the reality, the history, and the living fact of the matter is that the moment Shakespeare touched the shores and lands of these colonies he was meant to civilize, Shakespeare became something very different from what he had started out as. If Shakespeare was to have remained England's, all he/it had to do was stay home. But he came to mine. And he changed, became mine. The United Kingdom now has no more monopoly on Shakespeare than it has on decolonization. And at home—my home, that is—scores of languages, dozens of mainstream cultures, hundreds of classical and vernacular performance traditions, and too-numerous-to-name critical and creative engagements continue to bring this playwright's works to one-sixth of the world's population today. And I assert that just as he has been used in the colonizing enterprise, so, too, Shakespeare now is, and must be part of, a many-pronged decolonizing enterprise. The local, multivalent Shakespeares that already live on the stage, the page, the conversations, films, idioms, adaptations, afterlives, stories, languages in erstwhile colonial geographies must be where we look for leadership in this matter. And as with Heng and her multitudinal archival traces of non-white, non-colonial lives, so here: for us to *have* something like Shakespeare—that cultural currency, that worldwide-traveled presence, that length of memory and belonging—is to *have* to use it toward decolonization and more just imaginings of a sustaining and sustainable future.

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Cite this article: Dhar, Amrita. 2022. "The Invention of Race and the Postcolonial Renaissance." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 9, 132–138. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2021.38>