

Race, Gender, and the Middle Ages  
Rachel Dressler

As I read Angela Davis's historical account of the intersection of race, gender, and class in the United States I find certain resonance with what has been happening in my own field of study: the European Middle Ages. As I watched the unfolding of the Unite the Right protest and ultimately riot in Charlottesville in August 2017 I shared the horror of many of my colleagues at the presence of faux medieval insignia on the shields carried by many of the demonstrators. We were forced to acknowledge that the period to which we have devoted our professional lives was being misused and placed in service of ideologies of white supremacy, neo-Nazism and misogyny. What these groups and many others around the Western world constructed as medieval Europe was a society that was patriarchal and exclusively Christian and white, and these deep historical roots justified the contemporary desire on the part of some to create a racially and religiously "pure" society in which women knew their place.

This led to a kind of awakening in my field in which we were forced to confront our own responsibility for this situation, the fact that we had offered our students a conception of the Middle Ages that was not far from that claimed by various far right nationalist groups. Many of us began and are still working to correct these misconceptions by globalizing our research and teaching to acknowledge and include various ethnic and religious groups beyond Caucasian Christians. This is still a work-in-progress.

At the same time, we must face another failing, the makeup of our field of scholars. Feminism has done much to open up the field to women and to research on the experiences of medieval women and the medieval construction of gender. However, the women and men under study were most often elite, Christian, and heteronormative. For many years there was no concept of intersectionality. I think this is one place where Angela Davis's book really resonates—the failure of the early Suffragist movement to include the experiences of Black and working-class women. Indeed, Feminism suffered from this kind of ignorance from much of its history.

In addition to a failure to consider the lives of those beyond the Christian elite, Medieval Studies also exhibited a lack of diversity in its field of scholars, at least those getting hired at colleges and universities and publishing in scholarly journals. This again resonates with Davis's account. Many of us in the field are now working to correct this situation, but the real work has been and is being done by medievalists of color who are rightfully insisting that this must change.

My final thoughts have to do with the role medievalists can play in helping to overturn deep seated attitudes towards race. While many consider race a concept arising in the nineteenth century, there is certain evidence to suggest that it started in the mid-thirteenth century. This was possibly a result of greater contact between European Christians and Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa as a result of the Crusades. More interaction between Europeans, especially Northern Europeans with darker skinned peoples seems to have caused a new identity—that of whiteness—to permeate Christian, medieval society. Medievalists can make this case to students and the public, revealing the roots of current racial attitudes and de-normalizing them.

# White Supremacists, Neo-Nazis, the Alt Right and Medieval Studies

















# 12 SIMPLE TRUTHS

About  
RACE, RACISM & THE  
MIDDLE AGES

from  
THE PUBLIC Medievalist

1. The Middle Ages did not just happen in Europe.
2. Our current ideas about “race” are not based in science.
3. Ideas about “race” have changed vastly over time.
4. Medieval people did not think about race the same way that we do.
5. Medieval Europe was not all white.
6. People of color lived in medieval Europe.
7. Medieval Italy, Spain, and Byzantium were melting-pot cultures—and all the better for it.
8. Yes, conflicts between peoples happened.
9. Many medieval people were prejudiced. Violence happened. Injustice happened. It does now too.
10. But there were also people who did the right thing and stood up to that violence and hate, even in the darkest moments. Just like now.
11. The Middle Ages should not be defined by its conflicts. There were long periods of peace, tolerance, and cooperation.
12. The medieval world was at its best during the periods of peace and cooperation. Just like now.

**The question is: what history do you want to celebrate, to learn from, and to emulate?**



Psalter of St. Louis, Entry into Jerusalem, c. 1245; Psalter, Entry into Jerusalem, c. 1100





MEDIEVALISTS OF COLOR

# Whiteness in Medieval Studies: a workshop

*Organized by an open fellowship of medievalists of color*



**Medievalists of Color** has organized a workshop on racial politics that will convene during the 2017 International Congress on Medieval Studies. It will explore how medievalists in all areas of study can be effective allies for diversity and inclusion within our institutions and across our field. Everyone is welcome! Read about the workshop [here](#).

**TIME and LOCATION:** Saturday, May 13, 5:45pm in Fetzer 1045\*