The Medieval Literature Survey Reimagined: Intersectional and Inclusive Praxis in a US College Classroom

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Introduction

In recent years, medievalists and other premodern scholars, such as classicists, have drawn attention to the striking lack of diversity and inclusivity in our academic fields that enable white supremacists to misappropriate the past for their bigoted ends. Just two examples include the historical whitewashing of Greek and Roman statues that Sarah Bond has made more publicly known and Dorothy Kim’s call for an overt rejection of white supremacist ideology by medievalists in the classroom after the violent riot in Charlottesville, Va, in 2017.¹ While vari-

ou fields within academia, especially sociology and law, have long understood and researched organizational, structural, and institutional exclusionary practices, leading to the crucial work done by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, and Sara Ahmed, among others, colleges and universities in the United States still “perform” diversity work without successfully becoming truly inclusive for students, faculty, and staff in those institutions. As the editors of *Intersectionality and Higher Education: Identity and Inequality on College Campuses* argue, this disparity in supposed diversity work comes from a misunderstanding, or a complete lack of understanding, of “intersectionality,” which must be engaged in both theory and praxis to achieve both a diverse and inclusive higher education environment. Further, Collins seeks to reveal the “matrix of domination” that is the other side of the intersecting structures of oppression articulated through intersectional work. Without identifying the forms of power within such a matrix, we cannot fully recuperate the damage done within the college classroom to intersectional, particularly racialized, bodies, both those who teach and who are taught, those who inhabit the ivory tower and who seek to enter it—the medievalist scholar-teacher and the medievalist novice-student.


In this chapter, I encourage an intersectional approach paired with an understanding of critical race pedagogy to teaching the Medieval Literature survey in an English department, which is ubiquitous in the college curriculum in the United States, and I draw on my own experience and struggle with developing an intersectional pedagogical theory and praxis. Further, while I understand that each institution and program have their own requirements for what such a survey should include, I encourage a form of classroom-based activism and radically compassionate feminism that resists institutionalized white supremacy through a decentering of white male Anglophone literature as well as decentering my own power within the classroom as the professor. Instead, I strive to center the multilingual—or, if we take Jonathan Hsy’s term, appropriated from sociolinguistics and applied to polyglot writers of late medieval London, translingual— and multicultural Middle Ages in conjunction with making space for and honoring the epistemological and ontological pluralities of my students’ lived realities at a Hispanic-serving institution (HIS) in south Florida. In what follows, I rely upon not only current work on intersectionality studies and inclusivity in higher education, such as the examples already cited, but also on my experience teaching medieval literature courses at three different universities in the United States and

5 Jonathan Hsy, Trading Tongues: Merchants, Multilingualism, and Medieval Literature (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 6–7. In distinguishing between “multilingual” and “translingual,” Hsy writes, “If ‘multilingual’ denotes the fact that languages coexist and occupy the same di- or triglossic space, then ‘translingual’ emphasizes the capacity for languages within such spaces to interact: to influence and transform each other through networks of exchange” (7).

6 According to the United States Code, a “Hispanic-serving institution” is defined as “an eligible institution” (e.g., accredited, degree-awarding) that “has an enrollment of undergraduate full-time equivalent students that is at least 25 percent Hispanic students at the end of the award year immediately preceding the date of application.” See Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, 20 U.S.C. (2008), §§1101a, http://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=granuleid:USC-prelim-title20-section1101a&num=0&edition=prelim#effective-date-amendment-note.
my constantly evolving pedagogical theory and praxis. Finally, for the sake of pragmatism and transparency, I conclude with an appendix containing an abridged syllabus that includes my statement of inclusivity, ungrading policy, reading list, and a formal assignment.

**Intersectionality and Inclusivity**

More often than not, discussions of intersectionality begin with the origin of the term, which goes back to two of Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s legal writings: “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” published in the *University of Chicago Legal Forum* in 1989 and, more famously, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” published in the *Stanford Law Review* in 1991. Crenshaw’s early work on developing a “Black feminist criticism” that became what is known today as intersectionality studies, especially these two essays, addressed the particular challenges for Black women who report workplace discrimination not simply as women or as Black but as Black women (1989) and violence against Black women (1991). Black feminists like Angela Davis and Black feminist legal theorists especially influenced Crenshaw’s conception of intersectionality as centered on the experience of American Black women. In her 1989 piece, Crenshaw specifically credits the feminist legal theoretical work of Judy Scales-Trent, Regina Austin, Angela Harris, and Paulette M. Caldwell.7

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In a more recent essay, Sumi Cho, Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall provide not only a summary of current debates within intersectional studies but also a broader definition of intersectionality as they understand it today: “Intersectionality has, since the beginning, been posed more as a nodal point than as a closed system — a gathering place for open-ended investigations of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities.” Furthermore, Crenshaw has done more than “coin” the term intersectionality in her earlier essays noted above; she “identifies an important marker that shows not only intersectionality’s growing acceptance in the academy, but also how this acceptance subsequently reconfigured intersectionality as a form of critical inquiry and praxis.”

We can understand intersectional theory as an analytic for both the way we conduct research within academia and the way we move through and interact with the world as it acts upon us. In this chapter, I am interested specifically in the ways that instructors can work towards embodying intersectionality within their own pedagogical practice in the Medieval Literature classroom in the United States.

However, Sara Ahmed’s sociological work on diversity initiatives within universities in the United Kingdom and Australia has proven that such initiatives are a kind of “phenomenological practice: a way of attending to what gets passed over as rou-

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9 Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, Intersectionality (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 81.
Disturbing Times

tine or an ordinary feature of institutional life.” That which is “passed over as routine,” of course, is the very racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, and other forms of marginalization of those who identify outside of normative culture. Even more disconcerting is the fact that, although “a typical goal of diversity work is ‘to institutionalize diversity,’” this may not be the goal of a given institution such that “having an institutional aim to make diversity a goal can […] be a sign that diversity is not an institutional goal.” For example, if there is legislation requiring an institution of higher education to have at least one faculty of color on a hiring committee, the presence of that faculty member may “represent the absence of wider support for diversity,” and it certainly enacts the very definition of tokenism. This “absence of wider support for diversity” and institutional tokenism lends itself to a lack of inclusivity in which microaggressive comments, exclusive syllabi, and other discriminatory practices find a happy and uncontested resting place in the classroom specifically and the university more broadly. Rather than striving for diversity in our classrooms, such as including only one reading by a person of color — which would be another kind of tokenism — we should strive to be truly inclusive, which requires those in the dominant, non-marginalized groups to give up space to make their environment welcoming for those in minority and marginalized groups. Ahmed concludes that “diversity is exercised as a repair narrative in the context of institutions: a way of recentering on whiteness, whether as the subject of injury who must be protected or as the subject whose generosity is ‘behind’ our arrival.” Therefore, an emphasis on inclusivity rather than diversity is key, and the conjoining of an intersectional approach with an inclusive mindset is what will ultimately enact meaningful change in our classrooms and institutions.

10 Sara Ahmed, On Being Included, 22, her emphasis.
11 Ibid., 22–23.
12 Ibid., 23.
13 Ibid., 168.
While I understand that the racial politics within the United States are particular to the country’s origin and subsequent history, I believe it is important for instructors in European institutions of higher education to reflect on their own country’s complex past as it relates to historically minoritized peoples, and not just non-white peoples but also those who identify as non-Christian, disabled, socio-economically disadvantaged, women, and/or queer. The significance of an intersectional approach is that it acknowledges that any number of these categories may intersect to oppress a person while a person who does not experience the same reaps the benefits—that is, has privilege because of that person’s oppression. My identity and life experiences, for example, inform the way that I interact with the world and the way that others respond to me. I have an enormous amount of privilege because I am white and married to a cisgender heterosexual white man, but as a polyamorous queer woman who grew up as a Spanish heritage speaker in a working-class and middle-class split home, I have experienced, and continue to experience, for example, homophobia, misogyny, classism, and linguistic prejudice routinely, especially within academia. Moreover, because I am white, my Latinidad is often erased because I do not look or sound stereotypically Puerto Rican, a topic to which I will return below, but while I can recognize the denial of my ethnic background as problematic for me, I also acknowledge that Black Latinx peoples are not only erased from their Latinidad but also violently discriminated against because of the persistence of epidermal racism in the United States and much of Latin America, including the Caribbean.

Individual and Institutional Positioning

My home institution of Florida Atlantic University (FAU) currently has 25.88 percent of all enrolled students, undergraduate and graduate alike, self-identifying as “Hispanic or Latino,” or
Latinx\textsuperscript{14}, as of the preliminary Spring 2019 Census.\textsuperscript{15} If we break down the demographic statistics to distinguish between the undergraduate and graduate student populations, which is important because the Medieval Literature survey that I reimagine in this chapter is for an upper-level undergraduate course, the percentages become 27.38 and 20.31 percent, respectively. This difference demonstrates the difficulty Latinx students have in accessing not only postsecondary education but also (and especially) graduate education, and further, when combined with students who identify as “Black or African-American,” the percentage breakdowns become more striking.\textsuperscript{16} Black undergradu-

\textsuperscript{14} In adherence to my intersectional approach as well as the use in current Latinx Studies, I use the gender-neutral “Latinx” instead of “Latino/a,” “Latin@,” and “Latine” — which, while trying to be more inclusive, still relies on an artificial gender binary of masculine/feminine endings — as a pan-ethnic term to encompass all those who identify as Latin American (i.e., not just descendant from Spanish-speaking countries). However, “Latinx” itself has met with criticism because it is seen as a colonizer naming the colonized from its origin in the United States, as well as the simple fact that the /x/ in Spanish is not voiced, leaving the final syllable of the word unheard in Spanish. I would like to note here that there still is no consensus regarding what various Latinx peoples prefer to self-identify as and whether or not such pan-ethnic terms as “Latinx” or “Hispanic” are ultimately helpful or simply reductive. For example, my mother is from Puerto Rico, and she prefers to identify as Puerto Rican, Hispanic, or Caribbean but not as a Latina or Latin American. As many, such as G. Cristina Mora, have pointed out the three major Latinx groups in the United States (Cubans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans) had different needs when the term “Hispanic” first came into use, and they still have them. See G. Cristina Mora, Making Hispanics: How Activists, Bureaucrats, and Media Constructed a New American (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

\textsuperscript{15} CENSUS Spring 2019 (Preliminary), Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, Florida Atlantic University, https://www.fau.edu/student/assessment/data-dashboard.php.

\textsuperscript{16} Like Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and others before me, I capitalize “Black” because it is a specific ethnroracial group, like Latinx and Asian. I maintain a lower-case “w” in “white” as an attempt to decenter whiteness not only within this chapter but also within my pedagogy and other scholarship. See Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1244, n. 6.
ate and graduate students combined total 19.15 percent of the entire FAU student population, but separated into undergraduate and graduate, the numbers change to 20.11 and 16.68 percent, respectively. When we add the Latinx and Black percentages together, we find that Latinx and Black undergraduate students outnumber the non-Latinx white students with 47.49 percent (compared to the 40.13 percent of non-Latinx white undergraduates). However, when the same math is applied to the graduate student population, the numbers are not only reversed but also the degree of difference increases: non-Latinx white graduate students make up 47.48 percent while Latinx and Black students make up 36.99 percent.

This kind of census may be helpful on a superficial basis in tracking diversity (or the lack thereof) at an institution; however, it does not consider the geographic and linguistic multiplicities of, as well as their impacts on, south Floridians, who are the majority of undergraduate students enrolled at FAU (91.14 percent). Nowhere are students able to indicate that they are “Afro-Caribbean” or a “white Latino” on the census, which affects the ways that the university may choose to develop its diversity and inclusivity training and programming to the extent such exist. This lack of specificity or even ability to self-identify as one chooses beyond what is reduced to essentialized categories founded on the outdated and erroneous concept of biological (or “scientific”) race skews the numbers in significant ways.17 For example, I identify as a white Puerto Rican who is a

Spanish-heritage speaker, and my skin color provides me with white privilege while my lack of Spanish-accented American English provides me with Anglophone privilege. These aspects of my identity allowed me to navigate my private school in north Florida, which was filled with non-Latinx white students who were more socio-economically privileged than I was. However, my upbringing emphasized the linguistic, cultural, and even metaphysical or spiritual significance of descending from twice-colonized Caribbean islanders, and this, in turn, provided me with a different set of perspectives (epistemological and ontological) than a non-Latinx white person would have. At that private school, I received my first lesson in code-switching from a best friend who asked “Why do you talk like that?” when I mentioned anything related to Puerto Rico and my Puerto Rican family. Unbeknownst to me, I was automatically speaking Spanish or pronouncing Spanish names and places in my mother’s Puerto Rican accent, and this first lesson in the importance of code-switching, of Anglicizing Spanish names and places in addition to censoring my word choice, affected my subsequent engagement with language as well as my confusion over my own ethnoracial identity—I looked like my best friend in a superficial way (light skin, blue eyes, dark blond hair), but I was ethnically and linguistically different from her and our peers in what were clearly significant ways.

This background also serves to connect me to my students more easily as most end up revealing otherwise concealed parts of themselves to me, both ethnoracially and linguistically, such as the Francophone Haitian-American, bilingual Black Puerto Rican, monolingual white Mexican, or biracial and multilingual Caribbean-American students who excitedly share their stories with me.\(^{18}\) What I take into account in my classroom is

\(^{18}\) I would like to add that they also out themselves in terms of gender and sexuality because, on the first day of class, I identify myself as queer (pansexual and genderfluid) and share my personal pronouns with them in an effort to make my queer students, especially those who identify as trans*, comfortable sharing their realities with me and, hopefully, the class.
not simply ethnoracial diversity, but also geographic origin and language(s) spoken in the home, among other considerations. As my friend and colleague Nahir I. Otaño-Gracia has so eloquently related to me, being from the small Caribbean island of Puerto Rico, she felt a certain connection reading the Old English elegies when she was younger, bound by the shared experience as an islander at the mercy of the sea. Therefore, I continually strive to become a more inclusive (thus, more effective) teacher by being mindful of the intersectional realities of my students, which may resemble my Puerto Rican colleague’s, or my own mother’s, experience. While this is particularly true because I teach at an HSI, those who identify as non-Latinx white instructors who teach at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and especially at historically white colleges

This is another way of making the classroom more inclusive although it is not the primary focus of this chapter.

19 For example, see the above footnote. In addition to adding lives of queer saints and more writings by or centered on women to my syllabus, I also include texts in Arabic, French, Irish, Italian, German, Norse, Spanish, and Welsh to demonstrate how much more connected and dynamic the medieval world was than non-specialists often think. I anticipate these languages and readings to continue changing over time, and I am always open to recommendations.

and universities (HWCUs) would do well to keep this approach in mind. Further, I am aware that the (violently) racist history and ethnoracial demographics of the United States, as well as the subsequent contemporary racism, differs from that of the United Kingdom and other colonizing countries; however, I ask that my colleagues reflect deeply on their own ethnoracial and linguistic privileges to understand how those privileges affect their students as well as their peers. Those of us descendant from colonizers have a moral obligation to do so.

**Praxis: The Medieval Literature Survey Reimagined**

On the first day of class, we read aloud certain portions of my syllabus and course policy, which includes my “Statement of Inclusivity” (see Appendix), but we also do introductions and ice-breakers to get to know one another on a more dynamic level, not simply as instructor and students. At this point on the first day is when I reveal that I’m a Spanish heritage speaker, half Puerto Rican, and queer, as well as encourage “mental health” days due to my own ongoing healing from childhood trauma.

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Being open about my background, including being a child of divorce, allows my students to find some common thread to grasp, to link themselves to me that first day, whether that’s through their own mental health history; coming from a Christian family but no longer Christian themselves; identifying as queer; or, like most of my students, especially the white and Black Caribbean students, through their experience of language. Many excitedly tell me later “I’m Puerto Rican/Cuban/Mexican/Jamaican/Haitian, but you wouldn’t guess it. It’s so nice to meet someone who understands.” Here, read “someone” as a “professor” who understands that our bodies do not tell the whole story about who we are, especially a professor of a body of literature associated, often, with monolingualism and white nationalism. Because we tend to break down most of the stubborn walls of propriety and authority on the first day, my classes are usually willing and eager to see where this unconventional class in an otherwise conventional subject is going to lead them.

One of the unconventional assignments that I ask my students at FAU to complete before the middle of the term is a three-part creative translation project with a partner. I randomly pair them up in the first week and ask them to choose either one long, or two or three short Middle English lyrics that total approximately 25–30 lines from the selection provided in the Broadview Anthology of British Literature, Volume One: The Medieval Period. The three steps that they must follow to complete this project, which is assessed simply as complete/incomplete with written feedback rather than a “grade” in accordance with my ungrading policy (see Appendix), include: a literal/conservative modern vernacular translation; a meeting with me about their translation and to discuss their plan for the third step; and a creative adaptation, interpretation, or response to the lyric, which can be, but does not have to be, in poetic form. By explaining to my students what I mean by a “modern vernacular” for their first step, I introduce to them the potential for translating Middle English in any of the three most commonly spoken languages at FAU: English, French, or Spanish. These include any variations of those languages, including Jamaican Patois, Hai-
tian Creole (or *kreyòl ayisyen*), and Spanglish. Most of the time, however, students are too cautious to attempt a non-English translation in the first step because it is early in the semester and I am still a relatively unknown entity, despite the decimated walls. By the time we have made it a quarter of the way through the semester, though, they have emerged from their protective shells and begin to take chances, which is why the last step in the project is the most exciting for us all. In the past, my students have adapted the lyrics in many different ways, ranging from a short story in English influenced by a love lyric to a macaronic modern adaptation of a misogynistic lyric in English and Spanish with the languages performing different rhetorical and tonal purposes. Additionally, I have been happily surprised to receive creative options that were not limited to the three languages previously mentioned. For example, one couple turned a long lyric into a macaronic French and Hebrew translation in which I had to enlist my Jewish student’s help and authority in Hebrew to educate me in his poetic creation. Further, they remind me of different non-verbal languages that are just as significant today: one couple reconceived of a Middle English lyric, which seemed to praise women and was only revealed to be misogynistic in a Latin refrain that undermined all of the lyric’s praise, by modernizing the forms of praise to fit a college cisgender heterosexual man in the United States and undermined it with a complex series of emojis. While I originally conceived of this multilingual translation project to allow my students with Caribbean backgrounds a way to draw on their own linguistic realities, assert their own knowledge in a way familiar to me, and enable them to see themselves in the temporally, geographically, linguistically, and ethnoracially unfamiliar literature in a Medieval Literature course in English, they wound up teaching me and each other just as much, if not more, than I taught them about what it means to be human, then and now.

As one might expect, then, other than making this project multilingual, the single most important element of the project is its collaborative nature. By giving my students a partner to work with, who became their “buddy” in class so that they could
also get notes or inform me that they would be tardy, they also seemed more inclined to take greater risks in class, even if their partner did not know the language they wanted to translate the lyric into. In fact, this seemed to encourage greater collaborative work and dialogue because they taught each other throughout the process, and they brought the confidence built from an assertion of their own knowledge and validation of their expertise into class discussion. My bilingual and multilingual students constantly bring in observations from their own linguistic backgrounds when reading the Middle English. For example, one student in fall 2018 noted in class one day, when pointing out a false cognate between the Middle English and Modern Spanish, “I don’t know if this is what the Middle English is trying to convey, but in Spanish…” While the words they were pairing up had no lexical or etymological connection, the interpretation to which it provided my student access was insightful and based singularly on their raciolinguistic\textsuperscript{22} background, an interpretation that would not have been possible in a less inclusive classroom. By opening up my translation projects to include languages other than English, my students are more comfortable bringing those variously influenced readings into class discussion and journal entries. Even more encouragingly, this multilingual approach to a collaborative translation project, as well as my openness regarding my background as a Spanish heritage speaker who values and respects linguistic pluralities, instilled in my students a desire to tackle more translations, as the many final projects demonstrated. In spring 2019, one student, who

\textsuperscript{22} In his essay in \textit{Raciolinguistics} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), H. Samy Alim notes that, in discussions about race and ethnicity, “language is often overlooked as one of the most important cultural means that we have of distinguishing ourselves from others” (4–5). Further, in \textit{Looking like a Language, Sounding like a Race} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), Jonathan Rosa argues, “the co-naturalization of language and race is a key feature of modern governance, such that languages are perceived as racially embodied and race is perceived as linguistically intelligible, which results in the overdetermination of racial embodiment and communicative practice” (2).
did not know French, taught themselves enough to translate and adapt a Christine de Pizan poem (“Seulete sui”) into multiple poetic forms in Modern English. Moreover, a few students who had never taken an Old English language course translated selections from *The Dream of the Rood* and *Beowulf*, another student translated the French feminine pronouns for “la bête” into English feminine pronouns in Marie de France’s *Bisclavret* to analyze the possible transgender reading that provided, and many more translated *Sir Orfeo* and selections from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Another of my students wrote their final research paper on *The Arabian Nights* and expressed a desire to learn Arabic so that they could get closer to that text as well. The common thread, here, is a desire to form a deeper understanding of the medieval past through the language and literature by removing at least one level of mediation, the translator, in addition to their bringing the text closer to them and their own linguistic realities.

**Conclusion**

One of the most common questions I ask myself whenever I enter a large crowd is “Where are my people?” That is, where are the Latinx folx? Naturally, the answer to this question became consistently “not here” whenever I asked it of medieval English literature classrooms specifically—both the ones in which I was a student and an instructor—and medieval studies conferences generally. After completing an undergraduate minor in Spanish and writing an *English* honors thesis on contemporary Latin American women’s literature, feminist theory (in which I combined French, Black, and Latin American feminist theories), and magical realism, I transitioned into Early Middle English literature and manuscript studies in my Master’s program. I have always had a knack for gravitating towards the in-between spaces, those texts and people that seem to dwell forever in hybridity and, therefore, often in obscurity, so I suppose it only made sense—Early Middle English is both Old English and Middle English and neither simultaneously, and it is often overlooked
in the study of the English Middle Ages. In my entering Early Middle English and manuscript studies, I found myself turning away from my Spanish heritage speaker background and embracing the languages of Old and Middle English, French, Latin, and even some reading knowledge of German and Italian. Now that I have returned to Florida, my home state, as an assistant professor at a public university that is an HSI, I have found myself joyfully returning, literally, to my mother’s tongue, which has even more poignancy now than ever before because I hope to share his abuelita’s tongue with my son, to encourage a complex linguistic and cultural view of both himself and the world around him before he ever steps foot into a college classroom.