

THE ORIGINS OF RACISM: A CRITIQUE OF THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

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ABSTRACT

This essay has two objectives. First, it seeks to engage critically with contemporary scholarship on the origins of racism through the lens of an older debate centered around the history of ideas. Specifically, it argues that Quentin Skinner's influential critique of the history of ideas can help identify the pitfalls of our current fascination with the origins of racism—most particularly when such origins are traced back to antiquity and the European pre- and early modern periods. In pursuing its second objective, the essay turns from histories cataloguing ancient, medieval, and early modern racisms to objections leveled, in these same literatures, against scholarship defending the modernity of race. The defense of a premodern origin to race is, I argue, not just a historical argument but a contemporary politics embedded in a narrative of continuity that insists on the relevance of the medieval past to the racial configurations of our current moment. Rather than demonstrating continuity and sameness, this essay seeks to draw attention to alternative modes of historicizing that are more attentive to the alterity of the past.

Keywords: race, Quentin Skinner, skin color, Middle Ages, modernity, early modern, antiquity

The 2001 special issue on racism in the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* edited by Thomas Hahn, Benjamin Isaac's *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (2006), Geraldine Heng's *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (2018), and the inaugural issue of the new (pre-1800) editors of *Literature Compass*, a special issue titled "Critical Race and the Middle Ages" (2019),² are significant works that conveniently frame a scholarly controversy, one that has generated a string of single-authored works, edited collections, and special journal issues.³ As the titles of these works suggest, the debate

1. I would like to thank Mark Weller, Suman Seth, Sanjay Seth, and Sharon Kinoshita for their critical reading of earlier drafts of this article as well as for providing thoughtful suggestions and encouraging words of support.

2. The essays in this special issue do not address the divisions among scholars who are otherwise sympathetic to the premodern origins of racism. Dorothy Kim, however, offers a blistering critique of earlier special issues on the subject in "Introduction to Literature Compass Special Cluster: Critical Race and the Middle Ages," *Literature Compass* 16, no. 9-10 (2019).

3. Important and influential works published in the 1990s introduced race into their reading of the European Renaissance, including Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, and Renaissance Drama* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1988); *Women, "Race," and Writing in the Early Modern Period*,

itself centers on the origins of racism—specifically, the question of whether racism has its roots in the ancient and premodern past or if it is a product of Western modernity. The contributors to the themed journal issues as well as Isaac and Heng represent a growing number of scholars working on ancient, medieval, and early modern texts and cultural practices who have resolutely rejected the modernist appropriation of racial history.

Some thirty years prior to this present debate, a revival in scholarship on race signaled what appeared to be a new and growing consensus that race was both modern and Western. What constituted modernity was up for grabs (depending on the scholar, it could be as early as the 1700s or as late as the nineteenth century), but there existed general agreement that what we witness in ancient, premodern, and early modern history is xenophobia, prejudice, and ethnocentrism but *not* racism. The origins of racism, many of these scholars argued, were tethered to the rise of centralized states, nationalism, anthropology, and biological science—in other words, the appendages of modernity.

In 2015, Cord J. Whitaker confidently asserted in his editorial introduction to a journal issue on race and the Middle Ages that “significant progress in the past 14 years” means “that the question of race’s relevance is solved: yes, the Middle Ages have been thoroughly raced.”⁴ Such confidence now seems premature. By 2019, the Trump presidency, the rise of white supremacy, and increasingly tense and, at times, ugly exchanges on social media between medieval scholars (as well as between scholars and alt-right pundits) ensured that the annual International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan, was so politically charged and fractious that it made the front page of the *New York Times*.⁵ At the core of these divisions—both at the conference and, more broadly, in the published scholarship—is the fraught question of whether race and racism are relevant and viable categories in the study of premodern Europe.

Insisting on the modernity of racism was, for at least some contemporary scholars working on antiquity and premodern Europe, a political, historical, and scholarly provocation. Appealing to the language of racism (as opposed to ethnocentrism, for example) was politically necessary in making legible the discriminations, prejudices, and atrocities committed in the ancient and premodern past; it was historically legitimate to speak of ancient, medieval, or early modern racism because these prejudices and atrocities were directed at racialized groups (for instance, Jews and Moors). The scholarly imperative to foreground premodern racism resided in a growing frustration (and frankly, Michel Foucault’s periodization didn’t help) that yet again the medieval, in particular, was shunted aside as perhaps

ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995). But as Peter Erickson argues, “[w]hat is new about more recent work is the way it places race at the center of attention as a major organizing category for the period as a whole” (“The Moment of Race in Renaissance Studies,” *Shakespeare Studies* 26 [January 1998], 33).

4. Cord J. Whitaker, “Race-ing the Dragon: The Middle Ages, Race and Trippin’ into the Future,” *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 6 (April 2015), 7.

5. Jennifer Schuessler, “Medieval Scholars Joust with White Nationalists. And One Another,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/05/arts/the-battle-for-medieval-studies-white-supremacy.html>

of historical interest but of no contemporary relevance (the modernists having hoarded, yet again, the sexy—that is, topical—themes for themselves). This in its turn spurred the publication of a score of texts by scholars of antiquity and of medieval and Renaissance Europe detailing the prevalence of racism in the ancient and premodern past and insisting that it is the legacy of these histories that informed nineteenth-century racial thought as well as our own.

My objective here is not that of a review essay that diligently engages the theoretical nuances, close textual readings, and rich historical details that many of these works offer. Rather, my intention is twofold. First, I seek to engage critically with this recent scholarship on the origins of racism through the lens of an older debate centered around the history of ideas. Specifically, I argue that Quentin Skinner's influential critique of the history of ideas can help guide our attempts to identify the pitfalls of our current fascination with the origins of racism—most particularly when such origins are traced back to antiquity and the European pre- and early modern periods.⁶ The essay's focus then turns from histories cataloguing ancient, medieval, and early modern racisms to objections levelled, in these same literatures, against scholarship arguing for the modernity of race. The defense of a premodern origin of race is, I argue, not just a historical argument but a contemporary politics embedded in a narrative of continuity that insists on the relevance of the medieval past to the racial configurations of our current moment. In critically engaging these arguments, I turn from Skinner's essay to the work of historians who, while not themselves engaged with histories of racism, appeal to critical methodologies (often informed by postmodern and postcolonial theorizing) that may be of value to scholars on race. Rather than demonstrating continuity and sameness, the primary concern of these historians is to draw our attention to alternative modes of historicizing that are more attentive to alterity in the past.

This essay is divided into three sections. The first summarizes Skinner's critique of the history of ideas. The second maps the continued relevance of this critique as it charts the main points of contention concerning the origins of race. The third and final section turns away from Skinner and focuses on postmodern and postcolonial-inflected histories that offer alternate ways of engaging and theorizing the history of race.

AN OLD DEBATE: CRITIQUING HISTORY OF IDEAS

Arguably one of the most respected architects, advocates, and practitioners of the history of ideas, Arthur O. Lovejoy elaborated on his method across a number of works—most notably, in the introduction of his celebrated book, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*. To trace an idea, or what Lovejoy refers to as “unit-ideas”⁷ and “basic or germinal ideas,”⁸ through history—whether that history is drawn over centuries (as in the case of the chain of being) or decades

6. Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969), 3-53.

7. Arthur O. Lovejoy, “The Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2, no. 3 (1941), 266.

8. *Ibid.*, 262.

(as with Romanticism)—involves looking “behind the surface-dissimilarities” and “seeming novelty of many a system”⁹ to find recognizable coherence in the continuity of “old elements.”¹⁰ Looking past “the superficial appearance of singleness and identity, to crack the shell which holds the mass together,” Lovejoy suggests, thus permits us to “see the real units, the effective working ideas, which, in any given case, are present.”¹¹ To be sure, any unit-ideas will be shaped, reconfigured, modified, and altered through the course of history, and indeed, discerning such shifts is a crucial component of the historian’s task. It involves knowing, “so far as may be known, the thoughts that have been widely held among men on matters of common human concernment, to determine how these thoughts have arisen, combined, interacted with, or counteracted, one another.”¹² But this task is only enabled by the prior recognition of an essential form, a unit-idea sufficiently intact and retaining enough cohesion and familial features that its constancy over time (“through more than one—ultimately, indeed, through all—of the provinces of history in which it figures in any important degree”¹³) can be the object of historical narration. Thus “[i]t is . . . the persistent, dynamic factors, the ideas that produce effects in the history of thought”¹⁴ that concern the historian of ideas. Tossed and battered by the waves of time, unit-ideas always rise to the surface, revealing an essential constancy of form, a resilient continuity, and a conceptual durability that the particularity of history fails to erode.

The influence of this historical methodology can be gauged not only by the journal founded in its name and the innumerable authors that broadly followed its precepts but also by the lengthy critique that it inspired. I am referring here to Skinner’s 1969 *History and Theory* article titled “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas.” Although Skinner was not alone in his criticism of the history of ideas,¹⁵ it is the systematicity and breadth of his engagement—an engagement that covered a large body of literatures of which Lovejoy’s work is only one part—that singles out his essay as the template for my own reflections on the debate concerning the origins of race and racism. Thus, before turning to this more recent controversy within the field of race studies, it is necessary to return first to a much older debate and highlight some of the weaknesses Skinner identified with this particular mode of historicizing.

Skinner’s overarching criticism of the history of ideas will be familiar if not predictable to the readers of this journal; it consists in the more general and generalizable accusation of anachronism. The “perpetual danger”¹⁶ manifest in seeking to “conceptualize an argument in such a way that its alien elements are

9. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), 4.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 6.

12. Arthur O. Lovejoy, “Reflections on the History of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 1, no. 1 (1940), 8.

13. Lovejoy, *Great Chain of Being*, 15.

14. *Ibid.*, 5.

15. See, for example, John Dunn, “The Identity of the History of Ideas,” *Philosophy* 43, no. 164 (1968), 85-104.

16. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding,” 6. All subsequent citations to Skinner in this section are from this essay and will be given parenthetically in the text.

dissolved into an apparent but misleading familiarity” (27) resides in not only “mask[ing] some essential inapplicability to the historical material” (28) but also imposing thoughts, concerns, and practices on a past that may not in fact have shared or even conceived of such thoughts, concerns, or practices.

Skinner’s caution reiterates the mantra of historians everywhere—namely, “Thou Shalt Not Commit Anachronisms”—but what interests me here are the specific weaknesses Skinner identifies within the history of ideas scholarship that makes it particularly susceptible to charges of “parochialism” (24). My intention is not to reproduce the entirety of Skinner’s dense and detailed engagement with the field but rather to focus on four arguments that are of particular relevance to my later discussion of the debate concerning the origins of race.

The first of Skinner’s criticisms speaks to the common practice within the history of ideas literature of identifying and tracing a given doctrine (such as “equality, progress, Machiavellism, the social contract”) through history even when historical actors “signally failed” to recognize or name the doctrine to which they are being credited (10). Thus begins the search for a prehistory, a nascent whisper, a promising prototype, the precursor hiding in the wings preparing for its moment in the teleological drama. Skinner explains: “As the historian duly sets out in quest of the idea he has characterized, he is very readily led to speak as if the fully developed form of the doctrine was always in some sense immanent in history, even if various thinkers failed to ‘hit upon’ it, even if it ‘dropped from sight’ at various times” (10). This “reification of doctrines” (11), wherein “the doctrine to be investigated so readily becomes hypostatized into an entity” (10), gives rise “to two kinds of historical absurdity” (11). The first consists in the search to find “approximations to the ideal type” wherein texts and practices preceding the fully realized doctrine are mined for their anticipatory possibilities, “crediting each writer in terms of this clairvoyance” (11). The second and related problem that encumbers this predictive logic is the quest for origins—that is, “the endless debate—almost wholly semantic, though posing as empirical—about whether a given idea may be said to have ‘really emerged’ at a given time, and whether it is ‘really there’ in the work of some given writer” (12).

Where the necessary words that correspond to a given doctrine do not conveniently make themselves available, historians of ideas—and this speaks to Skinner’s second criticism—have resorted to a “misleading fetishism of words” (such as “progress, equality, sovereignty, justice” [39]) wherein the repetition of a given word or set of words across numerous texts over a historical period is privileged as evidence for the continuity of an idea. The word and idea morph into one such that an essential sameness, coherence, and uniformity can then be detected and accordingly mapped. Thus, when Lovejoy traces the “chain of being” in texts from antiquity to the eighteenth century, his attention to the historical malleability of the idea is underscored by a presumed immutability; the chain of being retains an essential sameness, a recognizable unity that sustains its conceptual integrity over a millennium. Such an approach not only “mistake[s] . . . taking the word for the thing” (35); it also belies the “changed connotation[s]” (36), the historical particularity, within which words are embedded. Moreover, the very proposition that ideas retain within them an essential meaning—an immutable core that transcends

the specificity of culture and/or time—is dubious not least because it accords ideas an ethereal and transcendental quality. Even in those instances where “[w]e may perhaps learn that the expression was used at different times to answer a variety of problems,” this knowledge in itself does not reveal “*what* questions the use of the expression was thought to answer” in any given historical period. Indeed, as Skinner argues, “we could never grasp from such a history what *status* the given idea may have had at various times” (38).

Cognizant of the perils of such an approach, historians of ideas increasingly appealed to historical context. Herein lies Skinner’s third criticism: though drawing attention to the historical context within which a text is produced is no doubt of some value, it can also have the effect of “simply beg[ging] all the questions: the social context, it is said, helps to cause the formation and change of ideas; but the ideas in turn help to cause the formation and change of the social context” (42). The primary problem, Skinner argues, is that though contextualization might aid in explaining a text, it does not *ipso facto* enable us to understand the work itself: “The ‘context’ mistakenly gets treated as the determinant of what is said. It needs rather to be treated as an ultimate framework for helping to decide what conventionally recognizable meanings, in a society of *that* kind, it might in principle have been possible for someone to have intended to communicate” (49).

The final and related weakness endemic to some of the literature within the history of ideas is what Skinner identifies as the “mythology of prolepsis” (24)—that is, the effort to credit historical actors with views that are in fact outside of their historical moments. Thus, to follow Skinner’s example, Jean Jacques Rousseau’s writings may have appealed to twentieth-century totalitarian politics, but to interpret his writings as offering a deliberate, conscious defense of totalitarianism is to read back in time a political significance that had yet to materialize (23). Conflating “the historical significance of the works . . . with an account of what they [these authors] were [actually] doing” (23) ultimately leads to a “teleological form of explanation: the action has to await the future to await its meaning” (24). This invariably results in the tendency to parse out blame, derision, or praise in an account of the historical authors’ arguments such that these authors are elevated or denigrated for their ideas.

A STUDY IN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS:
THE ANCIENT AND PREMODERN ORIGINS OF RACE

The debate concerning the historical lineage of race is ultimately a debate centered on origins where, following Skinner, we enter “the endless debate” as to when “a given idea may be said to have ‘really emerged.’”¹⁷ Thus, we begin. Is it possible “that some [of the] essential elements of later [modern] racism have their roots in Greek and Roman thinking”?¹⁸ Long neglected, the early Middle Ages may hold the key to providing “a bridge between classical and medieval

17. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding,” 12.

18. Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 5.

forms of racial categorization.”¹⁹ Alternatively, “race-making” can be gleaned in the texts and practices of the later Middle Ages, as evident in the treatment and representation of Jews, Muslims, Gypsies, and Saracens.²⁰ Then again, perhaps it is in the early modern period that we first encounter racist thought following the conquests in the New World and the beginnings of modern chattel slavery.²¹ The eighteenth century has also been a strong temporal contender for racism’s origins, especially given its position as the zenith of the transatlantic slave trade and the epistemological fetishism for taxonomies systematizing (and hierarchizing) human difference.²² Finally, is race the child of nineteenth-century modernity (and here I must confess my own allegiance) nursed by empire, nationalism, ethnography, and the biological sciences?²³

Reification of Doctrines

Such efforts to secure race and racism’s conceptual and material origins make this debate not only fraught but also open to the very criticisms that Skinner identified. We begin with an idea without a name. As Peter Erickson observes before defending the origins of racism in Renaissance texts, “I know of no other area of scholarly investigation in which the overall interpretative stance and conceptual framework so directly and completely hinge on the status and legitimacy of a single word.”²⁴ What Erickson is alluding to is the unhappy fact that race cannot boast a classical lineage. In an otherwise contentious debate, scholars have had to acknowledge that terms for “race” entered European languages only sometime between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, and even then these terms more often referred to horse- and dog-breeding, lineage (usually in reference to the nobility), and blood.²⁵

Thus it is not possible, à la Lovejoy, to trace the idea of race through appeals to the continuity and repetition of the word. This inconvenient truth, however, has not stopped historians from recognizing, through “unfamiliar vocabularies and languages,”²⁶ the presence of race in the ancient, medieval, and early modern periods. Emboldened by the modern doctrine of race but hindered by its

19. Nicole Lopez-Jantzen, “Between Empires: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages,” *Literature Compass* 16, no. 9-10 (2019).

20. Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3.

21. George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

22. See, for example, George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

23. For more on this, see Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

24. Erickson, “Moment of Race,” 27.

25. Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 5; Charles de Miramon, “Noble Dogs, Noble Blood: The Invention of the Concept of Race in the Late Middle Ages,” in *The Origins of Racism in the West*, ed. Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Benjamin Isaac, and Joseph Ziegler (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 200-203.

26. Steven A. Epstein, *Purity Lost: Transgressing Boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1000-1400* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 13.

etymological absence, scholars documenting premodern racism have sought to identify synonyms that stand in for “race,” including “gens,” “*natio*,” “stock,” “tribe,” “*ethno*,” “blood,” “lineage,” and “family.”²⁷ Functioning as precursors to a future yet to materialize, these stand-in words lead the historian “to speak as if the fully developed form of the doctrine [of race] was always in some sense immanent in history.”²⁸ We encounter in the literature such phrasing as “protoracism,”²⁹ “nascent nationalism,”³⁰ “nascent racial characteristics,”³¹ and “incipient racial ideology.”³² Once “hypostatized into an entity,”³³ premodern racism constitutes the origin point from which modern racism is identified as “the inevitable outcome of centuries of thought that preceded it.”³⁴ Even when race is not fully evident, there exist “black flags—signals that should alert us to the existence of the roots of racism,”³⁵ such as medieval discourses on the nobility (“the forge where race was minted”³⁶) or the “intellectual scaffolding”³⁷ built by Las Casas where “the seeds of what would later be called ‘race’”³⁸ were planted by John Locke on “ground . . . well prepared for” social Darwinism.³⁹

Scholars who argue for the presence of premodern racism are right to point to the intense forms of discriminations and violence against, as well as the xenophobic representations of, Jews, Gypsies, Saracens, and Moors in the medieval and early modern periods. They feel aggrieved, however, by the failure of theorists of modernity to recognize such practices and textual representations as forms of racism. Their contention is that even if the word “race” did not exist, racist practices did. That the historical actors themselves may not have recognized their actions as racist (or consciously rejected such categorization, as today’s racists often do) need not prevent us, armed with the benefits of hindsight (and equipped with a concept), to see what is really going on. The problem is that in seeking “family resemblances,”⁴⁰ we potentially obstruct our understanding of the historical context, inviting a situation where “our expectations about what someone must

27. Indeed, as Robert Bartlett argues, although the “most neutral possible translation of *gens* is ‘people,’” “in the space of one work by one author”—a mid-twentieth-century translation of William of Malmesbury’s twelfth-century text, *Deeds of the Kings of the English*—“*gens* can be rendered ‘race,’ ‘nation,’ ‘people,’ ‘tribe,’ ‘stock,’ or ‘family’” (“Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 1 [2001], 43, 44).

28. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding,” 10.

29. Isaac, *Invention of Racism*, 1.

30. Heng, *Invention of Race*, 32.

31. Diego von Vacano, “Las Casas and the Birth of Race,” *History of Political Thought* 33, no. 3 (2012), 406.

32. Jonathan Elukin, “From Jew to Christian? Conversion and Immutability in Medieval Europe,” in *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, ed. James Muldoon (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 171.

33. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding,” 10.

34. Lynn Tarte Ramey, *Black Legacies: Race and the European Middle Ages* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 37.

35. Miriam Eliav-Feldon, “Vagrants or Vermin? Attitudes towards Gypsies in Early Modern Europe,” in Eliav-Feldon, Isaac, and Ziegler, eds., *Origins of Racism in the West*, 284.

36. de Miramon, “Noble Dogs, Noble Blood,” 202.

37. von Vacano, “Las Casas and the Birth of Race,” 402.

38. *Ibid.*

39. H. M. Bracken, “Essence, Accident and Race,” *Hermathena* 116 (December 1973), 91.

40. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding,” 6.

be saying or doing will themselves determine that we understand the agent to be doing something which he would not—or even could not—himself have accepted as an account of what he *was* doing.”⁴¹ This is evident in the oft-repeated appeal to premodern literatures on monsters and wild men as evidence of ancient, medieval, and early modern racism. Here, symbolic representations of the monstrous—populations inhabiting distant climes whose bodies are human–animal hybrids—are translated into racialized figures wherein highly selective readings extract references to blackness as signifying innate theories of biologism in what are otherwise recognized as otherworldly accounts of difference.⁴²

Fetishism of Words

It should not surprise us that a quest for references to skin color dominates much of the scholarship on ancient, medieval, and early modern racism. If the word “race” is absent in premodern vocabularies, no such claim can be made for colors—or at least not black, white, green, purple, and red, which all figured in the medieval lexicon. What our premodern predecessors saw when they saw color is impossible to know with any certainty—the confused description (at least for moderns) of what the classical and medieval world identified as purple is well documented.⁴³ What is clear, however, is that in the European Middle Ages, “black” and “white” were charged descriptors that often conveyed moral meaning.

Thus, the most suggestive evidence for ancient and medieval racism resides in the normative evaluation accorded to “black” and “white.” It is an argument made famous in Winthrop D. Jordan’s influential 1968 work *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812*, where he argues that a long cultural history of pejorative associations with the concept of blackness congealed, “if incalculably,”⁴⁴ in the body of the African slave. Jordan’s thesis has been embraced by more recent scholars. By the time of Shakespeare, Ania Loomba argues, “there had been a long tradition,” one dating back to the Romans, “that equated blackness with lechery.”⁴⁵ Similarly, Hahn insists that “[t]hroughout the ancient world and the Middle Ages, the black–white binary persistently conveys deep-seated symbolic meaning, in both written and visual contexts,” and thus, “[i]t seems hard to accept that the ancient cultural registers . . . —habitual associations of blackness with evil and death, for example—did not leak through and suffuse the cultural identities of black peoples.”⁴⁶

41. *Ibid.*

42. The argument is ubiquitous. For just one example, see Jeffery Jerome Cohen, “On Saracen Enjoyment: Some Fantasies of Race in Late Medieval France and England,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 1 (2001), 113–146.

43. Charlene D. Elliott, “Purple Pasts: Color Codification in the Ancient World,” *Law & Social Inquiry* 3, no. 1 (2008), 173–194; John Gage, *Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (Singapore and London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), especially 26 and 80; Umberto Eco, “How Culture Conditions the Colours We See,” in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), especially 157–160.

44. Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 9.

45. Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 49.

46. Thomas Hahn, “The Difference the Middle Ages Makes: Color and Race before the Modern World,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 1 (2001), 10.

The argument is an appealing one, for unlike the unfamiliar vocabulary of the term “gens,” tracing the negative correlation between blackness and black skin in ancient and premodern times resonates with more modern conceptions of race as biological and innate. Thus, numerous scholars have sought to argue for the presence of race and racism in antiquity, the European Middle Ages, and the early modern era by offering evidence of the ubiquitous (and negative) references to blackness within the cultural imaginations of these periods. It is in the Middle Ages, we are told, that blackness and whiteness came to acquire their normative valence and “color prejudice” became “a sustaining ideology.”⁴⁷ The evidence for this assertion draws from theological interpretations of the *Song of Songs* “with respect to themes of color, ethnic prejudice, and racism”;⁴⁸ in the identification of whiteness with Christianity and “blackness linked with hell as well as with heathen culture” in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s epic thirteenth-century poem *Parzival*;⁴⁹ and in the fourteenth-century chivalric romance, *The King of Tars*, wherein the Saracen King metamorphizes from black to white upon conversion to Christianity, thereby demonstrating “the normativity of whiteness, and of the white racial body, as the guarantor of normalcy, aesthetic and moral virtue.”⁵⁰ “In all cases,” Whitaker writes of the English and European Middle Ages, “whether attributed to excessive heat, burnt blood or associated with unrestrained sexual passion—blackness denotes abnormality.”⁵¹ Similar arguments have been made about the early modern period, with Shakespeare’s *Othello* bearing witness to the color-coding of Renaissance racism.⁵² To these examples can be added the blackness of Ham, his banishment to Africa, and his identification with slavery,⁵³ or nontextual examples, including James Sweet’s contention that “[b]iological assumptions that were familiar to a nineteenth-century Cuban slaveowner would have been recognizable to his fifteenth-century Spanish counterpart.”⁵⁴

For scholars inclined to see race and racism as features of modernity, counterarguments have been offered: Ham’s association with Africa—let alone with blackness—is an invention of the nineteenth century;⁵⁵ those who often bore the brunt of medieval discrimination (the Jews, for example) were not always physiologically distinct; and though the so-called Moor was often disparaged, it is unclear what this designation actually entailed beyond its generic conflation with heathenness.⁵⁶

47. Epstein, *Purity Lost*, 11.

48. *Ibid.*, 16.

49. Lisa Lampert, “Race, Periodicity, and the (Neo-) Middle Ages,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2004), 404.

50. Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 231.

51. Whitaker, “Race-ing the Dragon,” 5.

52. Erickson, “Moment of Race,” 27-36; Ian Smith, “Seeing Blackness, Reading Race in *Othello*,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Tragedy*, ed. Michael Neill and David Schalkwyk (New York: Oxford, 2016), 405-420; Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*.

53. David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

54. James H. Sweet, “The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1997), 166.

55. Benjamin Braude, “Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Early Modern Period,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1997), 103-142.

56. G. K. Hunter, “Elizabethans and Foreigners,” in *Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Catherine M. Alexander and Stanley Wells (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 37-63; Daniel

Moreover, between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, Europeans did not identify themselves as white but rather appealed to “an astonishing range of skin colors,” including “*ulivigna* (olive-colored), to ‘deep red,’ *vermeille* (crimson) and even *verdâtre* or *verdastrò* (greenish)”⁵⁷—the vagaries of “an ever-changing, fluid combination of one’s bodily liquids.”⁵⁸ Whiteness itself was not always an enviable color: for the sixteenth-century physiognomist Giovanni Battista Della Porta, “[t]he moon is of a white color,” and thus it follows that “white is the color of lunatics, phlegmatics and shy individuals.”⁵⁹

Normative color-coding was more often correlated to status. Indeed, as Paul Freedman, David Brion Davis, and Colin Kidd have all argued, “blackness” was a descriptor often identified with the lower orders; it was a derisive marker of the menial labor performed by peasants, serfs, and slaves.⁶⁰ Yet others have argued that colors, including white and black, were fluid categories with unstable and changing meanings. We need only think of the Black Magi, the Black Madonna, Christ as black, and the “close association . . . between black robes and the ascetic ideas of the good Christian.”⁶¹ Indeed, if at times blackness stood in opposition to Christianity, on other occasions it was an integral medium for symbolizing the values of the Church: black came to signify mourning and death, but it also denoted modesty, austerity, and a pointed rejection of the temptations and sensual indulgences of the East.⁶² The “[d]istrust of color,” then, was equally a feature “of the ascetic code that dominated medieval Christianity.”⁶³

In short, it would not only be simplistic, as Davis has argued, to presume that the abstract symbolism of color neatly corresponded to bodies,⁶⁴ there is a danger in projecting contemporary racial associations with black and white onto a distant past. Indeed, doing so is often more revealing of our own cultural embeddedness within the racialized present than it is evidence of racism in premodern times. The conceptual slippage is not uncommon. James H. Dee, for example, asks why Bernard Knox, in a 1992 Jefferson Lecture, insisted that the Greeks were “undoubtedly white” only to then say, “or, to be exact, a sort of Mediterranean olive color.”⁶⁵ What modern preoccupations are entangled in such insistence?

J. Vitkus, “Turning Turk in *Othello*: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (1997), 145-176.

57. Valentin Groebner, “The Carnal Knowing of a Coloured Body: Sleeping with Arabs and Blacks in the European Imagination, 1300–1550,” in Eliav-Feldon, Isaac, and Ziegler, eds., *Origins of Racism in the West*, 221. Also see Groebner, *Who Are You? Identification, Deception, and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe*, transl. Mark Kyburz and John Peck (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 177-148.

58. Groebner, “Carnal Knowing of a Coloured Body,” 221.

59. Quoted in Patrizia Magli, “Face and the Soul,” in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, ed. Michel Feher with Ramone Naddeff and Nadia Tazi (New York: Zone Books, 1989) II, 96.

60. Paul Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 51; Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 77.

61. Jane Schneider, “Peacocks and Penguins: The Political Economy of European Cloth and Colors,” *American Ethnologist* 5 no. 3 (1978), 421.

62. *Ibid.*, 415.

63. *Ibid.*, 422.

64. Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 57.

65. James H. Dee, “Black Odysseus, White Caesar: When Did ‘White People’ Become ‘White’?” *Classical Journal* 99, no. 2 (Dec. 2003–Jan. 2004), 158.

For Dee, like Frank M. Snowden, Jr., before him, what is “remarkable” about the ancient Greeks “is the *absence* of the kind of obsessive and corrosive concern with ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ that so disfigures our modern world.”⁶⁶ Or consider, in the context of the Middle Ages, Epstein’s assertion: “As it was passed on from the ancient to the medieval worlds, color symbolism became deeply entrenched in religious discourse, with bad consequences for darker peoples.”⁶⁷ By what measure is “darker” to be gauged? Epstein unwittingly presumes that darkness has an objective reality, that it is a condition of being and not a characterization, a culturally imbued understanding of color. In a similar vein, though even more revealing, is Goldenberg’s contention that the ancient world (as today) “marked off these people from others. And we call them ‘Blacks’ because among their distinctive features, their skin color is the most prominent and most remarkable.”⁶⁸ Thus Goldenberg surmises, “[a] crucial element . . . in hostile thinking directed toward Blacks is that they are so very visibly not ‘us,’ that they are glaringly the Other.”⁶⁹ This self-evident fact of the obvious, because of “natural” differences of pigmentation, becomes the basis for Goldenberg’s evidence of somatic racism in the early Christian period.

Yet as Peter Wade has argued, such logic presumes that nature exists independent of social interpretation. Although many of the scholars who offer evidence of somatic differences in ancient, medieval, and Renaissance (as well as modern) thought are at pains to argue that race is socially constructed (and not a biological given), the presumed “objective biological fact” of pigmentation “posit[s] a natural tendency” to see race; it suggests that race is historically produced, but skin color just is; it “implies that the phenotypical attributes often called ‘racial’ are naturally salient as cues for categorisation (as opposed to height, eye colour or double-jointedness of thumbs).”⁷⁰ The purported “construction” of race is thus negated when the focus on what are already “‘known’ to be ‘racial’ aspects of phenotype . . . implicitly [present] people as predisposed to perceive and attach significance to those particular aspects.”⁷¹

Even if we leave Wade’s constructivist critique aside, to presume that color offers unmediated access to a racial consciousness in the distant past is no less fraught because, even in those instances where “black” and “white” convey normative meaning, this meaning will not necessarily reveal, as Skinner argues, “*what* questions the use of the expression was thought to answer” in any given historical period. In other words, we cannot know “the *status* that the given idea may have had at various times. . . . There *is* no determinate idea.”⁷²

How do we begin to interpret the normative associations that circulate in and through medieval appeals to blackness and whiteness within a context where God is not an object of the mind but a condition of being, or in a context where white

66. *Ibid.*, 162.

67. Epstein, *Purity Lost*, 16.

68. David Goldenberg, “Racism, Color Symbolism, and Color Prejudice,” in Eliav-Feldon, Isaac, and Ziegler, eds., *Origins of Racism in the West*, 89.

69. *Ibid.*, 92.

70. Peter Wade, “‘Race,’ Nature and Culture,” *Man* 28, no. 1 (1993), 21.

71. *Ibid.*, 25.

72. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding,” 38.

and black are sometimes better understood as luminosity and darkness?⁷³ In what register do we contemplate the (racial) body when the impassive immutability that such singularity and coherence denotes was foreign to premodern styles of reasoning? What we witness, in the premodern, are bodies tethered to the movement of planets and stars, transformed through baptism and conversion, afflicted by the imbalance of the four humors that are themselves inflected through color,⁷⁴ altered by climatic conditions, and at times, even liminal in their forms—part human, part animal, wild, monstrous.⁷⁵ Extracting, abstracting, and translating medieval vocabularies of color into the conceptual familiarity of race presumes a continuity that is difficult to sustain when confronted with two incommensurable structures of thought: the one, where colors acquire meaning through a constellation of statements that are tethered to cosmic sympathies and antipathies, God's benevolence and divine judgement, porous bodies and an agential nature; the other, the modern, where red, brown, black, and white bodies signified the normal and pathological, the primitive and the civilized, missing links and evolutionary stages.

Historical Context

Some scholars who have sought to trace the premodern origins of race and racism have complemented textual exegesis with a wealth of historical detail. The historical context unpacked with particular reference to Christian social, legal, religious, and political practices has added to the store of evidentiary examples for the presence of racism in the ancient, medieval, and early modern periods. Thus, we learn of the 1215 Fourth Lateran council's Canon 68, which mandated distinct dress codes for Jews and Muslims;⁷⁶ the series of English rulings requiring that the Jewish minority be compelled to wear badges;⁷⁷ the expulsion or forced conversion of Jews from Spain between 1341 and 1492; the expulsion of all Moors from Spain in 1492;⁷⁸ the 1596 and 1601 "open warrants" by Queen Elizabeth to deport "Negars and Blackamoors";⁷⁹ the 1554, 1562, and 1612 decrees to "banish or police gypsies" within England; and the 1594 decree to "banish the Irish."⁸⁰

73. Gage, *Color and Culture*, 58-61.

74. "The medical school of Hippocrates . . . had argued that man is made up of four 'humours': blood (red), phlegm (white) and yellow and black bile, which in a perfectly balanced mixture . . . made up a perfectly balanced organism" (Gage, *Color and Culture*, 29).

75. Vanita Seth, *Europe's Indians: Producing Racial Difference, 1500-1900* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Vanita Seth, "Difference with a Difference: Wild Men, Gods and Other Protagonists," *Parallax* 9, no. 4 (2003), 75-87.

76. Heng, *Invention of Race*, 15.

77. *Ibid.*

78. David Nirenberg, "Was There Race before Modernity? The Example of 'Jewish' Blood in Late Medieval Spain," in Eliav-Feldon, Isaac, and Ziegler, eds., *Origins of Racism in the West*, 242.

79. Emily C. Bartels, "Too Many Blackamoors: Deportation, Discrimination, and Elizabeth I," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 46, no. 2 (2006), 305-322. Bartels is against reading the open warrants as straightforward articulations of early modern racism but rather as complex stratagems of negotiation with Spain. Others, however, have seen these warrants as evidence of the stabilization of racial politics in Renaissance England. For critical comments of Bartels's essay, see Arthur L. Little, Jr., "Re-Historicizing Race, White Melancholia, and the Shakespearean Property," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (2016), 98-100.

80. Little, "Re-Historicizing Race," 100.

Even when we move from texts to practices, we still confront the problem Skinner identified—namely, that appeals to historical context can sometimes “beg the question.” Race is the interpretive lens through which texts and practices are recognized as racist while these same texts and practices are evidence of racism. The circularity of the argument is further accentuated when scholars seek recourse in definitions to ground the periodization they then wish to defend. Definitional fiat ensures that the determinative characteristics of race and racism identified by scholars obligingly correspond with the historical periods within which they locate race and racism’s origins. Isaac argues that racism, when “properly understood,”⁸¹ is “visible”⁸² in ancient Greek and Roman thought. That proper understanding is reliant on accepting Isaac’s definition of “racism” as:

an attitude towards individuals and groups of people which posits a direct and linear connection between physical and mental qualities. It therefore attributes to those individuals and groups of peoples collective traits, physical, mental, and moral, which are constant and unalterable by human will, because they are caused by hereditary factors or external influences, *such as climate or geography*.⁸³

But it is not just scholars of antiquity who appeal to definitions. Isaac is arguing against a body of literature that correlates racial logic with physiological immutability. Scholars who identify racism with modernity have argued that a certain malleability is accorded the body (change the conditions and the body itself will change) where human difference is accounted for through reference to environmental, political, or cultural factors. This, it is argued, is what distinguishes premodern prejudice from modern racism: the latter presumes the fixity and intransigence of human physiology. In this vein, Ivan Hannaford, who explicitly rejects the proposition that racism has an ancient or medieval lineage, offers a five-point definition of racism that includes the premise: “that human beings are independent of ethical, moral, religious, and mythological laws or rules and are subject to the laws of nature; . . . that descent is about the transmission of biological characteristics, once ‘blood,’ now ‘genes’; . . . [and] that races may be distinguished and arranged hierarchically so as to allow recognition of peoples by ‘type.’”⁸⁴ “These premises,” Hannaford concludes, “are not to be found in the Greeks.”⁸⁵ Whereas Isaac’s definition of racism extends well beyond, and encompasses a far broader range of ideas than, that of scientifically oriented biological determinism, it is precisely the emphasis on biology that is at the core of Hannaford’s definition. And whereas for Isaac environmental explanations for difference enable a history of protoracism, it is the potential mutability and transience that such explanations avow that, for Hannaford, relieves it of any resemblance to race. Finally, given that climate and environment were the primary frames through which the ancients accounted for human difference, it is not at all surprising that Isaac should find racism in the periods he studies. No less is true for Hannaford; privileging biological determinism and the normative

81. Isaac, *Invention of Racism*, 1.

82. *Ibid.*, 4.

83. *Ibid.*, 23 (emphasis added).

84. Hannaford, *Race*, 57-58.

85. *Ibid.*, 58.

classification of bodies as central to his definition of race restricts their presence to the nineteenth century.⁸⁶

Kwame Anthony Appiah's tripartite model of history—wherein he distinguishes among the ethnographic representations of antiquity, the theologically inspired prejudices of the early modern, and a nineteenth-century racism born of nationalism and biologism⁸⁷—similarly meets with protest and accusations of bad faith: “race is defined according to nineteenth-century specifications; the Renaissance cannot meet this stringent definition; therefore race is not a salient issue in the Renaissance.”⁸⁸ Rejecting such periodization, Erickson asserts that “race is relevant for the Renaissance but the concept has to be redefined.”⁸⁹

The value of definitions, of course, is that they help us to narrow or expand what concepts encompass. In this context, Isaac, Hannaford, and Appiah are in agreement. To define race requires that distinctions be made, such as conceptual delineations among xenophobia, ethnocentrism, and racism (Isaac, Hannaford, and Appiah); theological (Appiah) or civic (Hannaford) renderings of difference versus biological ones; and the absence of racialized color symbolism (Snowden and Dee) or its presence (Epstein, Erickson, Hahn, and Ramey). The underlying presumption is that to locate racism in a given period is also an exercise in delineating what is *not* racism. For this reason, Heng's efforts to assign racism's origins to the European Middle Ages is striking for the sheer breadth of her definition (the emphasis is all her own):

*“race” is one of the primary names we have . . . attached to a repeating tendency . . . 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. . . . [R]ace is a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content.*⁹⁰

We are left wondering, along with William Chester Jordan: “is every hatred a form or variant of racism?”⁹¹ But Heng's definition at least has the merit of recognizing that racism is a relationship of power and not simply an exercise in recording the bad things some people said about other people at some point in time (“back in the Middle Ages, color prejudice existed, at times even with few or no people of color to deprecate”⁹²).

Mythology of Prolepsis

Whether or not an author begins with a definition of racism, the very logic of origins presumes demarcations that include, among other things, a judgmental cataloging of thinkers noting, to put it crudely, who is and is not a racist. Historical

86. Vanita Seth, “Race,” in *A Cultural History of Western Empires in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Ian Coller (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 187.

87. Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Race,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Studies*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 274–287.

88. Erickson, “Moment of Race,” 29.

89. *Ibid.*, 27.

90. Heng, *Invention of Race*, 27.

91. William Chester Jordan, “Why ‘Race’?” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 1 (2001), 170.

92. Epstein, *Purity Lost*, 13.

thinkers are thus denounced or praised, chided for their omissions or credited for their foresight, and this paradigm of ethics and morality “determines the direction of the whole historical investigation.”⁹³ In this vein, Plato is emblematic of the “proto” in Isaac’s formulation of protoracism, for long before Francis Galton coined the term “eugenics,” we recognize an earlier articulation and defense of this doctrine in the writings of a fourth-century philosopher.⁹⁴ Julie K. Ward is more cautious in suggesting that though aspects of “Aristotle’s political theorizing . . . suggest promising sources for racialist thinking,”⁹⁵ his “notion of race and ethnicity” is more “cultural” and “social” than “biologically determinist.” This is so because Aristotle’s emphasis on “social training, political institutions, and moral education . . . in forming the character of Greek citizens” opens up the possibility for non-Greek inclusion, though “[a]dmittedly, Aristotle does not raise such a possibility.”⁹⁶ For Linda Lomperis, a “pervasive pattern of racial representation” exists “throughout the text” that is Mandeville’s *Travels*.⁹⁷ For Diego von Vacano, it is Bartholomé de Las Casas who “lays the foundation for an understanding of racial identities.”⁹⁸ Yet others identify François Bernier as the obvious progenitor of racism, especially given that he is credited as the first to employ “race” in anything resembling its modern usage.⁹⁹ Within the Enlightenment canon, H. M. Bracken argues that prior to the “racism of a Voltaire or a Hume,”¹⁰⁰ it was John Locke who had the most “decisive influence”¹⁰¹ in articulating a philosophical defense of slavery and racism. Montesquieu and Rousseau are the humanist heroes of Tzvetan Todorov’s history of racial thought, but “racialist theory in its entirety” is to be “found in the writings” of their contemporary, Buffon.¹⁰² The cosmopolitanism that recuses Montesquieu and Rousseau from the racist philosophical canon is insufficient to save Immanuel Kant. “Racist ideas are central to [Kant’s] thought,”¹⁰³ evident not only in his derogatory comments on blacks but also in “his failure to repudiate the chattel slavery of Africans.”¹⁰⁴ But if “his disturbing views of race contradicted his own moral universalism,” this contradiction was “finally resolved . . . during the mid-1790s.”¹⁰⁵

93. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding,” 13.

94. Isaac, *Invention of Racism*, 124-129.

95. Julie K. Ward, “Ethnos in the Politics: Aristotle and Race,” in *Philosophers on Race*, ed. Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 14.

96. *Ibid.*, 30.

97. Linda Lomperis, “Medieval Travel Writing and the Question of Race,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 1 (2001), 157.

98. von Vacano, “Las Casas and the Birth of Race,” 404.

99. Pierre H. Bouille, “François Bernier and the Origins of the Modern Concept of Race,” in *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, ed. Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 27.

100. Bracken, “Essence, Accident and Race,” 89.

101. *Ibid.*, 83.

102. Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 103.

103. Charles W. Mills, “Kant’s *Untermenschen*,” in *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Valls (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 171.

104. Robert Bernasconi, “Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism,” in Ward and Lott, eds., *Philosophers on Race*, 152.

105. Pauline Kleingeld, “Kant’s Second Thoughts on Race,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 57, no. 229 (2007), 592.

Ultimately, for all that distinguishes the scholarship on the origins of ancient and premodern racism, what is common is the implicit presumption that racism is an empty vessel residing outside of the history it is said to contain. In this respect, it is not dissimilar to Lovejoy's chain of being, albeit without a word to mark its presence and ground its continuity. Racism, like the chain of being, is presumed to retain enough conceptual cohesion that it precedes the history that it then particularizes. In short, racism functions as a unit-idea—in the constancy of its recognizable, essential form, the historical intransigence of racism is the presumptive condition for the histories of which it is then the object, histories that cross centuries if not a millennium. If Skinner's essay reminds us of the dangers of pursuing a history of ideas, other scholars, engaged in postmodern and postcolonial theorizing, enable us to imagine alternative ways of conceiving of and engaging with the past—ways that may be fruitful to our study of the history of race.

OTHER WAYS OF BEING IN THE WORLD

What is the impulse behind efforts to trace the origins of racism back to an ancient and premodern past and to seek that past in the present? Efforts to accord ancient or medieval origins to what has more commonly been identified with modern history are not, of course, limited to scholars of race and racism, but what is striking about the scholarship on premodern racism is not only the sheer volume of literature that has been produced over the last twenty years but also the tone of aggrievement that much of this literature conveys. The scholars whom I have engaged in this essay offer detailed histories and close textual readings, but they also articulate, to varying degrees, a sense of outrage, deep frustration, aggravation, indignation, and anger. What concerns me is not the passion itself (it is a much-needed corrective to the dull soberness of academic prose) but the factors provoking the often polemical and rhetorical style that informs much of this scholarship. The reasons for such anger and frustration are many, but they are less focused on the injustices of the past (the object of their study) than they are on the perceived injustices of the present: the willful failure of contemporary scholarship to recognize that ancient and premodern history, most particularly its racial history, continues to inform the politics of today. Some scholars regard this refusal as tantamount to a pervasive racism within the academy, a "white melancholia" that "posit[s] and valorize[s] an imaginary historical moment when . . . 'humanity' was both white and unraced."¹⁰⁶ It represents an "erasure of a black presence from the European medieval past,"¹⁰⁷ thereby consigning modern blacks to a history "without the authorizing length and depth available to whites."¹⁰⁸ As Erickson and Kim F. Hall argue, "we can only conclude that these acts of refusal [to recognize premodern racism] are . . . due to a pathological averseness to thinking about race under the guise of protecting historical

106. Little, "Re-Historicizing Race," 93. See also Ian Smith, "We Are Othello: Speaking of Race in Early Modern Studies," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (2016), 104-124.

107. Whitaker, "Race-ing the Dragon," 5.

108. *Ibid.*, 6.

difference.”¹⁰⁹ It is perhaps the correlation being drawn between the whiteness of the Anglo-American academy (particularly in classical, medieval, and Renaissance studies) and the refusal to acknowledge racism in the premodern past that accounts for why Dorothy Kim appeals to the calculable weight of difference as the opening gambit in her introductory essay in *Literature Compass*: “This is the first special issue on race or volume on race in the premodern past that also includes a 60% (including myself as the writer of this introduction) demographic of scholars who identify as medievalists of color.”¹¹⁰

More common are the complaints of misrepresentation where scholars of the modern era are accused of oscillating between nostalgic representations of the Middle Ages as a “golden age” (“advocates of pre-modern innocence”¹¹¹ who romanticize an alterity that eclipses the violence and atrocities committed over centuries) or “as a backward, brutal period,”¹¹² the Dark Ages. The effect, in either case, is to assume that the “modern legacy of racial thinking can be shut off”¹¹³ when engaging ancient texts; it is tantamount to treating the Renaissance “as somehow existing in a state of exception”¹¹⁴ or worse, for “[i]ninstalling the ancient world as a domain *before* prejudice”—a reference to Snowden’s book *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks*—“amounts to imagining it as *before* history.”¹¹⁵

It is apparent that the driving force behind recent efforts to establish a premodern origin for racism stems from the desire for, and an insistence on, political relevance—that ancient, medieval, and early modern history (whether in reference to art, philosophy, literature, or politics) continue to have a bearing on, and/or are foundational to, the making of our contemporary moment. Thus, arguments proffered by some historians that premodern prejudice be identified in terms of xenophobia or ethnocentrism rather than racism have been roundly rejected. The reasons offered are explicitly polemical; “racism,” it is argued, carries a resonance, a legibility, a political, contemporary currency that other terms do not. In other words, it is not history that is appealed to for legitimacy but political rhetoric and contemporary relevance. Similarly, it is against this backdrop of demands for the topicality of the premodern to the immediacy of present-day politics that has enabled an imaginative crisscrossing of cultures and temporalities. “[K]ey elements that form the foundations of both colonial expansion and nineteenth-century scientific racism can already be located in certain strands of medieval discourse”¹¹⁶ that are evident, Lynn Tarte Ramey continues, in “[e]arly scientific treatises on conception and on *what would come to be called genetics*.”¹¹⁷ Heng

109. Peter Erickson and Kim F. Hall, “‘A New Scholarly Song’: Rereading Early Modern Race,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (2016), 2.

110. Kim, “Introduction to Literature Compass Special Cluster.”

111. Nirenberg, “Was There Race Before Modernity?” 234.

112. Lampert, “Race, Periodicity, and the (Neo-) Middle Ages,” 393.

113. Denise Kimber Buell, “Race and Universalism in Early Christianity,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10, no. 4 (2002), 435.

114. Little, “Re-Historicizing Race,” 94.

115. Hahn, “The Difference the Middle Ages Makes,” 5; Frank M. Snowden, Jr., *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

116. Ramey, *Black Legacies*, 3.

117. *Ibid.*, 5 (emphasis added).

moves from recounting the persecution of Jews in the thirteenth century—manifest in various royal and church edicts—to twentieth-century apartheid in South Africa and twenty-first-century targeting of Kurds in Turkey.¹¹⁸ Peter Abelard's twelfth-century erotic imaginings of black women is a premonition of what is to come: "the modern-day saga of Strom Thurmond or the historical saga of Thomas Jefferson."¹¹⁹ The badges or stars that Jews were compelled to wear in the "twelfth, thirteenth, and twentieth centuries" are, for Hahn, all "mode[s] of legally mandated racial profiling."¹²⁰ The figure of Othello and the "racialism" that informs Shakespeare's play is paralleled, in Kyle Gordy's work, with the former US Secretary of State, Colin Powell.¹²¹ Modern Islamophobia is just the most recent iteration of premodern religious racisms perpetrated against Moors, Saracens, and Turks. The modern conflicts between Hutus and Tutsis and Bosnians and Serbs are all evidence of a return to the cultural racisms that are said to define the Middle Ages and early modern period.¹²²

In what follows, I focus particularly on arguments proffered by scholars on the medieval period precisely because it is the study of the Middle Ages that has most often been maligned as esoteric and not germane to the culture or politics of the present. Yet it is a curious fact that in the new millennium the European Middle Ages has indeed come to inform our modern moment. As a number of recent books attest, the medieval now looms large in the modern imagination at the level of popular culture and politics.¹²³ Whether we turn to such successful television series as *Game of Thrones*, to political rhetoric such as Bush's reference to "crusades," or to Milo Yiannopoulos's racist imaginings of the Middle Ages as a white Christian utopia, the medieval has undoubtedly captured the contemporary imagination. That this is often an imaginative portrayal of the Middle Ages that has little correlation with the historical Middle Ages is wholly beside the point; the medieval is topical and immediately relevant to contemporary politics and culture for the simple reason that in our present moment it offers up a blank canvas upon which we project our desires, fears, prejudices, and ideals.

But this is not the topicality being appealed to by scholars of medieval racism. Their contention is that there is a historical continuity and essential sameness that tethers the European Middle Ages to modernity—that contemporary racial politics are indebted to, and echoes of, a prior medieval racism. In so arguing, these scholars level three primary criticisms against those who continue to argue for the modern origins of racism.

The first objection speaks to an apparent contradiction that exists in the scholarship on modern racism—namely, that although the malleability and permutations of modern racial discourse are widely acknowledged, such recognition does

118. Heng, *Invention of Race*, 28.

119. *Ibid.*, 44.

120. Hahn, "The Difference the Middle Ages Makes," 5.

121. Kyle Grady, "Othello, Colin Powell, and Post-Racial Anachronisms," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (2016), 69.

122. Hahn, "The Difference the Middle Ages Makes," 9; Heng, *Invention of Race*, 20.

123. Andrew B. R. Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics and the Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2017); *International Medievalism and Popular Culture*, ed. Louise D'Arcens and Andrew Lynch (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2014).

not extend to include the equally fluid racialized imagery and language found in the premodern past. In other words, despite the fact that many scholars have identified the shifting signifiers and vocabularies upon which contemporary racism resides (and the fluid modes by which it finds expression), “our current moment of flexible definitions—a moment in which cultural race and racism, and *religious* race, jostle alongside race-understood-as-somatic/biological determinations— . . . stops at the door of modern time.”¹²⁴ But if contemporary “racism is no longer concerned merely with biology,” then “in a bizarre reversal, notions of race are returning to . . . a ‘premodern’ state.”¹²⁵

It is certainly true that there is a growing recognition, as Étienne Balibar’s theorizing of “neo-racism” suggests, that earlier appeals to biological difference now coexist with and, indeed, at times, are displaced by a new emphasis on the immutability of cultural difference.¹²⁶ I would argue, however, that what we are witnessing today in the fluid and multiple articulations of contemporary racism is not a return to a medieval past but a reaction to—an engagement with and a recognition of a prior privileging of—scientific, biological racism. It is only in reference to the once incontestable and now publicly denounced modes of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century biological racism that the contemporary shifts we are witnessing gain their meaning, traction, and significance. Indeed, this was recognized as early as 1967 when UNESCO published their “Statement on Race and Racial Prejudice” as an updated version of their 1950 educational “Statement on Race.”¹²⁷ Whereas the 1950 statement was focused primarily on refuting the biological grounds on which the logic of racial hierarchies found their defense (it was, after all, an act of contrition by the newly founded United Nations in the face of Nazi atrocities),¹²⁸ the 1967 statement begins by reiterating these earlier arguments but then turns to a repudiation of cultural racism: “Faced with the exposure of the falsity of its biological doctrines, racism finds ever new stratagems for justifying the inequality of groups.” Where biological arguments are no longer available, the report reads,

divine purpose, cultural differences, disparity of educational standards or some other doctrine . . . serve to mask its continued racist beliefs. Thus, many of the problems which racism presents in the world today do not arise merely from its open manifestations, but from the activities of those who discriminate on racial grounds but are unwilling to acknowledge it.¹²⁹

124. Heng, *Invention of Race*, 20.

125. Lampert, “Race, Periodicity, and the (Neo-) Middle Ages,” 419.

126. Étienne Balibar, “Is There a ‘Neo-Racism,’” in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, transl. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1991), 17-28.

127. “Statement on Race, 1950,” in *Four Statements on the Race Question* (Paris: UNESCO, 1969), 30-35.

128. It should be noted that the 1950 statement was almost immediately revised. Anger that the work of physical anthropologists and biologists was not represented in the first statement resulted in the publication of a 1951 document that sought to qualify the racial equality articulated in the earlier version. For an excellent overview of the early history of the UNESCO statement on the Race Question, see Michelle Brattain, “Race, Racism, and Antiracism: UNESCO and the Politics of Presenting Science to the Postwar Public,” *American Historical Review* 112, no. 5 (2007), 1386-1413.

129. “Statement on Race and Racial Prejudice, 1967,” in *Four Statements on the Race Question* (Paris: UNESCO, 1969), 51.

In other words, it is nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scientific racism that is the referent for and the framework within which contemporary racism acquires its multivariant and chameleonic characteristics. And it is in the shadow of the horrors legitimated by racial science (such that it became increasingly unacceptable to be openly racist) that *cultural* racism found salience. Indeed, one popular source for racism's cultural expression is history. In this respect, the European Middle Ages is particularly appealing given its popular (and wholly mythological) status as racially white and theologically Christian.

The frequent charge of anachronism meted out against scholars engaged in ancient and premodern studies of racism has also been met with scorn and derision, dismissed as “a scare tactic and conversation stopper”¹³⁰ that is intent on “[f]etishizing historical accuracy.”¹³¹ But “the charge of ‘anachronism’ that haunts analyses of early modern colonialism and race”¹³² has also, and this is the second criticism, been met with the counter accusation of ahistoricism that purportedly lies at the heart of histories centered on race's recent origin. Without necessarily naming Michel Foucault, it is often the Foucauldian-inflected penchant for historical ruptures and histories of discontinuity—especially “[t]he concept that everything suddenly changed in 1600 or 1700 or even 1800 (the date changes depending upon the period with which the scholar is most familiar)”¹³³—that particularly incenses scholars of ancient and premodern racism. It does so because implicit in such histories is, at best, a temporal vacuum and, at worst, the willful refusal to concede any relevance to the Middle Ages—indeed, to render the medieval as “somehow outside real time” while modernity “emerges from the ooze of a murkily long chronology by means of a temporal rupture—a big bang, if we like—that issues in a new historical instant.”¹³⁴

No doubt Foucault's earlier work, most notably *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, has contributed to the confusion.¹³⁵ Focused on an archaeology of knowledge, Foucault offers a rich account of the radically distinct epistemes upon and through which knowledge is produced within the Renaissance, Classical Age, and modern era. What is notably absent from *The Order of Things*, however, is any reference to causality, any connective tissue that charts the transition from one episteme to another. Thus, Foucault appears to seal hermetically and separate historical periods in his effort to distinguish different regimes of knowledge.

I would suggest, however, that it is possible to speak of conversations across time without presuming a continuity of meaning over time. No one would dispute the centrality of pagan writings, such as those attributed to Plato and Aristotle, to the theological meditations of Augustine and Aquinas, respectively.

130. Erickson and Hall, “‘A New Scholarly Song,’” 4.

131. Smith, “We are Othello,” 120.

132. Ania Loomba, “Periodization, Race, and Global Contact,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2007), 597.

133. Ramey, *Black Legacies*, 37.

134. Heng, *Invention of Race*, 20.

135. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973).

Machiavelli's sardonic introduction to *The Prince* is directed against the "advice manuals to rulers" popularized by ancient and medieval writers; his *Discourse on Livy* is inspired by Roman Republicanism. Antonio Gramsci interprets *The Prince*, Stuart Hall appeals to Gramsci, Sigmund Freud reads Sophocles, Hannah Arendt disputes Hegel, Jacques Derrida returns to Rousseau, Jean Rhys gives literary voice to Brontë's mad woman in the attic, Adrian Piper performs Kant, Judith Butler rereads *Antigone*, the eighteenth century turned to antiquity, the nineteenth century packaged the Middle Ages. All such engagements, disputations, anachronisms, nostalgia, and interpretations are part of what has been collectively identified as the hermeneutics of Western traditions of thought, and insofar as such texts, practices, and thinkers are continually interpolated into the present of the author who engages them, they are securing the continuity of that interpretive history. As Sanjay Seth recently argued, "[t]he text is not just an object of the past belonging purely to the present: it comes to us already interpreted, not as a mere object but as a tissue of interpretations."¹³⁶ Collectively, such historical interpretations and textual exegeses constitute "the traditions out of which we reason."¹³⁷ But we need not presume that such reason must be singular and constant throughout time. Rather, the contemporaries of any given period have taken up the texts and practices of their historical predecessors and revived, engaged, contested, and reimagined them but have done so, importantly, within the possibilities and constraints of radically distinct epistemic frameworks. In other words, one can acknowledge rupture and historical discontinuity without disavowing the continuity that underwrites Western hermeneutics.

One can recognize, for example, the long history of Christian vilification of Jews or Muslims without thereby presuming that medieval renderings of heathens and infidels share the same conceptual meaning as contemporary anti-Semitism or Islamophobia. Building on the work of a number of scholars, Jonathan Judaken argues that we "cannot simply postulate causal links across time between anti-Jewish animus and persecution,"¹³⁸ nor can we, as with "the over-expansive use of the term 'racism,'"¹³⁹ appeal to "a notion of anti-Semitism as eternal or as teleologically culminating in the Nazi genocide."¹⁴⁰

Thus, in the Latin Christian medieval context where God was the precondition for and locus of knowledge, ritualistic practices defined social existence at all levels. Those who engaged in forms of worship that failed to adhere to Christian doctrine were rendered legible (and in their legibility derided, ostracized, persecuted, killed, and at times violently expelled) within and through this epistemic framework. Thus, as Judaken argues, "the ostensibly malformed foot of the Jew was a sign of his affiliation with the devil in the Middle Ages," whereas in a

136. Sanjay Seth, *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 99.

137. *Ibid.*

138. Jonathan Judaken, introduction to "AHR Roundtable: Rethinking Anti-Semitism," *American Historical Review* 123, no. 4 (2018), 1130.

139. *Ibid.*, 1128.

140. *Ibid.*, 1130.

modern context, it was appealed to as “an indicator of his ineligibility for military service and consequently citizenship in newly forming nation-states.”¹⁴¹

As numerous scholars of religion have emphasized, in the post-Reformation context, God exists, if He exists at all, as an object of thought, the beneficiary of belief in a pluralized world of religions. Thus as Jean Pouillon argues, contemporary man must state his belief in God “even though he knows it—but also because he knows that by this very fact it is contestable and contested.” Above all, he knows that “there can be *other* beliefs only because his own belief is one among others.”¹⁴² Belief, as Pouillon, Talal Asad, and Saba Mahmood,¹⁴³ among others, have argued, is the offspring of religion, where religion is understood as encompassing a multitude of faiths practiced by private individuals and situated outside of (or in opposition to) the secular. And if such an understanding is not transcultural, it also is not transhistorical. Indeed, the French medievalist Jean-Claude Schmitt accuses European medievalists, in their frequent invocation of religion, of engaging in anachronism; religion, he insists, is an invention of the modern.¹⁴⁴

When scholars of medieval racism appeal to religion, more often than not it is the presumed plurality of beliefs that underscores their iteration of racism against Moors, Jews, and Saracens. Indeed, it is because medieval Christianity is identified as the medium through which people of other religions are racially marked that an easy transition and uncomplicated equivalence can be posited such that the Bosnian-Serbian conflict or post-September 11 anti-Muslim vitriol appear as racialized echoes of premodern religious racism.

The final, and related, objection proffered by scholars of medieval racism is directed against the postmodernist and postcolonial predilection for couching ancient, medieval, or early modern thought in terms of radical alterity. Privileging alterity, they argue, has the effect of not only marginalizing the significance of these historical periods (a significance that continues to haunt the present) but also conferring on the premodern past a diminutive status (the precursor to the real time of modernity); or worse still, it untethers the premodern from history altogether. The implication seems to be that to recognize other ages or cultures as imagining and inhabiting worlds incommensurable to that of the modern West renders them somehow impoverished and deficient.

Whether appealing to Dark Age imagery or the infantilizing temporality of childlike innocence, in both instances the Middle Ages functioned as inadequate and immature. However, efforts by scholars of medieval racism to counter such narratives of lack by insisting that that which defined European modernity always

141. *Ibid.*, 1137.

142. Jean Pouillon, “Remarks on the Verb ‘To Believe,’” in *Between Belief and Transgression: Structuralist Essays in Religion, History, and Myth*, ed. Michel Izard and Pierre Smith, transl. John Leavitt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 6.

143. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Saba Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?” in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, ed. Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 58-94.

144. Claude Schmitt cited in Christine Caldwell Ames, “Medieval Religious, Religions, Religion,” *History Compass* 10, no. 4 (2012), 341.

already existed does not dethrone the privileging of the modern but rather reaffirms it. Absence is conflated with abjection. “Thus,” Heng argues,

fictionalized as a politically unintelligible time, because it lacks the signifying expressive of, and witnessing, modernity, medieval time is then absolved of the errors and atrocities of the modern, while its own errors and atrocities are shunted aside as essentially nonsignificative, without *modern* meaning, because occurring outside the conditions structuring intelligible discourse on, and participation, in modernity and its cultures. The replication of this template of temporality—one of the most durably stable intellectual replications in the West—is the basis for the replication of race theory’s exclusions.¹⁴⁵

In effect, Heng is arguing for the relevance of the Middle Ages because within its folds exists all that we identify with modernity; being essentially the same as modernity, the Middle Ages must have historical value. Inadvertently, modernity constitutes the yardstick against which the medieval arrives at self-definition. And what Heng argues for the European Middle Ages, she then extends into her reading of the non-West. The non-West is like the West, and thus it cannot be inferior to the West. For example, citing Robert Hartwell, among others, Heng maintains that the Industrial Revolution, so long lauded as a feature of European history, was preceded by a Chinese version: “against the putative uniqueness of the Industrial Revolution . . . the tonnage of coal burnt annually for iron production in eleventh century northern China was already ‘roughly equivalent to 70% of the total amount of coal annually used by all metal workers in Great Britain at the beginning of the eighteenth century.’”¹⁴⁶ Although Heng is absolutely right in her criticism of a long lineage of scholarship that has identified the modern West as the instigator of history, thus marking the non-West as premodern and implicitly (if not explicitly) inferior, the answer is not to then insist that the conditions and practices of the modern West (be they nationalism, the Industrial Revolution, or racism) must therefore be extended to all societies in order to counter the “linear temporality” Heng rightly derides.¹⁴⁷ Rather, it is to question the yardstick, or the presumption that the modern West is the point of comparison and contrast. If modernity is the template that elevates the Middle Ages, it is a similar appeal to sameness that accords authority to non-European states. Again, what defines the West is benevolently extended to embrace other parts of the globe, thereby anointing them with status as well.

This logic is particularly peculiar given that many scholars arguing for the medieval origins of racism are sympathetic to postcolonial theory. The argument is curious because it represents an interesting shift away from an earlier criticism by medievalists who objected to the positing of the European Middle Ages as a familial ancestor to modernity.¹⁴⁸ Against this logic, it was “an emphasis upon the period’s alterity” that gradually came to define the field.¹⁴⁹ Scholars working within this broad rubric have resisted the presumption that

145. Heng, *Invention of Race*, 21.

146. *Ibid.*, 21-22.

147. *Ibid.*, 21.

148. For an excellent overview of the historical shifts in medieval studies within America, see Paul Freedman and Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “Medievalism Old and New: The Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies,” *American Historical Review* 103, no. 3 (1998), 677-704.

149. Ames, “Medieval Religions, Religions, Religion,” 339.

the absence of modern Western knowledge-regimes is suggestive of an incompleteness, a historical or cultural failing. Rather, the alterity of antiquity, the European Middle Ages, or the early modern period—as well as the alterity of non-European histories and traditions of knowing—is precisely what such scholars have sought to emphasize. In so doing, they have sought to reject the hegemony of the modern West as the guarantor of meaning and value, revealing in its stead a multiplicity of ways of being in the world. Acknowledging difference is not an exercise in derision.

Shigehisa Kuriyama's excellent comparative work on ancient Greek and Chinese medicine does not seek to recuperate Chinese conceptions of the body by revealing that China also contained within it the seeds of anatomical thinking and practices of dissection. If the ancient Chinese did not share Greek conceptions of the body, this did not constitute a lack. Instead, as Kuriyama maps out with extraordinary detail, ancient Chinese medicine constituted a rich alternative tradition that must be understood within its own terms.¹⁵⁰ In a similar vein, François Jullien rejects the common refrain that ancient Chinese art was aesthetically impoverished because, unlike the ancient Greeks and Romans or the European Renaissance, it did not conceive nudity as a site of artistic expression. To constitute this as a fault, Jullien argues, represents a failure to recognize two radically distinct traditions of knowing: one, that of the Greeks, where the principle of form—the idealized permanence of perfection—found embodied expression in the archetypal essence of the nude; the other, that of the Chinese, for whom the body existed as a transitory mass of invisible energy, the very nature of which was fleeting and impermanent.¹⁵¹ One final example is the work of Rajyashree Pandey. In contrast to a Christian-inflected tradition wherein sex, desire, and sin were organized around and through gendered bodies, Pandey offers a reading of medieval court literature within Japanese Buddhist traditions that conveyed the erotic largely without reference to bodies. Instead, desire, sexual escapades, and erotically charged encounters found sensual literary expression through lavish and detailed descriptions of clothing, hair, status distinctions, and performative gestures. Desire in the context of medieval Japan was not constituted through corporeality.¹⁵²

The oft-repeated complaint by scholars of medieval racism that the failure to recognize the ubiquity of racism in the historical period they study is somehow derisive, dismissive, nostalgic, or romanticizing need not logically follow. Pandey's work, for example, is alert to questions of power, status, and gendered norms, but as she shows, within the specificity of medieval Japan, such relationships are configured in ways unfamiliar to that of Europe in the Middle Ages. Similarly, we can be cognizant of the myriad ways that specific populations within medieval and Renaissance Europe were represented, victimized,

150. Shigehisa Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

151. François Jullien, *The Impossible Nude: Chinese Art and Western Aesthetics*, transl. Maev de la Guardia (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

152. Rajyashree Pandey, *Perfumed Sleeves and Tangled Hair: Body, Women, and Desire in Medieval Japanese Narratives* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016).

exiled, and discriminated against without insisting that sympathetic histories can only be pursued if they are accorded the status of modern categories—“biological thinking,”¹⁵³ “miscegenation,”¹⁵⁴ “the global south in early modern[ity],”¹⁵⁵ “eugenics,”¹⁵⁶ “premodern genetics,”¹⁵⁷ medieval “modes of governmentality” and “evolutionary progress,”¹⁵⁸ and racism.

CONCLUSION

It was one of those rare occasions in the academy where a single article’s refutation of an influential methodology—Skinner’s critique of the history of ideas—had such an enormous and, at the time, seemingly lasting impact. Skinner’s critique of the history of ideas revealed with historical and theoretical precision the inevitable limitations that arrest any historical endeavor that posits concepts as empty vessels immune to the ravages of time. Yet what once appeared as a decisive end to a particular mode of historical inquiry has reemerged with a vengeance in the field of race studies. Racism, in this scholarship, echoes Lovejoy’s chain of being—it transcends the history it is otherwise said to modify, mediate, and particularize while always retaining a constancy and legibility in its form. In reviewing this contemporary literature on race, I have sought to argue for the continued salience of an earlier, critical exchange that alerted us, some fifty years ago, to the pitfalls of pursuing conceptual histories that presume upon an ethereal form and a timeless essence.

But if part of this essay has necessarily been critical, it has also sought to suggest that a more recent body of work informed by postmodern and postcolonial theorizing offers alternative ways of engaging the past. In seeking to bring into relief the alterity of the past, this scholarship also emphasizes the significance of studying premodern history. It reminds us that there are other ways of being in the world—ones that are not better or worse but different. In alerting us to these differences, it becomes possible to imagine futures that are not predetermined by narratives of continuity and not inevitably tethered to the logic of race.

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153. Joseph Ziegler, “Physiognomy, Science and Proto-Racism,” in Eliav-Feldon, Isaac, and Ziegler, eds., *Origins of Racism in the West*, 199.

154. Lomperis, “Medieval Travel Writing,” 157.

155. Sandra Young, “Race and the Global South in Early Modern Studies,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (2016), 125-135.

156. Isaac, *Invention of Racism*, 124-133.

157. Ramey, *Black Legacies*, 5.

158. Heng, *Invention of Race*, 38.