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White Supremacy Part 1:

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Toward a Global History of White Supremacy

The simultaneous success of Trump and Brexit was no coincidence: white supremacist politics are international in scope and often share entwined histories.

- BOSTON REVIEW October 16, 2020

Editor's Note: Adapted from Global White Nationalism: From Apartheid to Trump edited by Daniel Geary, Camilla Schofield, and Jennifer Sutton.

From promulgating the racist birther conspiracy theory to exhorting vigilante Proud Boys to “stand by,” Donald Trump has amplified white nationalist ideas in the United States. But neither Trump’s emergence nor his impact can be understood fully by looking at the United States in isolation. Rather, Trump must be understood for his place in a long line of Anglophone leaders who claimed to speak for besieged whites, with precedents including Ian Smith, the leader of the white minoritarian regime of Rhodesia, and Enoch Powell, the British MP who infamously warned of “rivers of blood” if Britain did not halt non-white immigration. Moreover, white nationalism is global not only in its history but in its present manifestations: white nationalists worldwide have hailed Trump’s actions and would be emboldened by his reelection.

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While his authoritarian response to a season of Black Lives Matter protests has brought renewed attention to Trump’s racist politics, his investment in global white supremacy is long-standing and was instrumental to his election. Indeed, Nigel Farage, a leader of the UK’s far right, was an important international ally while Trump was campaigning. The morning after the June 2016 Brexit referendum vote, Donald Trump landed at his Scottish golf resort and tweeted that Britons “took their country back, just like we will take America back.” During his campaign that summer, Trump forged a close alliance with Farage, leader of the UK Independence Party and the most prominent advocate of British withdrawal from the European Union. Farage already knew Trump’s campaign manager, Steve Bannon, who hailed the rise of right-wing European nationalism as executive chairman of the alt-right website Breitbart News. In November, Farage was the first foreign leader to meet the president-elect; pleased with their successes on both sides of the Atlantic, they posed for a celebratory photograph before a glimmering set of golden elevator doors in Trump Tower. Trump and Farage’s image marked a victory in a struggle by linked resurgent white nationalists on both sides of the Atlantic to “take back” their countries from non-white immigrants and internationalist liberal elites.

Although many have observed the similarities between Brexit and Trumpism, few have noted that those similarities arise from the entwined histories of U.S. and British revanchist politics. Likewise, many have been baffled by the international spread of white supremacist violence, with authorities and the mass media wrongly depicting such attacks as the work of isolated loners rather than emanating from a dispersed political movement. Such bonds link not only Trump's and Farage's successes, but also the 2016 assassination of pro-Remain Labour MP Jo Cox in Yorkshire by a neo-Nazi proclaiming "Britain First"; the 2018 killings at a Pittsburgh synagogue by a white supremacist who believed that Jews were orchestrating white genocide by abetting immigration from Latin America; and the 2019 murder of Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand, by an Australian white supremacist. Both the rise of ethnonationalism in electoral politics and of white supremacist violence in the English-speaking world need to be understood as related developments in a longer history of exchange among white nationalists globally.

Because white nationalists are primarily concerned with the racial integrity of states, they have wrongly been assumed to be parochial in their politics, focused solely on domestic issues. In fact, transnational ties and transnational flows of culture and capital have long undergirded the pursuit of white racial nationalism. The success of Brexit, for example, emboldened Trump's nativist supporters to see themselves as part of a global movement that could achieve power in the United States. Trump's victory in turn inspired the Christchurch killer, who praised the U.S. president as a "symbol of renewed white identity and common purpose." We need to understand the history of these connections if we are to grasp what has sustained white nationalism despite global trends toward liberation and equality.

White nationalism is an ideology that asserts national identity and belonging in terms of European descent. Accordingly, white nationalists see their countries as threatened by immigration and social advancement by non-whites. They contend that national identity and belonging must be built around racial whiteness—rather than culture, language, or place—and that it is the *whiteness* of the nation's past, present, and future that ensures its continued historical development and survival. The fundamental ideas of white nationalists are hardly new, yet they have taken on new formulations since the mid-twentieth century as a politics of reaction to the promise of racial equality and decolonization. Though the numbers of self-identified white nationalists remain small, their ideas resonate broadly, impacting contemporary debates about global demographic change, national identity, and mass migration.

The shift of white nationalist politics from center to ostensible periphery is a relatively recent phenomenon. At the British Empire's zenith, its apologists claimed that the rule of law, free trade, and parliamentary sovereignty were natural virtues of the "English race." At the turn of the twentieth century, U.S. elites shared with British imperialists a discourse of English racial heritage termed Anglo-Saxonism that was used to justify the subjugation of Native Americans, the subordination of African Americans, and the possession of the United States' own overseas empire. According to Anglo-Saxonism, white, Protestant, English-speaking men naturally *made* modern nations. This racialized modernity is based on the presumption that only whites can govern and that the empowerment of non-whites is therefore an existential threat to white self-government.

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Anglo-Saxonism's cherished ideal of a white man's country reserving self-government and economic opportunity to whites may no longer be as dominant as it was a century ago, but neither has it disappeared. Popular historian Niall Ferguson still maintains that British colonial settler culture brought "modernity" to the world. Today some Brexiteers look to trade within an "Anglosphere" to reanimate this historical political tradition and harness racialized notions of kith and kin in the English-speaking world. Indeed, nostalgia for a past period of national glory in which white rule was unchallenged is a signature feature of today's right-wing populists who seek to make their nations great *again*.

Any account of white nationalism's influence today must take account of this longer history and also recognize that profound and persistent structures of white supremacy remain deeply rooted in the English-speaking world. To understand the politics of racism in the present requires locating and examining the histories of modern white nationalism in global terms: as a response to decolonization, struggles for equal rights, mass migration, and postwar international institutions. As Western political and social elites professed a commitment to color-blind ideals, assumptions of white supremacy were challenged and reformulated.

In particular, the declining legitimacy of *overtly* racist political expression produced new international alliances and new populist claims among white supremacists. As they saw themselves losing power locally, they looked abroad for allies. Countering liberal internationalist organizations such as the United Nations and the World Council of Churches, white nationalists increasingly adopted a rhetoric of ethnic populism, casting themselves as representatives of forgotten whites betrayed by globalist liberal elites. Even as they shifted their focus from opposing civil rights and preserving white rule in settler colonies to Islamophobia and opposing non-white immigration, they articulated a consistent mindset stressing the need to preserve the ethno-racial character of their nations.

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At the turn of the twentieth century, English-speaking whites throughout the world drew a global color line that marked out their own nations as white men's countries. Their policies restricted immigration to "desirable" Europeans and limited non-whites' right to vote to ensure whites' ability to govern themselves. Though their aims were ethnonationalist, they developed ideas and policies in coordination with international networks. As historians Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds write: "The project of whiteness was thus a paradoxical politics, at once transnational in its inspiration and identification but nationalist in its methods and goals. The imagined community of white men was transnational in its reach, but nationalist in its outcomes, bolstering regimes of border protection and national sovereignty."

In 1900 the ideal of the white man's country was broadly shared among whites of all classes, even as it provoked tension between aggressive white settlers and cautious metropolitan elites. Nonetheless, the global color line was slowly erased over the twentieth century. The industrialized slaughter of World War I undermined notions of European civilization's superiority. After the war, the colonized increasingly demanded self-determination and a new generation of intellectuals discredited the precepts of scientific racism. World War II, which pitted the Allies against a fascist enemy, also did much to discredit notions of racial hierarchy and subordination. The most important developments accelerated after World War II: the rise of national liberation movements and of movements for racial

equality in existing nations. It was, as British prime minister Harold Macmillan put it to Australian prime minister Robert Menzies, “the revolt of the yellows and blacks from the automatic leadership of the whites.”

Many liberal elites, over the course of the twentieth century, evolved from a white nationalist perspective toward color-blind or multicultural conceptions of their nations. For instance, in the 1920s, the Carnegie Corporation funded studies to justify white minority rule in South Africa. But by 1944, it was publishing Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma*, an influential text calling for the gradual extension of equal rights to African Americans. Rejection of explicit white supremacy became one of the components of a new liberal internationalism, embodied in the United Nations. While the violence of apartheid and Jim Crow continued unabated, in 1950 the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) released the first of its influential statements on race, drafted by an international team of prominent scholars and rejecting any notions of racial superiority. Many metropolitan elites also came to embrace decolonization, and thereby contain it, envisioning it as a historical step forward into modernity. Those who adhered to explicit white supremacy, however, experienced this new racial liberalism as a betrayal. Postwar white nationalism thus shifted toward a populist perspective, arrayed against white elites—the racial enemy within—as well as racial minorities.

The decades after the end of World War II saw the breakup of the British Empire as nations across the Global South won independence. As European empires dismantled, the United States extended its influence among newly independent nations. Despite losing its own major colony of the Philippines in 1946, the United States emerged from World War II as the preeminent world power, in many ways continuing the European imperial project of making the world safe for global capitalism. The need to maintain good relations with new nations and win their support in the Cold War put considerable pressure on the United States, UK, and British dominions to dismantle domestic racial discrimination. As Black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, one of the principal authors of the first UNESCO Statement on Race, acerbically remarked in 1954, “The white man is scared down to his bowels, so it’s be-kind-to-Negroes decade at last.”

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Black activists and intellectuals in both the civil rights and anticolonial nationalist movements saw themselves as fighting in a shared international struggle to dismantle white supremacy. By the 1960s, though civil rights movements were unable to achieve their goal of full racial equality, they forced recognition of the formal legal equality of all citizens regardless of race. Landmark legislation prohibited racial discrimination. In 1963 the United Nations General Assembly adopted a Declaration on the Elimination on All Forms of Racial Discrimination; two years later, Ghanaian ambassador George Lamptey led the campaign to introduce a UN convention against racial discrimination. Steeped in the language of human rights, this convention condemned colonialism and apartheid, affirmed equality before the law, and required its signatories to criminalize hate speech and institute national procedures to combat racial discrimination. The UN helped propel the extension of antidiscrimination laws globally. The United States passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the death knell to the southern system of Jim Crow, and followed that with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The UK passed the Race Relations Act in

1965, Canada its Canadian Multiculturalism Policy in 1971, and Australia its Racial Discrimination Act in 1975.

White supremacy was on the defensive. Yet ideas about whiteness and natural ability for self-government continued to shape understandings of global demography, anticolonial violence, and uneven economic development. Racial anxieties ran through analyses of population growth in the Global South, for instance, echoing early twentieth-century panics about white “race suicide.” Anticolonial violence was routinely depoliticized and depicted as an expression of savagery, a rejection of civilization. Whites continued to assert themselves as natural agents of modernity via, for instance, international development; their authority now increasingly drawn from an emphasis on technical expertise rather than any explicit white man’s burden. Tenets of the white man’s country were transmuted by technocracy to appear universal or color-blind.

Though white nationalism developed transnationally and in response to common international changes, it evolved asynchronously and asymmetrically according to different local logics. The United States has a history of domestic slavery, mass immigration, and subjugation of Native Americans that contrasts with Britain’s long history as an imperial metropole or the history of white minoritarian regimes in Rhodesia and South Africa. These differences are perhaps clearest in immigration policy changes and their demographic effects. The civil rights movement made the existence of racial quotas in U.S. immigration policy untenable, leading to the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 which soon (unintentionally) led to a mass wave of emigration from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Similarly, Australia dismantled its restrictionist White Australia policy in 1973, leading to a sharp increase in non-white immigration, especially from Asia.

In Britain, however, the story was different. Migrants from colonies and former colonies, who held citizenship in the British Empire and Commonwealth, began to arrive in increasing numbers after World War II in search of economic opportunity. This moment is often marked by the 1948 London arrival of the ship *Empire Windrush* which carried migrants from the Caribbean. The non-white population in Britain increased tenfold by 1961. Then, as a result of domestic political opposition, the British government began to introduce migration controls. To signal that these controls were part of a wider government effort to benefit race relations, the government also passed new equality legislation modeled on that of the United States but accompanied by the imposition of immigration restrictions rather than their relaxation.

In different countries, white nationalists adapted in similar ways to outlast the challenges against them: they persisted not simply by becoming far-right fringe minorities but also by developing coded electoral appeals within major political parties, such as the Democratic Party’s southern strategy in the United States. Everywhere, though, the array of forces against them led white nationalists to take up a defensive posture. In this new mode, white nationalists mobilized emotions of besiegement, resentment, loss, and nostalgia. The populist language of grievance white nationalists developed in retreat enabled them to capture broad appeal when new forms of political activism—on both left and right—challenged the legitimacy of the postwar order and the political establishment.

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In response to the efforts to challenge white racial privilege in the 1960s and '70s, a reactionary discourse emerged that rejected any guilt complex over the long history of white supremacy and instead offered a counternarrative of white victimization. Histories of lost causes were marshalled to this goal. As Paul Gilroy has examined, in Britain the loss of empire produced a "postcolonial melancholia" attached to the lost glories of the past—one detached from any sense of the real history of the empire. In Britain, as in Australia and the U.S. South, white nationalists turned away from acknowledging the atrocities of white supremacy. Instead, theirs is a history of heroism in defeat: the Lost Cause of the U.S. Confederacy, Australia's Battle of Gallipoli in World War I, and Britain's myth of self-reliance at the retreat of Dunkirk in World War II all serve as sites for what Gilroy calls "dreamworlds" where white male heroism can be retrieved.

This sense of resentment framed around perceived loss gave additional resonance to a wider set of social and political tensions in the period of decolonization and equal rights. The sexual revolution, student protests, and progressive legal reforms on marriage and abortion came to be viewed by many white nationalists as further examples of the destruction of national culture. Women's liberation and the moral revolution of the late twentieth century played into fears of a declining white population. White nationalisms throughout the Anglosphere are replete with anxious visions of lost white male and patriarchal authority. Opposition to gender equality has been and remains crucial to the making of modern white nationalism—as the defense of white women and white domesticity has long functioned as a focal point for white supremacy, colonial violence, and the dehumanization of people of color. Drawing from this long tradition, white nationalists present the white woman as the perennial potential victim, under constant threat from migrant rapists, Black male sexuality, and sharia law.

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From the civil rights era to the present, white nationalists found a home in right-wing political parties, where leaders appealed to race despite formally renouncing racism. White nationalism fit within the broader constellation of ideas advocated by the transnational right, whose critique of liberal internationalism also included asserting the place of social hierarchy, patriarchal families, and fundamentalist Christian values while attacking the legitimacy of the postwar social welfare state.

White nationalism needs to be understood as a specific political movement of the right, though one hardly limited to just a handful of extremists.

Though white nationalism is nurtured most intensely by a small group of activists and intellectuals, the electoral right throughout the English-speaking world has consistently appealed to racial fears among whites about loss of status. The electoral right receives much of its dynamism from the far right. Yet the existence of such far-right groups makes the electoral right more respectable by contrast, able to appeal to white nationalist sentiment while disavowing violent and explicit racism, and thereby enabling it to assemble a broader political coalition. This dialectic of extremism and respectability operates not simply within national boundaries but in a transnational framework.

One of the key issues involved in understanding global white nationalism is whether it should be perceived as a marginal political movement or as part of the mainstream of contemporary political culture. We think white nationalism should be understood as *both* constitutive of our societies and as a specific political movement of the right whose fortunes are now resurgent. Given the deep ways in which notions of white man's countries structured Britain, the United States, and British settler colonies

just a century ago, it is hardly surprising that a foundation of white supremacy remains under the edifice of societies that have formally renounced racism. This is particularly true given the partial defeat of movements for racial equality, as reflected in the continuation of vast institutional inequalities. The unacknowledged persistence of white supremacy in our societies has provided a strong platform on which white nationalists can stand, and it must be dismantled.

We also believe that white nationalism needs to be understood as a specific political movement of the right, though one hardly limited to just a handful of extremists. The successes of anti-racist movements in the twentieth century were only partial, but they were enough to spark a powerful reaction from those who wished to openly assert that their nations were still white men's countries. White nationalists' sense of betrayal and loss is very real. While their claims of victimhood often serve as cover for the assertion of racial dominance, they are rooted in very real changes to the racial order. Without question, combatting white nationalism requires truly grappling with the long history of white supremacy and the untold damage wrought by our contemporary racial order. But it does not mean accepting that our civic cultures must remain racist or that a majority of whites will be inevitably drawn to racist politics. Rather, it requires understanding contemporary Anglophone white nationalism as a specific historical formation which cannot be extricated from the history of slavery, settler colonialism, and white supremacy.

To many observers, Brexit and Trump made it seem as if an atavistic ideology was suddenly resurrected. But white nationalism has always been a presence in trans-Atlantic political culture. While rooted in the older ideal of the white man's country associated with British settler colonialism, it has adapted to the challenges posed by decolonization, civil rights, and liberal internationalism.

Those seeking to explain white nationalism's renewed political strength in our own time should then ask why it has begun to have greater appeal. To the minority who explicitly identify with white nationalist ideas, their sense of victimization and desire to return to an imagined past era of national glory has everything to do with the decline of white dominance. To many others, white nationalists' rhetoric of betrayal, nostalgia, and denouncement of non-white immigrants and internationalist elites has increased appeal in a period of depressed wages and precarious employment.

Critically, the lack of a significant left-wing challenge to neoliberalism has made ethnonationalism the main political form in which antiestablishment sentiment can be articulated. The adaptations that white nationalists made since 1945 has enabled it to broaden its appeal in our time. White nationalism is a worldly ideology. Regardless of whether Trump wins or loses, its resilience should never again be underestimated.

White supremacy and slavery: Gerald Horne on the real story of American independence

 salon.com/2014/05/30/white_supremacy_and_slavery_gerald_horne_on_the_real_story_of_american_independence/

May 30, 2014

With a sweeping and widely praised [new essay on reparations](#) in the Atlantic, Ta-Nehisi Coates has challenged Americans to reconsider how they view their country's history and to place the influence of white supremacy front and center. Rather than imagine the damages inflicted against African-Americans by white supremacy as having occurred mainly during the antebellum period, Coates asks us to recognize how Jim Crow in the South and [redlining](#) in the North denied black people the means to build real, stable lives for themselves, directly explaining the disproportionate poverty we still see in the African-American community today.

Yet as penetrating as Coates' essay may be, a new book from University of Houston professor Gerald Horne would have our revision of our own history stretch back even further — to the very founding itself. In "[The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America](#)," Horne marshals considerable research to paint a picture of a U.S. that wasn't founded on liberty, with slavery as an uncomfortable and aberrant remnant of a pre-Enlightenment past, but rather was founded *on* slavery — as a *defense* of slavery — with the language of liberty and equality used as window dressing. If he's right, in other words, then the traditional narrative of the creation of the U.S. is almost completely wrong.

Salon recently spoke with Horne about his book, why the conventional story of the U.S. founding has been so widely accepted, and what this new view of the American Revolution might mean for those still fighting white supremacy today. Our conversation is below and has been lightly edited for clarity and length.

What's the basic argument of your new book?

The argument is that it is time to revisit the heroic creation myth of the United States of America. My research has convinced me that we need to look more closely at slavery and the slave trade in order to better explicate the founding of a slave-owning republic in 1776. In other words, in June 1772, in London, there was [Somerset's case](#), which seemed to suggest the case's initial meaning, which of course was for England, could be extended across the Atlantic to the colonies. This caused great consternation in the colonies, not the least since the colonial economy was underpinned by slavery. It was not only the slave trade itself which brought spectacular profits, sometimes as much as 1,600 percent ... But it's also that these profits are reported to allied industries including banking, shipping, insurance, et cetera. And

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that, in itself, was developing the productive forces of the colonies, which then began to strain at the colonial leash, and the combination of these factors led to a declaration of independence on July 4, 1776.

What is the "creation myth" that you referred to just now, as you understand it?

The usual story runs — and you will hear it in profusion in about six to eight weeks — is that these Olympian Founding Fathers—capital O, capital F, capital F — in their utmost wisdom, revolted against tyranny from a despotic monarch in London and established a glorious republic with freedom and justice and liberty for all, as embodied in a wondrous Constitution that emerged subsequently. Quite frankly, in a stunning array of ideological diversity, scholars and ideologues from left to right have basically bowed down before that creation myth.

Was this a myth you believed in prior to writing this book? Why do you think it's so powerful?

Coming to this book and writing this book was a process for myself. That is to say, maybe 20-odd years ago, like many who have lived in the United States of America, I had not given deep thought to the creation myth and to that extent I think I can indict myself. With regard to the United States of America, I think the fact that so many Europeans truly were rescued from persecution by the creation of the United States of America helped to blind some to the unavoidable fact that their rescue in some ways was based on and founded upon a country that committed genocide against indigenous people and then enslaved tens of thousands — hundreds of thousands — of Africans.

I think that's unfortunate because if you look, for example, at the Dominican Republic, you may be aware of their dictatorial leader in the 1930s, Rafael Trujillo, who opened his doors wide to Europeans (particularly those who were Jewish who were fleeing persecution in the 1930s) and yet at the same time he was massacring darker skin Haitians along the border in the thousands. Now, Raphael Trujillo is not hailed and glorified because of the former rescue; that rescue was put into context with his other misdeeds; but somehow there has been a perverse form of affirmative action afforded to the United States of America whereby there has emerged a one-sided analysis that has led many to glorify the United States because of the rescue of so many Europeans and the uplifting of the standard of living of so many Europeans while at the same time giving short shrift to the kinds of atrocities that were visited upon the indigenous and the Africans.

You note in the book that there was a cultural gulf between Londoners and colonists when it came to how they thought of people of African descent and slavery. What was the disconnect — and why do you think it existed?

To be fair, there were only about 15,000 Africans in London in the 1770s. They were not the essential component of the English economy nor the Scottish economy. The exploitation of Africans basically took place thousands of miles away. And thus it became easier, it seems to

me, for Londoners to have a more civilized attitude. It became easier for William Hogarth, the painter, to invest Africans with a kind of humanity that was marginally absent in terms of the consideration and contemplation of many in the colonies. And I think this also helps to generate the schism between the metropolis London and the mainland provinces that ultimately leads to an eruption causing a unilateral declaration of independence in July 1776. Increasingly, Londoners were coming to see the colonists as being rather uncivilized with regard to their maltreatment of Africans. This was particularly the case when the colonists showed up in London itself and would engage in beating enslaved Africans on the streets of London and this did not go down very well amongst the Londoners. It did not go down very well amongst the British subjects, generally. I do think that this is a factor amongst many that creates this yawning gap — in some cases wider than the Atlantic Ocean — between the colonies, on the one hand, and the colonial master in London, on the other.

Did you find anything in your research that might explain why, exactly, most historians up to now haven't fully integrated slavery into their analysis of the Revolution?

I think historians have really downplayed the amount of unrest amongst slaves in the colonies — that is to say, in the 13 colonies that formed the United States of America. Even today, if you look at the historiography, there is an ongoing tendency to really downplay the unrest amongst the Africans. There are historians who are earning good livings by seeking to show, for example, that a number of slave revolts really weren't slave revolts. They were basically hallucinations on the part of slave masters, guilty fears on the part of slave masters. There has been a lot invested in suggesting that these ancestors of today's African-Americans were not very restive. I'll leave it to future scholars to try to puzzle out why that has been the case.

Secondly, I think that historians of colonial North America too often have looked at colonial history as sort of pre-U.S. history. That is to say, when they look at colonial history they only look at the 13 colonies; they don't look at Jamaica, Antigua, Barbados; they don't look at what was going on there even though these sites were all a part of one empire, even though there was a lot of back-and-forth between those islands and the North American mainland, even though all of them were administered from London, even though a number of leading colonists on the mainland were either born or spent time in the Caribbean (Alexander Hamilton quickly comes to mind but there are many more), even though in the Caribbean there were — even more so than on the mainland — repetitive plots to liquidate the settlements, which at once caused many of the Europeans to flee to the mainland and generated a sort of antipathy towards Africans, the fruits of which I think are still with us. So, I think that part of the problem with previous scholarship is a) as noted, the downplaying of restiveness among Africans on the mainland, and b) the sort of teleological approach where you don't necessarily expand your gaze to look beyond the 13 colonies.

Was this slavery-based motivation for independence widespread, or were certain members of the founding generation more "counter-revolutionary," to use your language, than others?

The Virginians [were more counter-revolutionary] for sure. The Virginians were the locomotive of the revolt. The Virginians being Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington — all of the familiar figures, many of whom are on the currency in your wallet. I think that also reflects the fact that before the U.S. Civil War, Virginians and slaveowners dominated the White House and dominated the Congress. In other words, they set up a republic to serve their interests, which is wholly understandable. Of course, there are figures who were out of step with these Virginians, most of whom have received short shrift — I'm thinking of Thomas Payne in the first place, whose denunciation by figures like Theodore Roosevelt should not be repeated on a family-friendly website ...

We're not that, so by all means ...

[Laughs] Well, I'm still my mother's son.

But in any case, I think that this is true even if you look at the figures who ... weren't Virginians: John Hancock, for example, was a leading slaveholder in Boston, Massachusetts. John Adams, who was the second president, was a leading lawyer and propagandist for slaveowners. But, to repeat, Virginians were the driving force behind this revolt. And when you consider the Virginians, you have to also consider Lord Dunmore, who is a well-known figure in terms of this period. He was the last colonial governor of Virginia and in many ways exemplified the worst nightmare for many of the settlers by seeking to arm the Africans to help to squash an incipient revolt. But Lord Dunmore was not alone. What helps to encourage North Carolina settlers to revolt was the fact that their last colonial governor, Governor Martin, was also accused of acting similarly, and the fact that Governor Martin had had previous experience at Antigua, which was notorious for slave revolts, gave sustenance to this idea that he would engage in the darkest of betrayals by arming Africans to squash the revolt of British subjects.

This brings me to my other point, which is that in order for British subjects to revolt against the crown, it takes something extraordinary. This is not an everyday occurrence. But what I try to outline and suggest is that what was pushing the settlers toward revolt was what I call "The Black Scare." That is to say, that this fear that armed Africans would come down like a ton of bricks on their head. And this was not necessarily a hallucination because, as pointed out in the book, the Spanish had been arming Africans since the 1500s and from Spanish Florida had been repeatedly raiding colonial South Carolina to great effect ... Indeed going back to the English Civil War in the mid-17th century, you had the Africans involved in that conflict. And when London, the British Empire, had begun to absorb defeat at the hands of the Spanish — which was limiting the territorial expansion of the British Empire — this was

not only giving substance to the idea that perhaps the better part of colonial wisdom was to arm Africans, but also it was giving a jolt of adrenaline to the abolitionist movement, which was growing by leaps and bounds in London at the same time.

So would it be right to say that, for people in the U.K. and in the colonies, Africans and slaves played a much larger role in the development of the revolution than what most of us are taught today?

It is correct. We oftentimes lose sight of the demographics [and] how in numerous precincts on the North American mainland, Africans wildly outnumbered Europeans ... When you combine the Native American population with that of the African population, you begin to get an idea of what I mean when I say there's this fear, if not hysteria, about arming Africans to squash revolts of European settlers.

This ties to my other point, which is that, in order to understand the particular scenario that I just outlined, it's also useful to understand ... that in order to attract Europeans to what was ultimately a riotous war zone — I'm speaking of colonial America, particularly the 13 colonies — there had to be emollients, there had to be inducements, there had to be enticements. Now, of course, land taken from the Native Americans, stocked with Africans, was one; but there are other inducements as well.

If you're right and if the U.S. was largely founded in defense of slavery rather than in the name of liberty — if that kind of white supremacy is so embedded in our very beginnings — how is it that descendants of slaves were ever able to claim greater rights, first by ending slavery and then dismantling Jim Crow?

I think that there's a lesson here, and it is that, historically — before the crumbling of Jim Crow in the 1950s — black Americans had sought out allies, beginning with the Spanish in the late 17th century and then the British from the late 18th century until the U.S. Civil War. And then, in the succeeding decades, sought alliances with Mexico, with India (as exemplified by the figure of Martin Luther King Jr. and his creative adaptation of the Indian passive resistance movement) and the African Liberation Movement and on to the present. So I think that there, too, lie lessons as well, particularly for contemporary political activists, who have an anti-racist agenda in mind. Seek allies ... try to lengthen the battlefield, so to speak, and not just be limited to those who carry blue U.S. passports in terms of trying to forge social change and political transformation in the United States.

When Did Racism Begin?

The history of race has animated a highly contentious debate.

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Does racism have its roots in the ancient and premodern past, or is it a product of Western modernity? That question has animated a significant body of recent scholarship on ancient, medieval, and early-modern texts and cultural practices. In his 2015 editorial introduction to a journal issue on race and the Middle Ages, the medievalist Cord Whitaker wrote that the “question of race’s relevance is solved: yes, the Middle Ages have been thoroughly raced.” But has it?

The recent scholarship on medieval “racism” resolutely rejects, and seeks to overturn, a prior consensus, broadly dating from the 1990s, that the concept of race is 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 19th century — but there was general agreement that what we witness in ancient and premodern history is xenophobia, prejudice, and ethnocentrism, but *not* racism. The origins of racism, these scholars argued, were tethered to the rise of centralized states or nationalism or anthropology or biological science — in other words, the appendages of modernity.

But by 2019, the Trump presidency, the specter of white supremacy, and increasingly tense and ugly exchanges on social media among medieval scholars (as well as between scholars and alt-right pundits), ensured that the annual International Congress on Medieval Studies, in Kalamazoo, Mich., was so politically charged and fractious that it made the front page of *The New York Times*. 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 viable categories in the study of the European premodern.

For the scholars who answer that question in the affirmative, the old consensus — that race is a uniquely modern construct — is a political, historical, and scholarly provocation. From this perspective, the language of racism (as opposed to ethnocentrism, for example) is necessary to make legible the prejudices of the ancient and premodern past — and the atrocities committed in their name. It was historically legitimate to speak of ancient, medieval, or early-modern racism because discrimination was directed at “racialized” groups, for instance, Jews and Moors.

The scholarship thus produced mobilizes contemporary politics — insisting on the relevance of the medieval past to the racial configurations of our current moment — but it does so through an appeal to a mid-20th-century historical methodology: the history of ideas.

For the 20th-century historian Arthur Lovejoy, one of the great architects of the history of ideas, “to trace an idea” through history involves identifying “behind the surface-dissimilarities” a recognizable coherence, that is, the continuity of “old elements,” “which holds the mass together,” thus permitting us to “see the real units, the effective working ideas, which, in any given case, are present.” Ideas, to be sure, will be shaped, reconfigured, modified, and altered through the course of history, and discerning such shifts is a crucial component of the historian’s task. It involves knowing “as 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."

But this task is enabled only 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 all the provinces of history in which it figures") can be the object of historical narration. 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 who broadly followed its precepts, but also by the lengthy critique that it inspired: Quentin Skinner's influential 1969 essay "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas."

While Skinner was not alone in his criticism of the history of ideas, the systematicity and breadth of his engagement have made his essay a classic touchstone in debates about the origins and persistence of concepts of time.

Skinner's overarching criticism of the history of ideas consists of a general accusation of anachronism. The "perpetual danger" manifest in seeking to "conceptualize an argument in such a way that its alien elements are dissolved into an apparent but misleading familiarity" resides not only in masking "some essential inapplicability of the historical material," but also in imposing thoughts, concerns, and practices upon a past that may not in fact have shared or even conceived of such thoughts, concerns, or practices.

While Skinner's caution reiterates the mantra of historians everywhere, namely, Thou Shalt Not Commit Anachronisms, what interests me here are the specific weaknesses Skinner identifies that make the history of ideas particularly susceptible to charges of "parochialism."

The first of these criticisms is of the practice of identifying and tracing a given doctrine (e.g., equality, progress, Machiavellism, the social contract) through history even when historical actors "signally failed" to recognize or name the doctrine with which they are being credited. Thus begins the search for a prehistory, a nascent whisper, a promising prototype hiding in the wings preparing for its moment in the teleological drama. "As the historian duly sets out in quest of the idea he has characterized," Skinner writes, "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." Such a quest for origins occasions "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."

Where the necessary words that correspond to a given doctrine do not conveniently avail themselves, historians of ideas — and this is Skinner's second criticism — have resorted to a "misleading fetishism of words" ("progress, equality, sovereignty, justice ...") wherein the repetition of a given word or 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 coherence can then be detected and mapped.

This approach not only "mistake[s] ... the word for the thing" but also belies the "changed connotations," 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 time, is dubious not least because it accords ideas an ethereal and transcendental quality. Even in those instances where “we perhaps learn that the expression was used at different times to answer a variety of problems,” this in itself does not reveal “*what* questions the use of the expression was thought to answer” in any given historical period. Furthermore, “we can never grasp from such a history what *status* the given idea may have had at various times.”

Cognizant of the perils of such an approach, historians of ideas increasingly appealed to historical context. Herein lies Skinner’s third criticism: While 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.” The primary problem, Skinner argues, is that while contextualization might aid in locating a text in a given historical moment, it does not ipso facto allow 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.”

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,” that is, the effort to credit a historical actor with views that are in fact outside of her historical time. Thus, to follow Skinner’s example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s writings may have appealed to 20th-century totalitarian politics, but to interpret his writings as a deliberate, conscious defense of totalitarianism is to read back in time a political significance that had yet to materialize.

What is common to the scholarship on both the ancient and premodern origins of racism is the implicit presumption that racism is an empty vessel residing outside of the history it is said to contain. Racism is thought to retain enough conceptual cohesion that it precedes the history that it then particularizes. In short, racism resembles Lovejoy’s 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 millennia.

The study of the historical lineage of race involves the question of origins — wherein, as Skinner said, we enter “the endless debate” as to when “a given idea may be said to have ‘really emerged.’” Is it possible, Benjamin Isaac asks, “that some of the essential elements of later” (modern) “racism have their roots in Greek and Roman thinking”? Nicole Lopez-Jantzen suggests that the early Middle Ages may hold the key to providing “a bridge between classical and medieval forms of racial categorization.” Alternatively, according to Geraldine Heng, one of the most prominent scholars in this subfield, “race-making” can be gleaned in the texts and practices of the later Middle Ages evident through the treatment and representation of Jews, Muslims, Gypsies, and Saracens. 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 — so argues George M. Fredrickson. The 18th century has also been a strong contender for racism’s origins — the zenith of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the fetishism for taxonomies systematizing (and hierarchizing) human difference. Or is race the child of 19th-century modernity (here I must confess my own allegiance), nursed by empire, nationalism, ethnography, and the biological sciences?

Such efforts to secure race/racism’s conceptual and material origins render this debate susceptible to the criticisms Skinner identified. We begin with an idea without a name. As Peter Erickson observed, before defending scholarship that locates 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." Erickson is alluding to the unhappy fact that "race" cannot boast a classical lineage. In an otherwise contentious debate, there is consensus that "race" enters European languages sometime between the 12th and 15th centuries, and even then, it more often refers to horse and dog breeding, lineage (usually in reference to the nobility), and blood.

Thus, it is not possible, à la Lovejoy, to trace the "idea" of race through appeal to the continuity and repetition of the word. This inconvenient truth has not stopped historians from recognizing, through "unfamiliar vocabularies and language," the presence of "race" in the ancient, medieval, and early-modern periods. Scholars documenting premodern "racism" have sought to identify "like-words" that are called upon to stand in for "race" — "gens," "natio," "stock," "tribe," "ethno," "blood," "lineage," and "family." Functioning as precursors to a future yet to materialize, the historian "is very readily led to speak as if the fully developed form of the doctrine was always in some sense immanent in history." We encounter in the literature such phrasing as "protoracism," "nascent racial characteristics," and "incipient racial ideology." Premodern racism then comes to constitute the origin point from which modern racism is, as Lynne Tarte Ramey puts it, "the inevitable outcome of centuries of thought that preceded it." It is, in Charles de Miramon's words, "the forge where race was minted," the "intellectual scaffolding" where what Diego von Vacano calls "the seeds of what would later be called racism" could be planted on, as H.M Bracken says, "ground well prepared" for social Darwinism.

Scholars who defend 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, Roma, Saracens, and Moors in European texts of the medieval and early-modern period. But are they right to feel aggrieved 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," we potentially obstruct our understanding of the historical context. 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, 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 otherworldly accounts of difference.

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 "race" is absent in premodern vocabularies, no such claim can be made for colors — or at least, black, white, green, purple, red, which all figured in the medieval lexicon. What our premodern brethren 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. 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 Jordan's influential work *White Over Black* (1968) where he argued that a long cultural history of pejorative associations

with the concept of “blackness” congealed, “if incalculably” 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,” dating back to the Romans, “that equated blackness with lechery.” Similarly, Thomas Hahn insists that “throughout 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, “it 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.”

The argument is an appealing one, for unlike the “unfamiliar vocabulary” of *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 defend the presence of race/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, Steven Epstein tells us, that blackness and whiteness come to acquire their normative valence and “color prejudice” becomes a “sustaining ideology.” The evidence draws from theological interpretations of the *Song of Songs* “with respect to themes of color, ethnic prejudice, and racism”; in the identification of whiteness with Christianity and “blackness linked with hell as well as with heathen culture” that Lisa Lampert observes in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s epic 13th-century poem *Parzival*; and in the 14th-century chivalric romance *King of Tars*, wherein the Saracen king metamorphizes from black to white upon conversion to Christianity, thereby demonstrating what Heng calls “the normativity of whiteness, and of the white racial body, as the guarantor of normalcy, aesthetic, and moral virtue.” “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.” Similar arguments have been made for the early-modern period, with Shakespeare’s *Othello* bearing witness to the color coding of Renaissance racism. To these examples can be added the blackness of Ham, his banishment to Africa, and identification with slavery.

Some scholars, inclined to see race/racism as a feature of the modern era, have offered counterarguments: Benjamin Braude points out that Ham’s association with Africa, let alone with blackness, is an invention of the 19th century; while G.K. Hunter says that those who often bore the brunt of medieval discrimination (the Jews, for example) were not always physiologically distinct, and that, while the “Moor” was often disparaged, it is unclear what this designation actually entailed beyond its generic conflation with “heathen.” Moreover, between the 13th and 16th centuries, Europeans did not identify themselves as “white” but rather referred to what Valentin Groebner calls “an astonishing range of skin colors” including “*ulivigna* (olive colored), ‘deep red,’ *vermeille* (crimson), and even *verdâtre* or *verdastro* (greenish)” — the vagaries of “an ever-changing, fluid combination of one’s bodily liquids.” Whiteness itself was not always an enviable color. Patrizia Magli quotes the 16th-century physiognomist Giovanni Battista della Porta to that effect: “The moon is of a white color” and thus it follows that “white is the color of lunatics, phlegmatics and shy individuals.”

Yet others have argued that colors, including white and black, were fluid categories with unstable and changing meanings. For Jane Schneider, 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.” Indeed, if at times blackness stood in opposition to Christianity, on other occasions it was an

integral medium for symbolizing the values of the religion: It could connote modesty, austerity, and a pointed rejection of the temptations and sensual indulgences of the East.

In short, there is a danger in projecting contemporary racial associations with black and white upon a distant past. Indeed, it is often more revealing of our own cultural embeddedness within the racialized present than evidence of racism in premodern times. The conceptual slippage is not uncommon. James Dee, for example, asks why Bernard Knox, in a 1992 Jefferson lecture, should insist that the Greeks were “undoubtedly white” only to then say, “or to be exact, a sort of Mediterranean olive color.” What modern preoccupations are entangled in such insistence?

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? When white and black are sometimes better understood as luminosity and darkness — the quest for salvation through knowledge of God’s magnificence or for redemption in the knowledge of man’s fall? 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? Instead, what we witness 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, altered by climatic conditions, and at times, even liminal in their form — part human, part animal, wild, monstrous.

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: one, the premodern, where colors acquire meaning through a constellation of statements that are tethered to cosmic sympathies and antipathies, God’s benevolence and divine judgment; 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.

To try to bridge the gap between such foreign conceptual schema and modern notions of race, some scholars seeking to trace the premodern origins of race/racism have complemented textual exegesis with a wealth of historical detail. Thus we learn from Heng of the 1215 Fourth Lateran Council’s Canon 68, which mandated distinct dress codes for Jews and Muslims and of the series of English rulings requiring that the Jewish minority be compelled to wear badges; from David Nirenberg of the expulsion or forced conversion of Jews from Spain between 1341 and 1492 and the expulsion of all Moors from Spain in 1492; from Emily C. Bartels of the 1596 and 1601 “open warrants” by Queen Elizabeth I to deport “Negars and Blackamoors”; from Arthur Little of the 1554, 1562, and 1612 decrees to “banish or police Gypsies” within England, and the 1594 decree to “banish the Irish.”

And yet, even when we move from texts to practices, we still confront the problematic Skinner identified, namely that appeals to historical context can sometimes “beg the question.” Racism is the interpretive lens through which texts and practices are recognized as “racist” even as 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/racism identified by the scholar obligingly correspond with the historical period within which he or she locates its origin.

Scholars challenging the modernity of the concept of race protest against Kwame Anthony Appiah’s tripartite model of history, which distinguishes between the “ethnographic” representations of antiquity, the theologically inspired prejudices of the early modern, and a 19-century racism born of

nationalism and biologism. They do so by insisting on changing the definition of race itself. As Erickson asserts, "race is relevant for the Renaissance, but the concept has to be redefined."

Whether an author begins with a definition or not, the very logic of origins presumes demarcations that include, among other things, a judgmental cataloging of thinkers: to put it crudely, who is and who is not a "racist." A given historical thinker is thus denounced or praised, chided for omissions or credited for foresight. Plato, for instance, is emblematic of the "proto" in Benjamin Isaac's formulation of "protoracism," since 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. To define race requires that distinctions be made: conceptual delineations between xenophobia, ethnocentrism, and racism; between theological, civic, and biological renderings of difference, and so on.

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, Geraldine Heng's efforts to assign racism's origins to the European Middle Ages is striking for the sheer breadth of her definition: "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. ... Race is a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content."

We are left wondering, along with William Jordan: "Is every hatred a form or variant of racism?"

What is behind the impulse 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 have more commonly been identified with modern history are not, of course, limited to scholars of race/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 past 20 years, but the tone of aggrievement that much of this literature conveys. The scholarship that I have cited here offers 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 (a much-needed corrective to the dull soberness of academic prose) but the reasons provoking the often-polemical style that informs much of this scholarship. This rhetoric is less focused on the injustices of the past than the perceived injustices of the present: the willful failure of contemporary scholarship to recognize that ancient and premodern racial history continues to inform the politics of today.

Some scholars regard this refusal as tantamount to a pervasive racism within the academy, what Arthur Little calls a "white melancholia" that "posit[s] and valorize[s] an imaginary historical moment when 'humanity' was both white and unraced." Or, according to Whitaker, it represents an "erasure of a black presence from the European medieval past," thereby consigning modern blacks to a history "without the authorizing length and depth available to whites." As Peter Erickson and Kim F. Hall put it, "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 difference." 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 quantifiable 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 percent (including myself as the writer of this introduction) demographic of scholars who identify as medievalists of color.”

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 upon, political relevancy — the insistence that ancient, medieval, and early-modern history continues to have a bearing on and was 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.

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. “Key elements that form the foundations of both colonial expansion and nineteenth century scientific racism can already be located in certain strands of medieval discourse” evident, Lynn Ramey continues, in “early scientific treatises on conception and on *what would come to be called genetics*” (my emphasis). Heng moves from recounting the persecution of Jews in the 13th century — manifest in various royal and church edicts — to 20th-century apartheid in South Africa and 21st-century targeting of Kurds in Turkey. Peter Abelard’s 12th-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.” The assignment of badges or stars that Jews were compelled to wear in the 12th, 13th, and 20th centuries are, for Hahn, all “modes of legally mandated racial profiling.” The figure of Othello and the “racialism” that informs Shakespeare’s play are paralleled, in Kyle Grady’s work, with the former U.S. secretary of state, Colin Powell. Modern Islamophobia is just the most recent iteration of premodern religious racism perpetuated against Moor, 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 the early modern.

For scholars who locate “racism” in the medieval period, there is a historical continuity, an essential sameness, that tethers the European Middle Ages to modernity. The frequent charge of anachronism meted out against this scholarship has been met with scorn and derision, dismissed by Erickson and Hall as a “a scare tactic and conversation stopper” intent on what Ian Smith derides as “fetishizing historical accuracy.” Charges of anachronism have provoked the counteraccusation of ahistoricism that purportedly lies at the heart of histories centered on races’ recent origin. Implicit in modernist histories, the thinking goes, is the suggestion that racism, like modernity itself, emerges out of a temporal vacuum, what Heng calls “a big bang” wherein all history before the modern is essentially relegated to a space “outside of real time.”

But surely 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. Machiavelli’s sardonic introduction to *The Prince* is directed against the “advice manuals to rulers” popularized by ancient and medieval writers; his *Discourses on Livy* is inspired by Roman Republicanism. 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, John Rawls revives Locke, Judith Butler rereads *Antigone*, the 18th century turns to antiquity, the 19th century packages 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 interpellated into the “present” of the author who engages them, they are securing the continuity of that interpretive history. As Sanjay Seth has recently argued, “The 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 interpretation.” And collectively, such historical interpretations and textual exegesis constitute “the traditions out of which we reason.” But we need not presume that such reason must be singular and constant throughout time. While the contemporaries of any given period have taken up the texts and practices of their historical predecessors and revived, engaged, contested, and reimagined them, they have done so 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 and 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” nor, as with “the overexpansive use of the term ‘racism,’” appeal to “a notion of anti-Semitism as eternal or as teleologically culminating in the Nazi genocide.”

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 were rendered legible (and in their legibility derided, ostracized, persecuted, violently expelled, and at times, killed) within and through this epistemic framework.

Therefore, 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 modern context, it was appealed to as “an indicator of his ineligibility for military service and consequently citizenship in newly forming nation-states.” Scholars of medieval racism, however, will sometimes argue that approaches like Judaken’s have the effect of not only marginalizing the significance of these historical periods (a significance that continues to haunt the present) but also conferring upon the premodern past a diminutive status (the precursor to the real time of modernity) — or worse still, untethering it from the modern 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.

Efforts by scholars of medieval racism to counter such narratives of lack by insisting that what defined European modernity always already existed, does not dethrone the privileging of the modern. On the contrary, it reaffirms it. Absence is conflated with abjection. In this vein, the “relevancy” of the Middle Ages is presumed to reside in its familial resemblance to the modern; being essentially the same, it must have historical value. Inadvertently, modernity constitutes the yardstick against which the medieval arrives at self-definition.

While medievalists are absolutely right in their criticism of a long lineage of scholarship that has identified the modern West as the instigator of history, thus marking the medieval (and non-West) as “prehistorical” and implicitly (if not explicitly) inferior, the answer is not to then insist that the conditions and practices of the modern West (be it nationalism, individuality, or racism) must therefore be extended to all societies in order to counter the “linear temporality” they rightly deride.

The oft-repeated complaint by scholars of medieval racism that the failure to recognize the ubiquity of racial prejudice in the historical period they study is somehow derisive, dismissive, nostalgic, or romanticizing need not logically follow. We can be cognizant of the myriad ways in which specific populations within medieval and early-modern Europe were represented, victimized, exiled, and discriminated against without insisting that sympathetic histories can be pursued only if they are accorded the status of modern categories — “biological thinking,” “miscegenation,” “religion,” “eugenics,” “premodern genetics,” “evolutionary progress,” and yes, “racism.” Some 50 years ago, 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. And yet, it is this particular mode of historical inquiry that has re-emerged with a vengeance in the field of race studies.

This essay is adapted from “The Origins of Racism: A Critique of the History of Ideas,” which appeared in History & Theory.

Correction (Aug. 23, 2022, 9:01 a.m.): This article originally misspelled the surname of a scholar. He is Kyle Grady, not Gordy. The article has been corrected.

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