The decision to include the European Middle Ages in a history of race studies is far from obvious, particularly when the definition of race is fundamentally based on skin color.\(^1\) The modern period, roughly from 1700 to the present, has had a privileged position vis-à-vis race studies, and for good reason. However, ideas concerning the origins, types, and worth of mankind did not spring up suddenly in the eighteenth century. Rather, these questions had been debated for centuries by European intellectuals and had found expression in the art and literature of periods far earlier than 1700.

In considering the history of race, one of the first things to establish is the distinction between race and racism and to treat the history of these two concepts separately. “Race” and “racism” are two different terms, with one definition of “race” being a group that shares some socially selected physical traits, as opposed to “ethnicity,” which is defined by socially selected cultural traits.\(^2\) Racism, as opposed to race, places a valuation on these physical traits and ranks humans according to them, allowing for those with supposedly greater capacities to wield power over those with innately lower capacities.\(^3\)

Twentieth-century historians of race looked to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, periods that brought discussions about and justifications of slavery in America. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates concerning who should be considered a citizen, who should be allowed to vote, whether people could be considered property, and the like were central to the very idea of what the fledgling democracy stood for. The importation of black Africans across the Atlantic to the
New World marked a turning point in the history of the idea of race. Allowing slavery to continue in a country founded on the idea of equality required justifying this behavior by discounting the humanity of black Africans. Such a decision led inexorably to the institutionalization of the belief that some people are worth more than others—and, to take it a step further, that some people are not even human—based upon their appearance and origins. A similar line of thinking in Europe set the stage for the genocides of the twentieth century.

Histories of racism sometimes start in the sixteenth century, with a cursory note that the Spanish at this time articulated an idea of the “purity of blood,” giving different rights and privileges based on how far back one could trace one’s genealogy to Christian, rather than Jewish or Muslim, origins. For others seeking the history of racial ideas, the origin of the word “race” is extremely important. Charles de Miramon finds the earliest uses of the word in fifteenth-century French poetry, where race refers to the bloodlines of certain dogs that stand as metaphors for French nobility. This connection with class, Miramon concludes, indicates that “race and hereditary blood were not initially racist. . . . The dominant medieval discourse leaves little room for a concept of race or human sub-species.” Pierre H. Boulle links the word “race” from the outset to the animal world, from the Italian usage in horse breeding. For Boulle, the concept of class first became intertwined with the origins of the modern notion of race in the seventeenth century, epitomized in the dark-skinned peasants of La Bruyère.

Both de Miramon and Boulle point to important changes in the way that the word “race” evolved in meaning in France over time. However, their philological insistence misses the point that meaning is also produced outside etymology. Though earlier writers were not using the particular word “race,” they were dealing with shared socially selected physical traits, which we earlier defined as race. It is not necessary to have the word “race” to have the concept of race. So when John Mandeville describes the pygmies as being short, he is making a racial comment. Were he to imply somehow that being taller made another group of people superior to the pygmies, that would be a racist remark.

Objecting that the word “race” does not have the same meaning for us today as it could possibly have had in the medieval context is quite correct. As has been pointed out, race has little or no biological meaning, and it can mean different things to different members of the same fam-
ily, let alone to people separated by millennia and continents. Indeed, notions of difference in the Middle Ages were very different from those in twenty-first-century American society. Likewise, however, there are vast differences between what the word “race” means in our own day in France, Germany, Spain, the United States, and even from community to community and individual to individual within any one of these countries. A search for an unchanging, stable connotation for the word “race” (or almost any word) across time and space would be unlikely to meet with success. Applying the word “race” to a different time and space tends to imply that there is in fact a constant notion of race, when today the thought that there is a significant biological difference between peoples and that everyone could be placed in a neat category seems hopelessly outmoded. All the same, the word does mean something today and has meant something in the past. Coining a new word to apply to the medieval period (suggestions have included “chromotism,” which would indicate that medieval peoples did find white superior to black, but that this did not constitute what we call racism) seems designed to force the medieval period into an uncomfortable dichotomy with the modern period. With denial that the medieval period was haunted by preoccupations about difference, the Middle Ages emerges as either a golden age of cohabitation or a time of hopeless infancy, where peoples may have held notions of prejudice but were unable to articulate them.

Not all race theorists see the premodern period through such rose-colored glasses. As early as 1983, Christian Delacampagne suggested that racism had its roots in the ancient and medieval West. Colbert Nepaulsingh opines that racism is found throughout the world, not just among white Europeans, and that “This universal characteristic of racism is true not only for this century but for as long as we have recorded history.” He discusses the origin of the T-O map based on the sons of Noah and the “curse of Ham” to illustrate his point that the notion of racial difference did indeed exist in the Middle Ages. In a contemporaneous article, the same T-O map is analyzed by Suzanne Conklin Akbari, who carefully charts the ambiguous history of these early maps of the world that divided a flat, round earth into three unequal parts separated by major riverlike bodies of water. The three parts of the world were usually attributed to Europe, Asia, and Africa, or even Ham, Shem, and Japheth, the sons of Noah who served as the founders of mankind’s originary “races” in Christian racial discourse. Akbari shows that these maps were inconsis-
ently labeled, and that it would be centuries before a stable iconography emerged and even longer before cartographers thought of the world in binaries such as Occident and Orient. \(^{16}\) Akbari thus nuances Nepaulsingh’s location of premodern race consciousness, pointing to the importance of a dialogue between race theorists and medievalists—not that these two groups need to be mutually exclusive.

Additional recent work, however, has begun to uncover the extent to which color prejudice and antiblack sentiment was woven into the fabric of premodern culture. \(^ {17}\) Early on in Christian culture—borrowing from ancient cultures—the color black was associated with death and the underworld. Church fathers Paul and Origen extended the metaphor, equating black with sin, and Origen associated the darkness of sin with that of the “Ethiopian.” \(^ {18}\) From that point, devils and demons were also conflated with black and with black people, or Ethiopians. \(^ {19}\)

Kofi Omoniyi Sylvanus Campbell finds colonial desire expressed as early as 1245 in Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s *De proprietatibus rerum*, located in the Englishman’s gaze upon the African landscape and inhabitants. By describing the Ethiopians in primitivizing terms, Bartholomew sets the stage for a colonial empire that will make use of the marvelous resources that the Ethiopians are not culturally advanced enough to use for themselves. \(^ {20}\) As Campbell’s fascinating analysis shows, the precolonial discourse of medieval English literature is essential to the history of the Anglophone black Atlantic. Only by portraying black Africans as both culturally inferior and in need of containment can the colonial enterprise take hold.

So if we wish to look at the long history of race—more specifically, race as defined by the socially selected physical trait of skin color—and color prejudice in the West, what then is the role of the Middle Ages in that history? Did black skin correlate with moral qualities?

The medieval period lacks a univocal discourse of race. Dark skin does not always indicate the same thing, in that some dark-skinned people have admirable qualities, such as the black Saint Maurice. \(^ {21}\) In some cases, dark skin is closely linked to class, as historian Paul Freedman points out. \(^ {22}\) In the twelfth-century French tale of Aucassin and Nicolette, dark skin is related to both race and class, where a dark peasant complains of his lot and Nicolette wears blackface to pass herself off as a Muslim minstrel. Geraldine Heng recounts the obsession of Peter Abelard with black-skinned women, good for “private pleasure,” \(^ {23}\) and
concludes that dark skin color did not always imply a total rejection. Even this seemingly more positive view of the black female body raises many troublesome issues—the women are better kept in private and not paraded about, perhaps from embarrassment or fear of angry outbursts; the skin is appreciated only for the effect it has on the masculine pleasure. Tellingly, black skin could acquire meaning only in contrast to the implied norm, white skin. However, it would be a fallacy to find a few positive examples of black-skinned people and conclude that the period was “race blind.”

Excessive praise of black skin may only serve to point out the exceptionality of the person described: context is key.

In the same manner as the medieval English depictions of black Africa and Africans that Campbell writes about, other aspects of medieval discourse on the Other were formative in the Western discourse on race and essential to the burgeoning rhetoric of colonization and repression. One of these central questions is what constitutes a human being. Colin Dayan, writing on the institution of slavery in the Caribbean, points out that the person/thing dichotomy is essential to the establishment of slavery:

> the very incommensurability of persons and things was necessary to underpin the institution of slavery. . . . Examples ranging from proofs of animality to marks of reason or imbecility—and a great deal in between—became part and parcel of judicial work. The limits of personhood and the extension of thinglikeness became oddly inseparable in this landscape of coercion.

As medieval writers categorized the beings that they encountered, some of the discussions on humanness reached levels that touch on premodern notions of race.

Medieval people tended to see certain markers for humanness that might today seem outrageous or quaint. Pygmies were ousted from the human category by some for not having enough “quantity” of humanness, while others declared them definitively human. For medieval thinkers, the limit between man and beast was complicated. Certainly, at times animals found themselves too closely aligned with the human, for instance the unfortunate pigs who at various places in fourteenth-century France were convicted and executed on murder charges—just a few of many animals treated on equal footing with humans in the legal process. If animals could sometimes be
treated as almost human, men could slip into nonhumanness. Adhering to the Christian religion, organizing in political groups such as kingdoms, and wearing clothing were all ways to demonstrate rational thought, and thus humanness.

On the other hand, people belonging to civilizations that lacked any one of these markers were open to accusations of nonhumanness. In his encyclopedia, Bartholomaeus Anglicus lists those who do not get married (with apparently no other distinction) and those who do not wear clothing alongside beings without heads, troglodytes, and dog-people. Medieval people long wondered whether these sorts of beings could be considered human and, if so, whether they had souls or not. Despite their bodily similarities with humans, cynocephali or dog-headed men were declared by Augustine to be nonhuman because they barked rather than talked, not because of their appearance.

These basic questions about humanity versus nonhumanity, or “thing-likeness” as Dayan names it, were already being asked about people within some medieval communities. On a spiritual level, some Christian writers questioned whether everyone had a soul or not, creating a dual-layered categorization of people in which some were privileged by God from the outset. The twelfth-century canonist Gratian, for example, quotes Augustine who denies claims that all human beings were created in the image of God by declaring in no uncertain terms that “mulier non est facta ad Dei imaginem” [woman is not made in the image of God]. The link between sexism and racism is not unlikely; as long as there was a hierarchy of souls for any reason, there was a tendency to refine and define relative positions in this chain.

In like manner, the French abbot Peter the Venerable (d. 1156) questioned the humanness of Jews. In one fictitious “dispute” between a Christian and a Jew, Peter presents a stalwart Christian who tries to convince a Jew of the superiority of Christianity to Judaism. Peter’s polemic is harsh; since the Jews do not recognize the Truth, Peter says, they must be irrational. The Christian tells his Jewish interlocutor:

I do not dare to call you a man, lest I be found lying greatly; for I recognize that reason—which separates man from the beasts and lifts him above them—is dead in you and buried. . . . Why should you not rather be called a brute animal, why not a beast, why not a horse?