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A Cultural History of Color in the Medieval Age. Edited by Carole P. Biggam and Kirsten Wolf. Bloomsbury Academic. 2021. White Before Whiteness in the Late Middle Ages. By Wan-Chuan Kao. Manchester University Press. 2024. Seeing Race Before Race: Visual Culture and the Racial Matrix in the Premodern World. Edited by Noémie Ndiaye and Lia Markey. ACMRS Press in cooperation with The Newberry Library. 2023. White: The History of a Color. By Michel Pastoureau. Princeton University Press. 2023.

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White: The History of a Color. By Michel Pastoureau. Princeton University Press. 2023.

This essay reviews recent books focused on two distinct but somewhat overlapping topics in premodern cultural studies, namely histories of color, on the one hand, and histories of race making and racialization, on the other. Each study is informed by distinct disciplinary and methodological standpoints. Wan-Chuan Kao's *White Before Whiteness in the Late Middle Ages* stages an invigorating dialogue between interrogations of whiteness in critical race theory and fourteenth-century Middle English texts, such as *Pearl*, *The King of Tars*, Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and select works by Chaucer. Engaging also with issues of gender, precarity, fragility, and affect, among others, Kao's is the most theory-literate of the titles under consideration, marshalling a diverse and somewhat dizzying array of contemporary interpretive frameworks that betray the book's provenance in the modes of medieval literary studies exemplified by this journal. The volume assembled by Noémie Ndiaye and Lia Markey, *Seeing Race Before Race*, which doubles as the catalog to an exhibition at the Newberry Library in Chicago in 2023, is similarly positioned as an overtly theorized intervention. Insisting on critical race theory's utility as a lens through which to interrogate medieval and early modern visual and material culture, *Seeing Race Before Race* demonstrates the potential for curated displays and object histories to engage productively with theoretically informed modes of scholarship. As the editors put it, in the succinct "state-of-the-field" summary in their book's introduction, early art historical readings of race in premodernity were characterized by "a certain reparative naivete" and

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the development of a truly *critical* race studies in the 1990s “has yet to find its way into art historical methodologies” (xix). Conversely, while Michel Pastoureau’s *White* and Carole P. Biggam and Kirsten Wolf’s edited volume *A Cultural History of Color in the Medieval Age* each touch to a lesser or greater extent on the relationship between histories of color and histories of racialization, these two studies forgo the kind of explicitly critical ethos that Ndiaye and Markey advocate in their project.

Despite representing divergent approaches and disciplinary formations, the books under review have a shared investment in uncovering the shifting historical, cultural, and socio-political conditions in which ideas of “color” and/or “race” emerged and sometimes became enmeshed. Pastoureau’s study is the sixth in a monumental series of books devoted to the History of a Color, its predecessors recounting the visual and cultural histories of blue (2001), black (2009), green (2014), red (2017), and yellow (2019). *White* (2023), like those earlier books, is guided by the principle that the meanings of color are always culturally relative and socially constructed, so that even white—a color associated in the medieval European imagination primarily with virtues such as virginity, innocence, purity, and beauty—has not held universally positive associations across all times and places (9). Moreover, while white, like its counterpart black, was usually perceived in European societies as a “true color” up until the late Middle Ages, developments including the advent of movable type printing around 1450 (which heralded the use of black-and-white engraved images as well as the dominance of black ink on white paper) and Isaac Newton’s prism experiments in 1665–6 (which revealed a new spectrum of colors that held no place for white or black) dictated that, between the mid-fifteenth and early twentieth centuries, “white and black were considered and experienced as ‘noncolors,’ and then as forming an autonomous ‘black and white’ universe” (7).

Relatedly, while never losing sight of our current moment, Kao roots his analysis of *White Before Whiteness* (2024) in intricate close readings of late medieval English texts with a view to uncovering a distinctly fourteenth-century culture of whiteness. Taking to task contemporary theorists and medievalists who treat whiteness as a phenomenon predominantly grounded in corporeal and especially dermal manifestations of difference, Kao identifies in Middle English literature what he sees as “a conceptual unmooring of whiteness from any stable essence or singular significance within the premodern milieu” (2). While *Seeing Race Before Race* (2023) investigates a broader set of signifying entities than color alone, Ndiaye and Markey, too, call into question twenty-first-century presumptions concerning the defining characteristics of “race”: “While phenotype has become synonymous with race for modern readers,” the editors observe, “in premodern times, it was only one paradigm in the racial matrix, one that developed rather late and always operated in relation or in tension with the older paradigms of class and religion” (xvii). Elena FitzPatrick Sifford and Cécile Fromont’s contribution to the volume on “Back Bending Labor, Savage Dances, Pious Stances,” which explores the role of bodily comportment and movement in visual representations of Africans and Indigenous Americans disseminated in early modern Europe, makes a particularly compelling case for the extent to which premodern racial taxonomies drew on a wide range of racializing techniques that extended well beyond notions of skin color or physiognomic difference.

At the outset of their own volume, Biggam and Wolf (2021) do not reflect explicitly on issues of methodology or even historiography. Instead, the editors’ introduction comprises a descriptive survey of different regions in medieval Europe, briefly introducing

key developments in religion and politics before listing various examples of art and artefacts associated with each region that seemingly evidence a delight in color. Such a survey risks implying that color is predominantly a visual and physical entity, manifested in extant objects, rather than being expressed also in other cultural domains such as literature, medicine, philosophy, or theology that speak to color's status as a phenomenon with immaterial as well as material attributes. The ensuing essays in *A Cultural History of Color in the Medieval Age* do, nonetheless, amply support Pastoureau's basic insight that "it is society that 'makes' color" and that the issues it raises are "always cultural" (2023, 15).

Unsurprisingly, books from Pastoureau's History of a Color series are cited by several of Biggam and Wolf's contributing authors, including Gail R. Owen-Crocker, whose wide-ranging chapter on "Body and Clothing" opens with the most extensive treatment of bodily complexion and skin color in the entire book. Owen-Crocker avoids utilizing the word "race" in this context, except with passing reference to the Plinian monstrous races, which is presumably a deliberately historicizing move on her part. As with Kao's analysis of whiteness as a cultural phenomenon in late medieval England that is not simply or predominantly racializing, Owen-Crocker takes readers on a whistle-stop tour of some of the many ways in which body coloring was seized upon by medieval artists and writers as a means of signaling differences in gender, age, or moral status as well as religion or ethnicity. Thomas Dale's chapter on "Art" also concludes with a short section on "Color, Race, and Ethnicity" (165), the only place in the volume where the modern term "race" is itself deployed, devoting two paragraphs to the issue. Here Dale draws on previous research undertaken by Madeline Caviness (2008) on the emergence of a historically situated "white identity" in visual representations of Europeans from the thirteenth century onwards. Dale's chapter, like Owen-Crocker's, also helpfully illuminates some of the many ways in which color operated in medieval Europe as a means of apprehending, identifying, and differentiating bodies, including a brief but trenchant account of the potential for polychromy to transform inanimate images and materials into living flesh.¹

In this essay I shall focus on the two categories of color, white and black, that have come to play an especially significant role in manifestations of racialization and racial politics in western modernity. What insights do the books under consideration offer on premodern manifestations of black-and-white thinking, and what light does this material shed on the long history of race making? Also, focusing especially on the implications of exploring histories of color and histories of racialization in tandem, I will highlight several methodological challenges posed by these fields of study and how the books discussed in this essay respond to those challenges. Finally, in conclusion, I suggest some possible future directions for scholarship that build on the works reviewed.

Whiteness, blackness, and the premodern racial mirage

In his acclaimed 2019 book *Black Metaphors*, which has also featured extensively in previous review essays published in this journal (Walter 2020; Yu 2021), Cord J. Whitaker argues that racial difference is a mirage, "created and maintained through rhetoric" (2019, 3), and that whiteness and blackness in the Middle Ages were mutually constitutive constructs that repeatedly betrayed their underlying polysemy

or “shimmer” (2019, 10–11). Coming on the heels of a series of other important publications on the idea of race in medieval Europe (notably Heng 2018), Whitaker’s study is a key precursor to Kao’s exploration of whiteness’s “definitional slipperiness” (2024, 7) in Middle English literature. But Whitaker’s argument about the instability of black metaphors in medieval thought also resonates with Pastoureau’s analysis of the vocabularies and symbolic values assigned to both white and black in premodernity. In the opening chapter of *White*, for example, we learn from Pastoureau that the modern English words “blank” and “black” have a shared etymology, being derived from a verb designed to express luminosity.² The fact that here and elsewhere Pastoureau reproduces, almost verbatim, entire paragraphs from his previous book *Black* (compare, for instance, *White*, 46–48, with Pastoureau 2009, 27–28) is indicative of the extent to which these categories were inextricably bound up with one another.

In the earlier of the two books, while charting how black became the “diabolical color par excellence” (2009, 52) in medieval Europe, its negative meanings progressively occupying the whole symbolic field (46), Pastoureau also highlights some of the ambivalence with which black continued to be held in premodernity, including its associations with the sacred (as embodied in underground caverns, grottoes, and forests) and valuations of black clothing as variously humble and penitential (as with Benedictine monastic habits) or fashionable and luxurious (as with the robes worn by merchants, bankers, and later nobles from the mid-fourteenth century onwards). In *White*, too, Pastoureau devotes space to exploring the quarrel between Cluniac and Cistercian monks concerning the black or white coloring of their respective habits, again recycling significant passages from his book on *Black* (compare Pastoureau 2023, 71–72, with 2009, 63–65; Wim Blockmans’s essay on “Power and Identity” in *A Cultural History of Color*, 69–70, also briefly touches on the meanings of monastic dress in western Europe).

Again, this material interestingly aligns with Whitaker’s thesis that the Middle Ages were a period when blackness and whiteness were relative constructs that did not necessarily settle into a stark dichotomy. For in material reality, as Pastoureau observes, “the monks of Cluny and of Cîteaux were not truly dressed in white or black but only in shades approaching them: ecru, gray, bluish, more or less dark brown” (2023, 72). Symbolically speaking, in other words, black and white were constructed as radically distinct categories, a rhetorical operation that belied their relative values and imbrication with one another. Similarly, Aristotle’s theoretical reflections on color—as explored also by A. Mark Smith in his valuable overview of late medieval scholastic color theory influenced by Aristotelian sources in *A Cultural History of Color*—influenced medieval perceptions of blackness and whiteness as intimately connected concepts that found expression in mixture as well as duality. Consequently, Whitaker asserts, with reference to a pseudo-Aristotelian treatise on colors translated from Greek to Latin in the thirteenth century, blackness and whiteness were perceived in the period as being “the two primary colors of which all other hues consist . . . in the same family and made of the same stuff” (2019, 95). If modern racist thinking is rooted in a simplistic black-and-white binary that arrests this potential for metaphorical shimmer, by assuming that whiteness inheres within itself alone as an unmarked norm, this does not necessarily align with medieval figurations of these colors or with the experiences they engender beyond the rhetorical mirage.

Kao's book adds a new theoretical dimension to these lines of inquiry. Just as Ndiaye and Markey's volume interrogates what race looked like *before* the emergence of a modern idea of "race," and similar to the way that some scholars tracing the history of sexuality have made a working distinction between modern "sexuality," as an identity formation, and premodern understandings and practices of "sex," erotic desire, and intimacy (see, among others, El-Rouayheb 2005; Phillips and Reay 2011), Kao contends that it may be useful to distinguish between premodern articulations of "white," which may or may not function as a dermal or racializing signifier akin to more recent deployments, and what he describes as "the delimiting, homogenising and singularising sense of whiteness in modernity" (2024, 10). What is more, taking stock of an animated critical debate in contemporary gender studies, Kao intermittently renders the term "white*" in *White Before Whiteness* with a diacritical asterisk, akin to the way in which the asterisked word "trans*" is sometimes employed by trans activists and scholars as a means of refusing to situate gender transition "in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity," to quote Jack Halberstam's suggestive pitch for the strategic utility of trans* in theoretical and historically situated accounts of gender (2018, 4; see also DeVun and Tortorici 2018). Kao is careful not to draw too close an alignment between white* and trans*, acknowledging that even with the supplementary asterisk white* "signals an originary hegemonic privilege more actively than 'trans*' could ever do" (2024, 10). But the white-plus-asterisk formulation, which attests to the inventive connections that Kao forges between different strands of cultural theory, productively registers the metaphorical shimmer and lability enveloped within premodern ideas of whiteness.

As well as gifting readers these feats of theoretical wizardry, which provide much food for thought in the analyses of Middle English texts that follow, Kao explores premodern whiteness as a phenomenon that finds expression in nonhuman as well as human entities. These include inanimate objects such as suits of armor or bread and animal bodies such as horses or lambs. For instance, the Great Khan's dreams of a white knight on a white horse in *Mandeville's Travels* lead Kao to conclude that such other-than-human things "constitute the prostheses of premodern racialisation" (2024, 13). In his fourth chapter, Kao also pays close attention to the description of the titular character in Geoffrey Chaucer's tale of *Sir Thopas* in the *Canterbury Tales* as possessing a bread-like white face, an observation that provides the point of departure for an intriguing analysis of the dynamics of flatness and cuteness in the tale. In chapter two Christ the Lamb in *Pearl* is described—via a footnoted reference to Roland Barthes—as the "white *punctum*" of the poem, a center point that, insofar as it bleeds red, represents "an excess that breaks through the white surface" (111).

A particularly striking example of this effort to foreground the nonhuman dimensions to whiteness is Kao's analysis in his third chapter of the "whitlether" (white leather) bodysuits worn by actors in religious drama to simulate nudity, especially when playing God and Christ, as recorded in surviving inventories. Kao interprets these special costumes, along with figurations of white skin in William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, as an index of Christian precariousness, which is premised in turn on the precaritization of Jews as Europe's internal Other. Admittedly, these critical maneuvers are intellectually challenging and demand a lot from readers, especially those who may not be fully conversant with all the frameworks cited. In the space of this chapter alone, reference

is made to Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical theory, Didier Anzieu's notion of the Skin Ego, Judith Butler's account of precaritization, and Eva Hayward and Jamie Weinstein's concept of "tranimality"—to name just a few of the more significant theoretical touchstones undergirding this section of the book. But in keeping with Whitaker's groundbreaking work on the rhetorical mirage of racial difference and his efforts to develop analytic frameworks that reach beyond the simplicity of a black-and-white racializing dichotomy, the payoff here is a conceptually nuanced account of medieval literary culture that contests the idea that premodern whiteness was predominantly located in figurations of the human body.

The preceding chapter in *White Before Whiteness*, which focuses on *Pearl*, also contains a meticulously researched excursus on the physical effort that went into artificially whitening pearls in the Middle Ages—a labor that, Kao stresses, is completely erased in the poem itself. This represents another example of the operation whereby white* shades into whiteness, insofar as the multiplicity of shades and forms embodied by physical pearls has, through a process of material and aesthetic transformation, become the basis for an idealized, ideologically freighted myth of physical and spiritual perfection, as signified by the Pearl Maiden. As well as affording new insights into the material culture underpinning representations of whiteness in fourteenth-century England, this interrogation of the labor history of a specific class of "white" object would also lend itself to the analysis of other materials and media, such as ivory or bone, paper or parchment, and the lead-based cosmetics used to whiten skin. Kao's thought-provoking analysis of pearl whitening and its erasure in *Pearl* thus has potential to be taken up productively in future scholarship as a framework for exploring culturally specific manifestations of whiteness in other geographies and timeframes.

In keeping with Kao's emphasis on the material dimensions to histories of color and race, and building on Kim F. Hall's pioneering analysis (1995) of material culture as a vehicle for constructing ideas of racial difference in early modern England, M. Lindsay Kaplan and Dana E. Katz's essay on "Fashioning Racial Materiality in Nicolas de Nicolay's Representation of Jews" in *Seeing Race Before Race* focuses on the medium of clothing as a racializing tool in premodernity. Exploring visual representations of Jews accompanying an account by a sixteenth-century French geographer, Nicolas de Nicolay, of a journey to Istanbul, Kaplan and Katz productively consider what they call the "counterfactual labor of race construction" in a printed copy of Nicolay's *Navigations*, which is to say "the effort that goes into bending empirical evidence of the Ottoman Jewish experience to fit the imperatives of Christian triumphalism" (2023, 40). Indeed, a point that comes out especially strongly in all the books under review is that histories of color and histories of race often coincide insofar as they entail the transformation of materiality of all kinds into abstract signs or metaphors of difference. The premodern racial mirage is formed, as Whitaker himself forcefully demonstrates, from this intersection of material reality with the realms of imagination and interpretation.

Methodological challenges

Keeping an eye on the ramifications of analyses of premodern literature for the present, in his book's conclusion Kao—like Whitaker before him—interrogates contemporary appropriations of the medieval past that fetishize the period as a repository of Christian

whiteness. This line of thinking, disturbingly advocated by adherents of alt-right, white supremacist, and “European” identitarian movements in recent years, culminated in the infamous “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017, when marchers seeking to maintain the symbolism of a Confederate statue chanted antisemitic slogans and took up neomedieval imagery of the Knights Templar.³ Unwittingly, by painting a picture of an epoch almost entirely innocent of racialized conceptions of human difference, some medievalist scholarship potentially aligns with these fantasies of a “preracial” Middle Ages in contemporary politics and popular culture. This points to a key methodological quandary that the reviewed titles expose and in some cases tackle. Race is an undeniably urgent topic in the humanities and social sciences today, one that is being addressed especially with reference to its north American iterations. Until recently, however, many of the most widely cited interrogations of the category have considered it to be an exclusively or chiefly modern phenomenon. This is a common feature of contemporary critical race theory and whiteness studies, as Kao articulates in his introduction (2024, 3–4). But it is also a feature of medievalist scholarly analyses, especially those published in the 1990s and early 2000s, several of which, as Kao also summarizes (4–5), sought to draw a line between “race,” as an index of intractable biology that is essentially modern, and “ethnicity” as a marker of malleable culture that better aligns, in the view of such scholars, with the medieval evidence.

Preceding the recent wave of scholarship on race thinking and racialization in premodernity, as exemplified by studies such as Kao’s, earlier arguments were advanced making the case for “race” as a critical framework for analyzing medieval culture. These include two widely cited articles, by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (2001) and Thomas Hahn (2001), that were featured in a special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* devoted to “Race and Ethnicity in the Middle Ages.” As indicated by the title, this influential publication surfaced one of the key fault lines in this debate, namely the question of whether “race” is defined critically, with reference to contemporary critical race theory and postcolonial studies, or via more dated (and ultimately racist) biological definitions of race as an exclusively physiological or dermal phenomenon that can be seen and measured. More than two decades on from this publication, however, medievalist scholarship continues to be produced which risks perpetuating the trope of a “preracial” Middle Ages.⁴ To some extent, indeed, Pastoureau himself appears to subscribe to a view of premodernity as being largely devoid of racist ideology. Towards the end of *White*, Pastoureau reflects on the application of the adjective “white” to distinguish “Western Caucasian populations” from “African or Asian populations,” claiming that the systematic use of color descriptors to differentiate ethnic groups according to dermal contrasts is “not very old.”⁵ The Romans were not aware of such taxonomies, he adds, and “nor was it familiar to the Middle Ages; what counted then was knowing whether the inhabitants of a distant country were Christian or not, and if not, whether they could be converted to Christianity” (2023, 210). Noteworthy in these comments is the author’s use of “Caucasian,” a word that is itself a relic of eighteenth-century racist discourse. Equally, Pastoureau proposes a timeline in which “chromatic” taxonomies progressively became “racial” only during the modern era and explicitly “racist” only from the early nineteenth century onwards.

In fairness to Pastoureau’s larger argument, which is directed at the tendency in the modern West to refer to people as “white” or as having “white skin,” it is worth

emphasizing that he is not necessarily claiming at this juncture that racialization of other kinds was not operative in premodernity. Rather, Pastoureau's point is that, as Kao and contributors to Ndiaye and Markey's volume themselves also argue, skin color did not necessarily play as decisive a role as it arguably does in today's articulations of racial difference. At the same time, by seeking to push the timeline of race thinking decisively backwards, into the Middle Ages themselves, while remaining attentive to differences as well as continuities between those pasts and our present moment, both *White Before Whiteness* and *Seeing Race Before Race* actively resist the presumption that racism and race making were nonexistent phenomena in premodernity. As in some versions of the history of sexuality, which have been shaped by a reading of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* that foregrounds the existence of a stark epistemological break between pre-modern sexual "acts" and modern sexual "identities," whereby one model is effectively eclipsed and superseded by another, the temporal framing of the book's titles, with their mobilizations of the word "before," could at first glance be interpreted as drawing a sharp line between modernity and premodernity when it comes to charting the development of racial ideologies.⁶ Substantially nuancing such accounts of temporal rupture and supersession, however, while simultaneously keeping in view the past's alterity and specificity, Kao and contributors to Ndiaye and Markey's volume demonstrate the extent to which modern and contemporary modes of racism and racialization are themselves liable to being haunted or shadowed by manifestations of race thinking in premodernity.

A related challenge is the problem of periodization in histories of both color and racialization. Pastoureau's efforts to map the history of specific colors across a longue durée largely reproduce the periodizing frameworks customarily applied to European history. Thus, *White* and its predecessors in the series are structured chronologically, chapter divisions following the convention whereby ancient, medieval, renaissance, and modern are enlisted as organizing prisms. Seemingly in tension with this attempt to shoehorn color history into traditional period boxes, however, is Pastoureau's argument that, where white and black are concerned, the key epistemic changes occurred in the late Middle Ages (with the advent of printing) and the mid-seventeenth century (with Newton's spectrum). This is perhaps indicative of the value of thinking across the medieval/early modern boundary that tends to separate humanities scholars into distinct camps. By selecting "premodernity" as their temporal category of choice, and bringing objects into dialogue that range in date from the mid-1200s to the 1700s, Ndiaye and Markey lay the groundwork for a generative dialogue between medievalists and early modernists that takes stock of Margo Hendricks's recent observation that the refusal of Premodern Critical Race Studies to employ "medieval" or "renaissance" as period markers "signals a step away from a post-Enlightenment tendency to carve time, place, and human lives into discrete boxes" (2021, 381). Contrast this with the organization of the "A Cultural History of Color" series which, as with other series in Bloomsbury Academic's now extensive "A Cultural History of" program of publications, is again structured along traditional period lines. The stylization of Biggam and Wolf's timeframe in the book's title as a singular "medieval age," defined here as running from 500 to 1400, highlights a tendency to homogenize the period rather than harnessing the pluralizing potential of "Middle Ages" as a phrase. Leslie Webster's chapter on "Artifacts" in *A Cultural History of Color*, which acknowledges that the period under consideration is "long and changeable" (2021, 192), and consequently concentrates especially on examples

from the less well-documented early Middle Ages, offers a useful counterpoint to this propensity for treating the “medieval” or premodernity in general as cultural monoliths.

Pointedly, each of the long-form essays in Ndiaye and Markey’s *Seeing Race Before Race* is co-authored by scholars who not only often represent distinct period specialisms but also diverse disciplinary perspectives, a deliberate editorial strategy that models “the kind of collaborations necessary for opening new directions in Premodern Critical Race Studies today” (2023, xxii). Also, *Seeing Race Before Race* highlights the role that could potentially be played by institutions and collections of premodern art and artefacts in fostering new modes of critical inquiry: as well as itself originating in an exhibition project at the Newberry, the volume incorporates a series of shorter “Note from the Field” essays, authored by curators from the Newberry and elsewhere, as a means of highlighting both the challenges and rewards of adopting critical race perspectives in the context of cultural institutions.

The geographical scope of these books presents a third methodological challenge. Kao’s book is squarely centered on late medieval England, albeit mobilizing critical frameworks and contemporary examples that originate in other cultural settings. The chapter on Chaucer’s tale of *Sir Thopas*, for example, incorporates an intriguing analogy between the dynamics of cuteness and squeezing in the medieval text and paintings by a contemporary Japanese artist, Takashi Murakami, which exemplify the principles of a “superflat” aesthetic (2024, 189–99). Biggam and Wolf’s *A Cultural History of Color in the Medieval Age* is positioned from the outset as having a European focus, though it is important to acknowledge that several contributions, including the editors’ introduction, discuss eastern as well as western parts of the continent including the regions now corresponding to Romania and Ukraine. Thus, their chapter on “Language and Psychology,” which the editors—both themselves specialists in linguistics—co-author with Roman Krivko and Piera Molinelli, covers color semantics in Old and Middle English, Old Norse-Icelandic, Latin, and Old East Slavic. Even as the book does not rise to the challenge of developing a global perspective on the period, in other words, the regions and languages represented across the entire volume comprise an impressively expansive list.

Pastoureau’s *History of a Color* series also adopts a pan-European approach, albeit with a strong emphasis on western Europe specifically. Reflecting, as he also does in his introduction to *Black* (2009, 12), on the reasons for limiting his research to European societies, the author presents a strident defense of his approach and disciplinary orientation: “As a historian, I am not competent to speak about the whole planet and not interested in compiling, second- or thirdhand, works by other researchers on non-European cultures” (2023, 10). In his foreword to the English edition of *White*, Roland Betancourt encourages scholars following in Pastoureau’s wake also to “think comparatively,” looking beyond the European Middle Ages and recognizing how colors had the capacity to operate in profoundly different ways across the globe during a single slice of chronological time (Betancourt 2023, 4). While I appreciate Pastoureau’s candor in acknowledging his limits as a historian, I can likewise see the merits of developing truly comparative histories of both color and racialization, an initiative that, of the titles reviewed here, only *Seeing Race Before Race* pursues in earnest. In a chapter on “Race, Empire, and Cartography” in that volume, for example, Ricardo Padrón and Risa Puleo include an analysis of maps

produced by Indigenous Americans to defend their interests from the onslaught of Spanish colonizers in sixteenth-century Mexico, using this material to open a window onto the distinct ways in which people mapped the distribution of human difference within non-European locales. A multi-authored volume is of course better suited than a monograph to facilitating collaborations across linguistic, cultural, or geographical borders, but I admire Ndiaye and Markey's concerted efforts to cultivate such a conversation among scholars and curators representing such a varied range of expertise.

Conclusion: Where next?

Reading these books alongside one another, it seems that histories of color and histories of race would benefit from being in closer dialogue. Ndiaye and Markey's experiments with the form of an edited volume/exhibition catalog in *Seeing Race Before Race* point the way to one possible direction for future scholarship in these fields, namely the adoption of a thoroughly collaborative, dialogic approach that knowingly straddles the disciplinary, periodizing, linguistic, religious, regional, and national borders that conventionally shape research on premodernity. Single-authored studies will of course continue to play a key role in opening up new perspectives on these topics. But it would also behoove individual scholars whose research focuses primarily on European premodernity, and especially on the more prominent Christian or colonial discourses developed within that context, to pay attention to the important work currently being undertaken by scholars with expertise in other geographies, literary, visual, and religious cultures.

Lamia Balafrej (2021), for instance, has recently published an important study of visual images of slavery in illuminated manuscripts in Arabic, produced in thirteenth-century Iraq, Egypt, Syria, and Anatolia, highlighting the interface between skin color and social hierarchy epitomized by elite forms of cultural production within these settings. Concluding that medieval Arabic sources such as these express versions of anti-Black racism through the development of a binary opposition between white and black, Arab and non-Arab, Balafrej engages critically with the work of historians whose research has tended to underplay the operations of race thinking and racialization in medieval Islam. Literary scholars, too, are increasingly paying attention to the language of racialized blackness and whiteness in premodern Arabic literature (Schine 2021) or in Persian writings produced in precolonial India (Gandhi 2022), demonstrating some of the distinct ways in which the duality of black and white was used as a framework to taxonomize humanity outside Christian Europe. While acknowledging that, in the words of Rachel Schine, race was "not purely a matter of color in the premodern world (nor in our own)" (2021), this research also has the goal of provincializing European ideas of race by comparing them to discourses generated within wholly distinct social and cultural environments. Paying heed to Supriya Gandhi's warning that there are "good reasons to be suspicious of the universalization of race as a subject of investigation" (2022, 1181), such scholarship points to the need for a "comparative critique of racial ideologies across temporal and spatial boundaries," as advocated by Ania Loomba (2009, 501), who has made a powerful case for what she calls "cautious comparativism," defined as an approach that renders the longer and global histories of race visible, while simultaneously revealing "both the

political utility, and the limits, of comparative methods” (518) in premodern studies. This points, too, to the prospect of developing emphatically *transnational* models of critical race studies that seek to challenge the dominance of theories and histories rooted primarily in north American or western European experiences of modernity and the present.

While the key publications evaluated in this essay only intermittently model the kinds of transnational or cross-cultural approach being advocated by these other scholars, it is nonetheless worth acknowledging the many fascinating insights that can be gained from reading even this modest selection of books alongside one another. Despite their very different registers and levels of engagement with critical race theory, each of the reviewed titles benefits from being examined in the light of others in the list as a means of developing fresh perspectives on constructions of color and race in premodernity. A lesson to take away from this is that, even within the confines of medievalist scholarship centered mainly on western European literature or art, it is productive to think both critically and comparatively. For in histories of color and premodern race making, as in all other domains of human history, nothing is ever ultimately black and white.

Notes

1. In addition, Mark Cruse, in a chapter in the volume devoted to “Literature and the Performing Arts,” briefly mentions the “climatological theory of racial difference that equates heat and the southern regions with dark skin, cold and the northern regions with whiteness” (132) as shaping Isidore of Seville’s analysis of color in his influential seventh-century *Etymologies*. A more detailed analysis of premodern climatological theory, and its similarities as well as differences from modern biological forms of racism, is offered in Ricardo Padrón and Risa Puleo’s essay on “Race, Empire, and Cartography” in Ndiaye and Markey’s *Seeing Race Before Race*.
2. As Pastoureau outlines in *White*, “blank” is one of two standard terms in Middle English naming white, the other being “wit,” corresponding to the Old High German distinction between “wiz” (matte white) and “blank” (glossy white) (48). Perhaps surprisingly, given that his books were originally published in French, Pastoureau does not discuss the French lexicon for white and black, but the *Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* confirms that the French word “blanc” has a Germanic etymology. See entry on “*blank” in von Wartburg, Walther (1969, 138–146).
3. For an interrogation of the long history of this co-option of medieval imagery and rhetoric by extremist groups for racist, antisemitic, and Islamophobic ends, which also foregrounds the responses to such claims by people of color since the emergence of medieval studies as a discipline, see Hsy (2021).
4. For a pithy recent overview and critique, see also Kim (2021).
5. The original French edition, translated into English by Jody Gladding, renders the relevant passage as follows: “Ici encore, l’adjectif « blanc » signifie « pâle » ou « clair ». Substantivé et mis au pluriel, il désigne les populations occidentales de type caucasien en tant qu’elles se différencient des populations africaines ou asiatiques: les Blancs, les Noirs, les Jaunes. Contrairement à une idée reçue, cet emploi systématique d’adjectifs de couleur pour distinguer des groupes ethniques d’après la couleur de leur peau n’est pas très ancien” (Pastoureau [2022] 2024, 165).
6. For a classic critique of the acts/identity opposition insofar as it shapes the history of premodern sexualities, see Fradenburg and Freccero (1996).

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