

Reverse Genealogies of Race: Rethinking the Origins of Proto-Racial Epistemologies

الجينيالوجيا المعكوسة للعرق: إعادة التفكير في أصول الإستمولوجيات ما قبل العرقية

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Abstract:

Recent revisions in the historiography of intellectual movements have challenged linear models that locate the emergence of racial thinking solely in the scientific classifications of the eighteenth century. This article proposes a reverse-genealogical approach to the history of race, reading the discourse backward to uncover earlier conceptual formations. Drawing on scholarship in Premodern Critical Race Studies, it traces proto-racial imaginaries across various forms of discourse. Such an approach demonstrates that ideas of human difference did not appear abruptly with Enlightenment science. Rather, they developed gradually through overlapping intellectual and cultural frameworks. Examining examples from medieval literature and classical environmental thought reveals the *longue durée* of racialized thinking. Reverse genealogy thus exposes the plurality and instability of racial discourse prior to modern scientific racism.

Keywords: Reverse genealogy; Premodern Critical Race Studies; historiography of race; medieval discourse; proto-racial imaginaries.

ملخص

شهدت كتابة تاريخ الحركات الفكرية في السنوات الأخيرة مراجعات مهمة تحدت النماذج الخطية التي تربط ظهور التفكير العرقي حصراً بالتصنيفات العلمية في القرن الثامن عشر. يقترح هذا المقال مقاربة جينيالوجية معكوسة لتاريخ العرق، من خلال قراءة الخطاب العرقي بصورة رجعية للكشف عن التشكلات المفهومية السابقة له. وانطلاقاً من دراسات النقد العرقي ما قبل الحداثي، يتبع المقال ملامح التخيّلات العرقية الأولية في كتابات عديدة. وتُظهر هذه المقاربة أن أفكار الاختلاف البشري لم تظهر فجأة مع العلم التنويري. بل تطوّرت تدريجياً عبر تداخل أطر فكرية وثقافية متعددة. ومن خلال تحليل أمثلة من الأدب الوسيط ومن الفكر البيئي الكلاسيكي، يكشف المقال عن الامتداد التاريخي الطويل للتفكير المعرّق. وبذلك تُبرز الجينيالوجيا المعكوسة تعددية خطاب العرق وعدم استقراره قبل ظهور العنصرية العلمية الحديثة.

كلمات مفتاحية: الجينيالوجيا المعكوسة؛ دراسات النقد العرقي ما قبل الحداثي؛ كتابة تاريخ العرق؛ خطاب العصور الوسطى؛ التخيّلات العرقية الأولية.



Introduction

The periodization of intellectual movements has long structured the way scholars conceive of the emergence of philosophical, literary, and scientific ideas. Traditional historiography often relies on clearly defined chronological boundaries that identify specific moments of origin for new conceptual paradigms. These narratives tend to portray intellectual developments as sudden ruptures wherein one form of knowledge replaces another. However, since the latter half of the twentieth century, such linear models have been increasingly challenged by scholars influenced by poststructuralist historiography and genealogical methods of inquiry. These approaches emphasize the instability of intellectual boundaries and highlight the complex processes through which ideas evolve across historical periods. Central to this wave of reconsideration and remapping is Michel Foucault, who in his *Archeology and Genealogy*, challenges the conception of a continuous and linear development, which he replaces instead with the notion of epistemic breaks, as elaborated in his seminal work *the Archaeology of Knowledge*.

The models that question, in a sustained manner, the linearity and continuity of intellectual periodization emerged in the late twentieth-century historiography, when time was reconceptualized as layered and narratively constructed. Fernand Braudel, in *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949), introduces the notion of *longue durée*, that accounts for the slow structural transformations, privileging it hence over event-based ruptures. This is further developed by Reinhart Koselleck in *Futures Past* (1979), where conceptual history reveals overlapping temporalities that resist fixed chronological boundaries. On another front, Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973) and Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* (1983–1985) demonstrate, at the level of historiography, that historical continuity is narratively produced through 'emplotment' rather than objectively given. Extending this critique, Dominick LaCapra, in his work *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (1983), emphasizes the interpretive, multi-layered and imbricated nature of historical understanding. Taken together, these works collectively decentred the notion of intellectual movements as linear and clearly delineated.

Within the historiography of race, the dominant and overarching narrative has frequently situated the emergence of racial thought in tandem with the eighteenth-century biological essentialism. The rise of Enlightenment natural history and the development of biological classification systems have often been presented as the moment in which race first became a coherent scientific concept. Figures such as Carl Linnaeus and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach developed taxonomies that divided humanity into hierarchical categories based on perceived biological and Phenotypic differences. These classificatory schemes later became foundational to the emergence of modern scientific racism and played a crucial role in legitimizing colonial and imperial projects.

While these scientific developments undeniably contributed to the consolidation of racial ideology, they do not represent the true beginning of racial epistemology. Increasingly, scholars in Premodern Critical Race Studies argue that forms of racialization existed long before the eighteenth century. These earlier discourses did not necessarily rely on biological determinism but nonetheless articulated durable distinctions between groups based on religion, culture, lineage, or geography. As Geraldine Heng argues, race should be understood not simply as a biological concept but as a structural relationship that organizes human difference through systems of power and exclusion (P.3). In a complementary vein, Ania Loomba contends that Renaissance debates surrounding religious, cultural, and bodily difference were both intense and foundational, positioning alterity at the very core of the period's literary production. For Loomba, this sustained preoccupation did not merely reflect difference but actively contributed to the emergence of ideological frameworks that mobilized analogous, pre-



scientific vocabularies of race, thereby reinforcing the view that racial thinking precedes and exceeds its later biological codifications.

This article proposes that the historiography of race can be productively reconsidered through a method that may be described as reverse genealogy. Inspired by Michel Foucault's genealogical approach to intellectual history, reverse genealogy involves tracing conceptual histories backward in order to uncover earlier discursive formations that anticipate later developments. Rather than searching for a single origin of racial thought, this method emphasizes the dispersed and layered archives and vocabularies that gradually produced racial discourse.

By reading the history of race backward, it becomes possible to uncover proto-racial frameworks embedded within earlier cultural and literary texts. Medieval travel narratives, theological treatises, environmental theories, and early ethnographic accounts often articulated distinctions between human populations that anticipate later racial classifications. These conceptual fragments formed part of a broader intellectual environment in which ideas about human difference circulated and evolved. The emergence of scientific racism in the eighteenth century can therefore be understood not as a sudden intellectual rupture but as the culmination of longer historical processes.

Periodization, Reverse Genealogy and the Instability of Intellectual Origins

The challenge to conventional periodization has been a central concern within modern intellectual history. Reinhart Koselleck's work on conceptual history demonstrates that key political and cultural concepts undergo long processes of semantic transformation that resist simple chronological boundaries (2004, p. 75). Rather than emerging abruptly within specific historical moments, concepts develop gradually as they are reinterpreted across different historical contexts.

Michel Foucault's genealogical method similarly undermines the search for stable intellectual origins. In contrast to traditional historiography, which seeks definitive beginnings, genealogy traces the contingent and discontinuous processes through which knowledge emerges. Foucault famously argued that genealogy reveals the "hazardous play of dominations" that shape historical discourse (1977, p. 139). Instead of uncovering a pure origin, genealogical inquiry exposes the multiplicity of forces that contribute to the formation of ideas, and demonstrates that figurations are best understood as clusters of ideas from various paradigms that are oftentimes superimposed on one another anachronistically.

These methodological insights bear significant implications for the study of race. If concepts develop through long and uneven processes rather than singular moments of invention, then the origins of racial thought cannot be confined to the Enlightenment. Rather, they must be understood as the product of multiple discursive formations that gradually converged over time. Stuart Hall's influential work on race as a discursive formation underscores this point. In his lecture "Race, the Floating Signifier", Hall argues that race is not a biological fact but a system of representation that emerges within specific historical and ideological contexts (1997, p. 55). Such systems of representation are shaped by cultural narratives, political interests, and social practices that extend across centuries. As a result, racial discourse cannot be traced to a single moment of origin but must instead be understood as a historically evolving structure of meaning.

The concept of reverse genealogy provides a methodological framework for uncovering these deeper historical layers. Instead of beginning with early historical texts and moving forward toward modern racial theory, reverse genealogy begins with the established discourse of race and traces its conceptual fragments backward in time. This retrospective approach reveals the earlier intellectual formations that helped make racial classification thinkable. Interestingly, when race history is read in reverse, proto-racial discourses become visible across a wide range of premodern cultural contexts. These discourses are kernelled within theological writings and their exegesis, travel narratives, and early ethnographic accounts that attempted to fathom differences between human populations.

Understanding the genealogy of racial thought requires moving beyond the conventional narrative that situates its origins exclusively at the wake of the Enlightenment. Although eighteenth-century



scientific racism produced the most explicit classificatory systems of human hierarchy, the conceptual vocabulary that enabled these classifications developed over a much-protracted period. Premodern intellectual traditions generated a wide range of explanatory models that attempted to account for human diversity, difference, and ultimately hierarchy. These models did not yet constitute race in the modern biological sense, yet they created the intellectual conditions that later allowed racial thinking to crystallize.

Such early frameworks emerged from multiple intellectual domains, including classical philosophy, theology, natural history, medicine, and travel literature. As Ania Loomba has demonstrated, premodern and early modern understandings of human difference cannot be contained within discrete disciplinary boundaries; rather, they are produced through the circulation of ideas across overlapping epistemic fields. Rather than functioning as isolated bodies of knowledge, these traditions overlapped and interacted with one another. Ideas about climate, geography, bodily constitution, religion, and culture circulated across disciplines and gradually formed complex explanatory systems through which human difference was normalized and explained. These systems were neither stable nor uniform. As Kim F. Hall has shown, notions of difference, particularly those tied to race, colour, and material value, were embedded within broader cultural and symbolic economies, where they were continuously re-signified. Instead, they appeared as shifting clusters of concepts that were repeatedly reinterpreted in response to changing historical circumstances. Similarly, Ayanna Thompson underscores the fluid and contested nature of early racial thinking, emphasizing that such categories emerged through performance, representation, and interpretive instability rather than fixed systems.

Premodern Critical Race Studies has demonstrated that the absence of modern biological race does not imply the absence of racializing discourse. As Geraldine Heng argues, medieval societies produced durable forms of differentiation that organized populations according to inherited cultural, religious, and bodily traits (2018). These classifications often functioned as mechanisms of exclusion and hierarchy even when they were not explicitly framed in biological terms. A reverse-genealogical approach makes these earlier formations visible. By beginning with the established discourse of race and tracing its conceptual antecedents backward through intellectual history, it becomes possible to identify the dispersed fragments that eventually converged into modern racial ideology. Among the most influential of these fragments were environmental theories of human difference, theological debates about human origins, colonial ethnography, and literary representations of cultural alterity.

Geraldine Heng's groundbreaking study *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* demonstrates that medieval societies produced racialized categories that structured forms of exclusion and violence. Medieval Christian discourse, for example, often constructed Jews and Muslims as fundamentally different communities whose perceived characteristics were transmitted through lineage and culture. Such representations frequently attributed moral and physical traits to entire populations, thereby producing durable systems of differentiation that resemble later racial ideologies (2018, p. 3).

Cord Whitaker similarly argues that medieval texts reveal complex forms of racial thinking embedded within religious and cultural discourse. In *Black Metaphors*, Whitaker demonstrates how medieval theological writings frequently employed the symbolism of blackness and whiteness to articulate moral and spiritual hierarchies (2019, p. 27). These examples illustrate how proto-racial discourses circulated within medieval culture long before the emergence of scientific racism. Rather than forming coherent systems of classification, these early discourses appeared as fragmented clusters of ideas drawn from theology, geography, and ethnography. Over time, these conceptual fragments gradually converged into more rigid frameworks for categorizing human populations.

Proto-racial Ecologies and Cartographies of Alterity

One of the most influential and enduring gateways of proto-racial thinking in premodern intellectual traditions was environmental determinism. Classical writers such as Hippocrates and Aristotle argued that

climate and geography exerted profound influence over human physical appearance and temperament. In the treatise *Airs, Waters, Places*, Hippocrates suggested that environmental conditions shaped the bodily characteristics and cultural practices of different populations. Such explanations provided an early framework for linking geographical difference to physical and behavioural traits, dispositions and social customs among peoples living in different regions of the world.

This environmental paradigm was closely connected to the theory of the four humours, which dominated medical thought from antiquity through the early modern period. According to this theory, the human body was composed of four fundamental substances: blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile, whose relative balance determined both health and temperament. Climatic conditions were believed to influence this balance, thereby producing distinctive bodily and behavioural traits among different populations.

Although humoral theory originated as a medical model, it gradually acquired broader cultural significance. As Mary Floyd Wilson observes, early modern writers frequently used humoral discourse to interpret differences between peoples, transforming a medical theory into a proto-ethnographic framework of differentiation (2006). Environmental conditions were thus linked not only to bodily constitution but also to moral character, intelligence, and social organization. Such interpretations generated early forms of ethnological classification that foreshadowed later racial taxonomies and paradoxically seep still into certain discourses of differences even in our times.

These classical environmental theories were later reworked, synthesized and transmitted through medieval and early modern intellectual traditions. Medieval European scholars frequently relied on climatic explanations to account for perceived differences between populations encountered during periods of exploration and colonial expansion. Climate theory thus became an important precursor to later racial classifications by establishing a conceptual link between geography and human variation.

Travel literature also played a significant role in shaping early representations of human diversity. Medieval travel narratives such as those attributed to Marco Polo and Sir John Mandeville described encounters with unfamiliar cultures and peoples across Asia and Africa. These accounts often blended ethnographic observation with imaginative speculation, producing vivid descriptions of human difference that circulated widely in European culture. *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, for example, contains numerous descriptions of exotic peoples whose physical features and customs were portrayed as radically different from those of Europeans. Although these depictions were often fantastical, they nevertheless contributed to broader cultural assumptions about the diversity and subsequently the hierarchy of human populations.

Such narratives played a crucial role in shaping the imaginative ferment and geography through which Europeans conceptualized the world beyond their immediate cultural sphere. Early colonial encounters further amplified these processes of classification. As European explorers encountered new populations in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, they increasingly sought systematic ways to categorize human difference, invoking hence, in a distorted and often presumptuous way, various intersecting frameworks to grapple with difference. Ethnographic observations recorded in travel accounts and colonial reports gradually provided the empirical material that later naturalists would incorporate into scientific classification systems.

The expansion of European colonial power profoundly transformed the intellectual landscape in which discourses of human difference developed. Colonial administration required systematic knowledge about the populations being governed. As a result, imperial institutions generated extensive archives of ethnographic observation, legal classification, and administrative documentation. Ann Laura Stoler has demonstrated how colonial bureaucracies functioned as important sites of knowledge production (1995). Administrative records, census reports, and ethnographic surveys contributed to the gradual codification of categories used to classify colonized populations. These categories often drew upon earlier intellectual traditions while adapting them to the practical demands of imperial governance.

The production of colonial knowledge was therefore inseparable from the exercise of power. Descriptions of colonized societies were shaped by the administrative needs and ideological assumptions of imperial authorities. In many cases, such descriptions emphasized perceived differences in culture, morality,

and bodily characteristics in ways that justified colonial domination. Language also played a crucial role in these processes of representation. The ability to record and circulate written accounts allowed European observers to define the terms through which colonized societies were understood. Written descriptions of foreign cultures frequently became authoritative sources of knowledge within European intellectual circles, even when they were based on limited or distorted observations.

Scholars of colonial discourse have emphasized that such representations often revealed more about European interpretive frameworks than about the societies being described. As Greenblatt notes, early modern representations of the New World frequently functioned as reflections of European cultural anxieties and ambitions rather than accurate depictions of indigenous realities (1991). Within a reverse-genealogical perspective, these colonial archives appear as crucial stages in the historical consolidation of racial thought. The categories developed within colonial administration gradually merged with scientific classification systems emerging in Enlightenment natural history. The resulting synthesis produced the more rigid racial taxonomies that characterized nineteenth-century scientific racism.

Taken together, the environmental and colonial theories did not yet constitute biological race theory, yet they provided a powerful conceptual mechanism for linking physical difference to cultural value. Over time, climatic explanations of human variation contributed to broader discourses that organized populations according to perceived natural characteristics. Within a reverse-genealogical framework, humoral environmentalism thus appears as one of the foundational layers in the intellectual formation of racial thought.

On another front, literary production, in its ample genres, constitutes an important site for examining the evolution of proto-racial discourse. Narrative forms often function as cultural laboratories in which ideas about human difference are imagined, negotiated, and contested. By analysing literary representations across historical periods, scholars can trace the gradual transformation of conceptual frameworks that later contributed to racial ideology. Medieval literature frequently explored themes of cultural and religious difference. Works such as the *Chanson de Roland*, for instance, depicted conflicts between Christian and Muslim societies in ways that emphasized moral and cultural distinctions. These narratives often portrayed Muslim characters through symbolic markers of difference that reinforced Christian identity and solidarity.

Early modern dramatic literature often explored encounters with foreign peoples through imaginative narrative forms. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* provides a particularly revealing example. The character of Caliban has frequently been interpreted as embodying early modern European anxieties about cultural difference and colonial encounter. Although Caliban's portrayal cannot be reduced to a simple racial allegory, the play nevertheless reflects contemporary debates about the nature of humanity, civilization, and otherness. In fact, this is not an isolated Shakespearean instance, but part of a larger dramaturgical regime of othering.

This dramaturgical investment in alterity, however, extends far beyond Shakespeare and cannot be confined to a handful of canonical texts. Indeed, Renaissance theatre displays something approaching a sustained obsession with the staging of foreignness, repeatedly populating the early modern stage with figures marked as culturally, religiously, geographically, or corporeally unfamiliar. Across the dramatic corpus, playwrights returned with remarkable insistence to Moors, Turks, Jews, cannibals, Persians, "Indians," renegades, and various infidel or monstrous bodies, constructing the theatre as a privileged site for negotiating England's expanding awareness of worlds beyond itself. Such recurrent representations suggest that alterity was not merely an occasional thematic interest but one of the structuring imaginative compulsions of the early modern dramatic consciousness. The foreign body became a theatrical instrument through which anxieties about Christendom, civility, sovereignty, commerce, sexuality, and human hierarchy could be projected, rehearsed, and contained.

The breadth of this representational fixation has been demonstrated across a wide range of dramatic texts in the doctoral thesis *The Early Modern Theatre and Cultural Othering: The Turk, the Moor, the Renegade and the Cannibal*, which offers a comprehensive examination of how Renaissance playwrights repeatedly mobilized distinct figures of outsideness to articulate English fears and fantasies of difference.



Surveying canonical and non-canonical plays alike, the study reveals that cultural othering operated not as a marginal dramatic trope but as a pervasive epistemological framework embedded in theatrical production itself. Whether through the threatening Ottoman, the racialized Moor, the apostate renegade, or the cannibal, the early modern stage persistently translated geopolitical encounters into legible dramatic stereotypes. These figures functioned as condensed symbolic repositories for the unknown, allowing theatre to domesticate unfamiliar peoples within recognizable scripts of estrangement, fascination, and inferiority.

Similarly, travel narratives and romances often constructed imaginative geographies populated by exotic or monstrous peoples. These representations contributed to broader cultural frameworks through which difference was interpreted and categorized. Although such depictions did not yet constitute biological race theory, they nonetheless participated in the development of discourses that associated physical and cultural difference with hierarchical value. Premodern Critical Race Studies scholars emphasize that literary texts should not be treated merely as reflections of historical ideology. Rather, they actively participate in shaping cultural perceptions and conceptual frameworks. As Denise Ferreira da Silva argues, racial discourse emerges within broader epistemological systems that organize knowledge about the world and its inhabitants (2007, p. 21).

Literary narratives therefore provide crucial evidence for understanding how early societies conceptualized difference and identity. Through these narrative forms, ideas about human difference circulated widely within European culture. Literary texts translated complex intellectual debates into accessible stories that reinforced particular perceptions of identity and alterity. Over time, these representations contributed to the accumulation of cultural assumptions that later informed more formal systems of racial classification.

Seen from the perspective of reverse genealogy, the emergence of scientific racism in the eighteenth century appears less as an intellectual rupture than as the consolidation of earlier conceptual frameworks and analogical vocabularies. Environmental theories, ethnographic observations, theological narratives, and literary representations gradually provided the intellectual vocabulary through which racial classification became possible. During the Enlightenment, naturalists sought to systematize knowledge about the natural world through comprehensive taxonomies. Human populations were incorporated into these classificatory systems, leading to the development of racial categories that organized humanity into hierarchical groups. These scientific frameworks drew upon earlier cultural assumptions about difference while simultaneously transforming them into more rigid biological doctrines.

Ann Laura Stoler's work on colonial knowledge systems highlights the role of imperial administration in shaping racial discourse. Colonial bureaucracies generated vast archives of ethnographic information used to categorize and govern subject populations (1995, p. 37). These administrative practices reinforced the authority of racial classification and contributed to its institutionalization within modern political systems. Reverse genealogy therefore reveals that scientific racism did not emerge *ex nihilo* but developed through the gradual consolidation of earlier discursive formations. The Enlightenment did not invent racial thinking; rather, it codified and systematized conceptual frameworks that had long circulated within European intellectual culture.

Conclusion:

The historiography of race has traditionally relied on narratives that situate the emergence of racial thought within the scientific classifications of the eighteenth century. While these developments played a crucial role in consolidating racial ideology, they do not represent the true beginning of racial discourse. Instead, they should be understood as the culmination of longer intellectual processes. By adopting a reverse-genealogical approach, this article has sought to uncover the deeper historical layers that contributed to the

formation of racial thought. Reading race history backward reveals the presence of proto-racial discourses embedded within medieval theology, classical environmental theory, travel narratives, and literary representations of difference. These dispersed conceptual fragments gradually converged over time, ultimately producing the more rigid racial classifications associated with modern scientific racism. Such an approach challenges linear narratives of intellectual history and highlights the complex processes through which ideas evolve. Race, far from emerging suddenly within Enlightenment science, developed through a long history of cultural representation, intellectual speculation, and political practice. Recognizing this extended genealogy enriches our understanding of the historical formation of racial discourse and underscores the importance of examining the diverse intellectual traditions that shaped modern conceptions of human difference.

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