It would of course be ludicrous to fault modern critics for denying the “co-evalness” of the middle ages. After all, its very name defines this thousand-year chunk of Western history as that which we are not—the time before Modernity. Yet this delineation of a Time Before bears an uncanny resemblance to the “othering” process that, since Said, it has become our second nature to recognize, analyze, and criticize. In fact, like “the Orient,” the Middle Ages have long served as a repository of the abject and the exotic against which modernity is constructed. The coincidence is more than structural, for medievalism, like Orientalism and often linked to it, was one of the nineteenth century’s abiding obsessions. In recent popular usage, “medieval” is often used as shorthand for everything dark and perverse, as in the famous line from Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*. Nor does it fare better in academic discourse. Carolyn Dinshaw, for example, notes how Homi Bhabha’s notion of the radical hybridity of postmodern identities is bought “at the cost of the medieval.” As capacious a thinker as Sylvia Wynter launches her deconstruction of modernity by pushing off from the static, essentializing view of a “Latin-Christian Europe” characterized by its “orthodox Christian-Aristotelian physics” and its “clergy-controlled Scholastic order of knowledge.” That Scholasticism should signify all that is fixed, rigid, and homogenous in the European middle ages is ironic given its genealogy, jump-started by Latin Europe’s discovery of Arabic translations of Aristotle and its persistent fascination with commentators like Avicenna and Averroes.
In postcolonial criticism, an interesting elision of the medieval occurs in Dennis Porter’s “Orientalism and Its Problems” in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman’s *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*. In this essay, Porter takes Edward Said to task for neglecting heterogeneity and fragmentation in Orientalist writings, for “finding always the same triumphant discourse where several are frequently in conflict,” and for overlooking “how literary texts may in their play establish distance from the ideologies they seem to be reproducing.”

Porter makes his point through an analysis of T. E. Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, showing how even this text, written from a position of privilege and authority, is “cross-hatched with historical, political, socio-economic, and psychological determinations.” Only the careful reader, however, will notice the ellipsis marking the place of the paragraphs deleted from Porter’s original essay—nearly five pages on Marco Polo’s *Travels*. In contrast to readings taking the *Travels* as the epitome of medieval quaintness, Porter finds “a diverse and fragmented object,” combining “historical reportage” on the Great Khan with a “down to earth interest in natural environment and natural resources, animal life, [and] food production.”

Given the economics of the anthology form, it would be unfair to indict the editors of *Colonial Discourse* for the violence done to Porter’s article. And yet there is something synecdochic in this specific elision: an excision of the part (Marco Polo) for the whole (the Middle Ages) that symptomatically reveals the selective blindness of postcolonial studies, at once ignorant and dismissive of the premodern.

What is lost with these eleven paragraphs? More, I think, than one more example of the way a supposedly monolithic Orientalism reveals its “heterogeneity and fragmentariness” to the first attentive reader. For this Venetian merchant who traveled to distant Cathay and returned to write about it is in fact a less exceptional figure than he is usually taken to be. Transcribed in Old French, the “lingua franca” of the Latin Mediterranean, the *Travels* gesture toward the “mobile, polyglot and virtually borderless” world hidden from us by our own impoverished conception of the “medieval” that Clifford Geertz has called a multicultural bazaar, where “Arabs, Jews, Iberians, Greeks, Indians, various sorts of Italians and Africans pursued trade and learning, private lives and public fortunes, bumping up against one another and against various sorts of political adventurers, but more or less getting along, or getting by, within broad and general rules for communication, propriety and the conduct of business.” In this sense, Marco Polo may be seen as one of “a group of people whose travels and breadth of experience and education seems astonishing even today, on a planet thought to be newly-shrunken.”