Civilization does not have one color, one religion, or one geographical orientation.

—August Wilson (September 26, 2001)

The following essays speak for themselves. One need not patronize authors or readers with attempts at summation and paraphrase. This introduction reflects briefly on their significance as part of an ongoing attempt to trace out both a discourse and a subject of investigation in a rapidly evolving field of multidisciplinary inquiry. The immediate focus of this collection is constructions of race in the early modern Atlantic world. But that needs to be understood within the larger study of race, literature, and ethnicity, projected in the “Signs of Race” symposiums and volumes—and within the wider world which affects us all, as scholars and human beings.

In the first year of the twenty-first century, organizers of the University of Alabama Symposium Series, “Signs of Race,” proposed and received approval for an ongoing set of multidisciplinary conferences on race, ethnicity, language, literature, and cultural difference. From the beginning, the programs were envisioned as bringing together speakers from a wide array of disciplines: literature, critical theory, linguistics, history, cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, religious studies, and so on. Several were also projected to feature eminent keynote speakers and performers from the contemporary arts—literature, drama, film, music, dance—whose careers and major achievements had centered on cultural representations of race.

The events of September 11, 2001, were still in the future when these plans were made, and the first symposium was innocently scheduled to begin on September 26, 2001. Since the speakers were coming from as far away as Hawaii, the grounding of all commercial air traffic in the United States in the immediate aftermath of the Al Qaeda...
attacks threatened to make the projected gathering of minds and disciplines physically impossible. But planes began to fly again, in time, and all but one of the invitees—already, as that person put it, “a nervous flyer,” who would have been departing from, of all places, New York—arrived. The symposium began in Morgan Hall, a building erected in 1911 and named for J. T. Morgan (1824–1907), Alabama secessionist, Brigadier General in the Confederate Army, and United States Senator for thirty years. From the stage of the restored Edwardian theatre in that building, dedicated to one of the architects of segregation, the eminent American playwright August Wilson told a spellbound, overflow, interracial audience something about his own experience, as an artist and a citizen of African heritage, with race and cultural difference in contemporary America. Even before the rigorous security measures imposed at airports in the wake of the 2001 attacks, Wilson noted wryly at one point, he had already found himself invariably selected from boarding passengers on flights for “random” screening. “I guess I’m just a random kind of guy,” he concluded.

There was nothing random about Wilson’s condemnation of “the politics of exclusion, damning and damaging to our global world.” The rhetoric and practice of exclusion has, since Wilson spoke, only intensified, lengthening the roll-call of victims of real or putative randomness. Whatever the differences between George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden, they both apply righteous and violent binaries to the thick complexity of interactions between the world’s many peoples. “The present is the consequence of history,” Wilson reminded us, “given form and function.” The contributors to this collection describe some of the forms and functions that the righteous, violent binaries of race have historically taken, and some of the effects of that past upon our present. The anthology of stories this volume tells should teach us the colossally tragic consequences of any division of the world into black and white, good and evil, us and them.

Much of the importance of such a volume as this lies, beyond its specific content, in the collaborative framing of an investigatory enterprise. When the coeditors—one of us a specialist in early modern England, the other an early Americanist—first envisioned this project, we began with the simple idea of making sure we represented both sides of the Atlantic. This may seem elementary, but in fact the fault-lines of academic disciplines usually confine a scholarly career, or a classroom, to one side or the other of “the pond.”

This is not to say we were without major points of reference in contemporary scholarship. Focusing on the legacy of African slavery