theories and methodologies

At Home with Race

VIET THANH NGUYEN

THE LINE BETWEEN A CONTACT ZONE AND A COMFORT ZONE IS A THIN ONE. I CAN IMAGINE THAT LINE DRAWN IN MANY WAYS, BUT THE COLOR line of which W. E. B. DuBois spoke is the one that concerns Michael Omi and Howard Winant. In *Racial Formation in the United States*, when they declare that "race has no fixed meaning" (71), they mean that this color line is always being redrawn, by different hands and differing hearts. It is this possibility of racial transformation, not just racial formation, that makes Omi and Winant's theory powerful and compelling. With transformation in mind, we can conceive of racial formation as another version of Mary Louise Pratt's contact zone, where friction sparks unpredictable futures and where, by implication, our racial present may not look like our racial past. At the same time, racial formation is also reformation, affirming identities with which we feel at ease. In these comfort zones of inherited identities, we encourage others and are encouraged ourselves to toe the (color) line. These racial tendencies, toward change and constancy, innovation and cliché, are evident in both politics and culture. Although Omi and Winant's sociology of race is not concerned with literature, their insightful model of racial formation is manifest in literary culture, in aesthetic form and in literary institutions: the publishing industry, the literary marketplace, and the department of literature, where racial politics are always present.

These politics are an inherent part of racial formation, which is "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (Omi and Winant 55). In this useful formula, race is shaped by the contact and conflict between varied groups, or by how the members of seemingly homogeneous groups learn to separate themselves from one another. Omi and Winant's idea of inhabiting race, however, also alludes to the way that we can learn to live with race, making it one of the "safe houses of identity," as Anna Deavere Smith calls it (24). From behind the glass walls of these safe houses, we draw all the benefits, as well as the dysfunctions, of home. Locating race at home and being perhaps too easily at home

VIET THANH NGUYEN is an associate professor of English and American studies and ethnicity at the University of Southern California. He is the author of *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (Oxford UP, 2002); of articles in journals such as *American Literary History*, the *New Centennial Review*, and *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*; and of short stories in *Best New American Voices 2007* (Harvest-Harcourt, 2006), *Narrative Magazine*, *Gulf Coast*, and other publications.

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with race myself, I tend to see race saturating everyday life, as do Omi and Winant. From the domestic to the public, from culture to the state, racial formation concerns both the bureaucrats of the political economy as well as the practitioners of cultural politics, the ones who both interpret racial forms and shape them, through literature and art in general.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Omi and Winant's concern with the state and with politics leads them to argue that race is chiefly articulated through class, particularly through "racial projects," which are "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (56). Although "resources" has many meanings, I interpret their usage of it to be primarily about material resources—hence, the struggles over racial difference are also fights over class advantages, conflicts from which literature is not immune, situated as it is with at least one foot in the marketplace. Omi and Winant's attention to class is not sufficient for one of the most vocal critics of racial identification, Walter Benn Michaels, who nevertheless concedes that *Racial Formation in the United States* is "certainly the most influential academic text on the social construction of race" (48). The title of Michaels's book speaks for itself: *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*. For Michaels, the politically crippling illusion of race draws attention away from the real problem, class inequality. The division constructed by Michaels between the illusion of race and the reality of class is as absolute and forbidding as the Berlin Wall, with no doubt as to which side freedom falls on. While Michaels's critiques of the absurdities of diversity and multiculturalism are sometimes valid, his insistence on the pure truth of class inequality is not. His few solutions to the problem of class inequality are populist, on the scale of participation in electoral politics or confessing one's salary. These offerings are less about class revolution than the affirmation of neoliberalism, summarized in the Clintonian campaign slogan, "It's the economy, stupid!" But the mixed results of the Bill Clinton era indicate that focusing on class without a utopian horizon of revolution leads only to small change.

Likewise, insisting on class as the only difference that counts ignores how alienation in capitalism is expressed through racial identities, as Stuart Hall argues when he writes that "race is . . . the modality in which class is 'lived'" (55). DuBois links race and alienation succinctly with his concept of double consciousness, while Omi and Winant make it clear that race alienates not only people of color but white people as well. A literary example of white alienation through race can be found in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, a template for countercultural white boredom. Fleeing from the rat race of the spiritually oppressive city, Sal Paradise and his friends seek beatification in Negro jazz clubs and Mexican bordellos. Published in the same year, John Okada's *No-No Boy* depicts the arm-in-arm relationship of race and class through a tale of patriotism and suspect loyalties. In Okada's novel, those Japanese Americans who affirm their loyalty to the United States while serving time in American concentration camps are rewarded after war's end with new cars, comfortable houses, and modern furnishings. Those who refuse to swear allegiance or serve in the armed forces like the protagonist, Ichiro Yamada, are punished with poverty and ostracism. While white Negroes declined the material bargain of American society and sought voluntary exile among people of color, nisei refuseniks rejected American society's racist pledge and were excluded from American bounty. In both cases, Sal Paradise and Ichiro Yamada are in search of a spiritual home away from home, kept on the run by alienation from societies riven by race and class.

But my emphasis so far on how class is lived through race and vice versa may give

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the false impression that our safe houses are composed purely from the brick and mortar of racial difference and class position. In actuality, these houses are much more complex, incorporating sex and gender in fundamental ways and ensuring that racial formation, despite its name, is never only about race or even class. While blackness jazzed the white Negro largely through the fantasy of black masculine hypervirility (Mailer), "racial castration" was the primal fear for some Asian American men (Eng). As for Asian and Asian American women, a concept like Susan Koshy's "sexual model minority" might be more accurate in describing their place at the intersection of race, gender, and sex (15). The sexual model minority performs a docile femininity for a racist and misogynist imagination. Thus Emi of *No-No Boy*, sexy yet wholesome, represents (Japanese) America's promise to Ichiro. She is also emblematic of how racial difference eroticizes Asian and Asian American women. "The hypersexuality of race" that results, according to Celine Parreñas Shimizu, can lead to a reactionary puritanism on the part of some Asian and Asian American women. In the face of this, Shimizu demands the repossession of pleasure, calling for a cultural politics based on lust as much as on what is just. For Asian and Asian American women, then, sexuality is the fraught modality by which race is lived, in ways ranging from the domesticated to the daring.

Although Omi and Winant put little emphasis on how racial formation is electric with sexual desire and driven by differences in gender, their formal template is capacious enough to take sex and gender into account. For Omi and Winant, the new social movements of the 1960s and afterward

> create collective identity by offering their adherents a different view of themselves and their world . . . [the new social movements] do this by the process of rearticulation, which produces new subjectivity by making use of the information and knowledge already present in the subject's mind. They take elements and themes of her/his culture and traditions and infuse them with new meaning. (99)

Sexual and gender projects are as important as racial ones in shaping these new subjectivities, which is evident in literature. Thus, in Asian American writing, transformation and reformation are manifest through ethnicizing race and "ethnicizing gender," to use Sauling C. Wong's term. While Asian American literature is diverse in many ways, the most well-known strain of it since the 1976 publication of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* is marked by the authorial fashioning of Asian Americans into the "new Jews," a process described by both Gish Jen and Eric Liu. These liminal ethnics may or may not be quite white, but their difference is far from dangerous to white people, as Jhumpa Lahiri shows in "The Third and Final Continent." Her Indian-migrant protagonist outdoes Sal Paradise by traveling to three continents in 1969, not just two. Her protagonist's arrival in Boston (that most revolutionary of cities) is welcomed by his landlady, an ancient white woman born at the end of the Civil War (that most divisive of conflicts). The story dramatizes a pleasing ethnic difference between an icon of American history and her Indian tenant, but the troubling racial clashes and sexual threats of the American past are not suitable for their polite conversation.

Yet if some Asian Americans are the neighborly new Jews, can some also be the unwelcome old Jews of racist nightmares, desiring gold, power, and sex? The enduring Asiatic "racial form" engendered in the late nineteenth century provides the template for such figures (Lye), and these "apparitions of Asia" continue to haunt the United States today (Park). In Trinh T. Minh-ha's memorable words, there is a "Third World in the first, and vice versa" (98), which Hurricane Katrina made clear. The fallout from Katrina

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showed how the threat of this Third World troubles diverse Americans, making unexpected rhetorical allies of George W. Bush and Jesse Jackson. Speaking of those rendered homeless, Bush said, "the people we're talking about are not refugees. They are Americans" (Noveck). As for Jackson, he opined that "it is inaccurate, unfair and racist" to call the displaced refugees, for "to see them as refugees is to see them as other than Americans" (Safire). This black-and-white logic is racist itself, for some refugees are Americans. In New Orleans, they came from the substantial Vietnamese American community, many of whom fled Vietnam at the end of the American war. The existence of these and other refugees threatens the promise of the nation-state to protect its citizens and hence must be repudiated by nationalist leaders of both the dominant class and the opposition (Agamben; Espiritu). If the homeless refugee throws the nation-state into crisis, so, too, does the old Jew and the Asiatic, both of whom undermine the national home in other ways by sharing the refugee's desperation to work for cheap and her fecund ability to procreate. Omi and Winant's process of racial formation, then, must also be extended beyond the borders of the nation to show how these racial forms of Jew, Asiatic, and refugee threaten a different kind of miscegenation, this time between the domestic and the foreign.

Omi and Winant's sociology of race helps us understand how these racial forms are outcomes of racial formation, which is in turn shaped by the use of these forms in American literature and other kinds of media. The fear of the refugee that unifies a house otherwise divided between black and white, as well as left and right, is ameliorated to some extent by hope: the wish that the next audacious person who comes knocking on America's door should be Lahiri's Indian migrant. He is the "flexible citizen" (Ong), equipped to survive in an age of "flexible accumulation" (Harvey), one that requires the ability to hop across continents, corporations, and, yes, universities. The willful and wonderful mobility of this kind of migrant, as rendered in some versions of postcolonial literature written in English, makes her or him a suitable subject for traveling theorists and their theories of travel. In contrast to the nationalist unity of black and white, the literary world offers the internationalist solidarity of migrant writer and cosmopolitan reader. This solidarity is selective, however. I suspect this reader would much rather read about migrants, whose mobility reminds the reader of himself, than about refugees or, worse yet, those who do not travel at all. By servicing this kind of reader, the literary apparatus—publishers, editors, agents, book reviewers, and academic critics—participates in its own kind of racial formation through the same dynamic of absorption and insulation described by Omi and Winant (84–87). They discuss how the racial state learns to accommodate the political demands of race-based movements and to assimilate their leaders. In the bookish world, this co-optation occurs through the celebration of insurgent writers, which reaches its peak in canonization, the kiss of death that promises literary afterlife.

The political equivalent of canonization has domesticated multiculturalism in general. Once deemed an assault on Western civilization by conservative critics in the 1980s, *multiculturalism* is now part of the bureaucratic jargon of government, corporations, and academia. *Diversity* names this process of inoculating the American body politic against the more serious pox of class warfare. The fact that literature is more effective in ensuring individual authorial success than collective equality evidences how the state and the culture industry collaborate to ensure the presence of "dark faces in high places," as Charlotta Bass says (qtd. in Lipsitz 304). Not everyone is satisfied with the results of this diversity lottery, where many play but few get paid. "The race industry is a growth industry,"

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Benjamin Zephaniah says, and Eric Cheyfitz may agree. For Cheyfitz, academia's star system blunts the radical political potential of American studies in particular and academic theory in general. Here, profitable careers can be made on dense studies of resistance and subversion, a contradiction that affects not only American studies but also feminist, queer, postcolonial, ethnic, and literary studies. A more general despair with race thinking drives Paul Gilroy to argue against the "hip vanguard in the business of difference" (242) and against the "dermo-politics" (46) of race leaders who have become "cultural brokers" (242) and "memory merchants" (269). As Omi and Winant point out, racial formation cannot escape from this cycle of protest and payoff, since co-optation is inevitable in capitalist society. Subject to our own reified consciousness (Lukács), we have—pardon the cliché—always already sold out to one degree or another.

Co-optation is quite visible in the architecture of our safe houses, which can be comfortably familiar or depressingly repetitive, depending on one's point of view. These tract homes of identity are found in well-developed neighborhoods of race, gender, class, and sexuality, which are witnessing the rise of new subdivisions for the disabled, the fat, and the aged, with more probably in the works. Invested with the cultural and symbolic capital of difference, these safe houses are definitely for sale. Critics of diverse political and theoretical persuasions rightly rebel against them. Percival Everett satirizes the formulaic quality of racial identity in his novel *Erasure*, which poses the rhetorical question, Must African American authors be identified as such, and must they write about seemingly black pathologies like crime, drugs, ghettoization, and profanity? Lee Edelman takes on another kind of marketable banality in *No Future*, when he argues that queer politics should concern not the cuddly gay men and hysterical best friends of popular culture but the radical refusal to reproduce and invest in futurity. Seemingly progressive politics are also suspect in *Compositional Subjects*, where Laura Kang makes a case for how Asian American feminist politics should be skeptical about the feel-good rhetoric of saving Asian American women and should instead examine how different discourses create and use Asian American women. Similarly, Kandice Chuh rejects the existence of Asian Americans in *Imagine Otherwise*: for her, Asian American politics should be based on a "subjectless discourse," where Asian American persons or cultures are only useful fictions (9). These contemporary critiques, among others influenced by poststructuralism, level an antiessentialist charge against the safe houses of identity; they allege that nobody is home in these dwellings that have cost us so much.

Our homes and our safe houses are full of such contradictions. While safe houses are meant to be shelters, their existence is predicated on the existence of danger. The theory of racial formation advanced by Omi and Winant tells us that our safe houses of race are not the problem since they are attempts to shield us against forces we do not wholly control. Thus we build safe houses for very good reason. But the political question left implicit in their project, and in the work of many critics and artists dealing with all the various versions of identity and its formations, is when to leave the comforts and discomforts of home and venture outside into what Smith calls the "crossroads of ambiguity" (24). Recent work on melancholia and mourning, like Anne Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race*, clarifies our ambivalent psychic longings for the very identities that hurt us and gives theoretical heft to William Faulkner's insight that the past is not yet dead—it's not even past. But the material dimension of these "ghostly matters" (Gordon) is where racial formation is a necessary corrective to poststructuralism's and psychoanalysis's blind spots about bureaucracy and economy. We can hardly take account

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of emotional and psychic loss without also opening up our ledgers of financial loss (and gain, since pain can be a kind of capital, too). Race not only haunts us but also straps us to the state and binds us to the market. Those bonds hurt, but as Wendy Brown says, they also make us dependent on the state and its promise to (re)dress the same injuries it has helped to inflict. For Brown, these "wounded attachments" are a manifestation of Nietzschean *ressentiment*, a slave morality causing the weak to seethe and to act out against the binds in which they find themselves (52–76).

Acting out is the other side of melancholia and mourning addressed by Sigmund Freud, as Paul Ricoeur reminds us (80). Acting out is less attractive in most cases than melancholia and mourning, which are somewhat validated by their moral patina of undeserved grief. In contrast, acting out only seems irrational, selfish, contrived, or immature, all behaviors that can sometimes characterize the worst aspects and moments of identity-based politics (including the often unremarked identity politics of whites and men). Still, there's no doing away with acting out, which Freud sees as the refusal to remember an originary cause for one's dissatisfaction. In this case, the cause is alienation under capitalism, which has many faces, including but far from limited to race. The inevitability of such alienation may tempt us to speak a rhetoric of realism about race and identity, a submission to the way things are. But realism devolves fairly easily into pragmatism and cynicism, until one day the follower of such racial realpolitik may awaken to discover that the face he sees in the mirror bears a striking resemblance to Dr. Bledsoe of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

In this context of melancholia, mourning, and acting out, Raymond Williams's suggestive and elusive comments about structures of feeling become helpful. A structure of feeling is "a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating," often expressed earliest in art and literature (131–32). The structural dimension of feeling reminds us that emotions are produced socially. As a result, feeling is never simply individual and it is never unique. But since we may take our feelings to be only our own, their structural dimension remains "at the very edge of semantic availability" (134), even though it is what would connect us to others and make us feel at home with them. The new "semantic figures" of these structures must be reinterpreted by a later generation of critics who can offer "explanations but now at a reduced tension: the social explanation fully admitted, the intensity of experienced fear and shame now dispersed and generalized" (134). Racial and other formations of identity are precisely these structures of feeling that we experience individually and yearn to understand collectively. As Omi and Winant also theorize, these structures of feeling change over time and from generation to generation, not inherently but because those who are dissatisfied with race have sought to "*work through*" its problems (Freud 155).

Literature, of course, claims feeling for itself. The current of emotions that heats up the hothouse of race, leaving us inflamed, is the same current running through literature. Toni Morrison makes this clear in her novels and in her essay "Home," found in *The House That Race Built*. In "Home," talking about race, she stacks up the metaphors of house and home as I have done. For her, the "racial house" is where race has always mattered and still does (11). The racial house names the structure of feeling passed on by a previous generation, an abode in which we continue to dwell. But for Morrison, the abolition of race will create home, a utopian dream necessary for survival in our racial houses. Morrison thus reminds us of the necessary possibility of change and of transformation, even when it comes to race. This possibility is part of an emergent structure of feeling concerning race that we do not wholly understand or recognize, one manifest

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in the refusal to be racialized. As Morrison notes, the primary criticism of the yearning for a future absent of race is the charge that one is "encouraging futile attempts to transcend race or pernicious efforts to trivialize it," even though what she is "determined to do is to take what is articulated as an elusive race-free paradise and domesticate it" (8). To look for home when it comes to race is thus to seize the chance of rethinking what race might mean tomorrow rather than to surrender to what race dictates today.

But in the end I must depart from Morrison's metaphor of home as utopia, a place "psychically and physically safe" (10). Even as a metaphor, home is not always safe. Although home is where one's heart is, home is also where one's pathologies are (which Morrison demonstrates so memorably in *Beloved*). Thus, even after leaving a home that has shaped us for better or for worse, the home we find will provide not only chances for love and new futures but also the opportunity to inflict pain and to repeat our forebears' mistakes. A utopian home without trouble would be unrecognizable to us. What's more, by the time we get to open the door to this utopian home, we probably would not be recognizable as a species, either. In the long meantime between the present in which we live and the future for which we yearn, while we still remain all too human, the processes of racial formation described so accurately by Omi and Winant will persist. Racial formation is guaranteed, perhaps by an innate desire to differentiate between self and other, certainly by capitalism's need for differences to exploit. Even so, there is no master plan for race, no blueprint dictating where the color line will be drawn in the future, just as the color line was drawn elsewhere in the past. Our racial house, our safe house, our house that race built is a home that successive generations will rebuild, so long as they do not resign themselves to race.

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