Theories and Methodologies

"Not Like Us"

ALEXANDER PONOMAREFF

In planning this essay, I kept returning to the thought that the best way to begin would be to offer a confession.

I have little interest in the European Middle Ages or the medieval. I have publicly stated this disinterest in the past, on many occasions, and, more damningly, even questioned the significance of scholarship on the medieval.

The most frequent audience for my pronouncements has been my colleague Nahir I. Otaño Gracia, who has typically responded to my outbursts with a reminder that she shares similar thoughts about the contemporary, which, broadly put, is my field of study. Her research on chivalric stories and medieval languages often feels far away from my work on hip-hop artists, graffiti writers, and comic book creators. I suspect that it was these conversations that inspired her to suggest that I be included in this collection on Geraldine Heng's *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*. I doubt Nahir's suggestion came from a sense that Heng's work, or any work on the medieval, might fundamentally change my stubbornly held position. If she did, then I am sorry to disappoint her. Nonetheless, I hope that my response can suggest some of the many resonances that Heng's work can potentially hold for even the most skeptical of interlocutors, such as myself.

While my pronounced lack of interest in all things medieval stands out as one barrier to my engagement with Heng's work, I also found myself trying to reconcile the claims Heng was making with my own understanding of race as a category and a lived experience, which I understood as both a cause and an effect of the advent of the transatlantic slave trade. I understand my approaches to research and teaching as part of the larger projects that can be articulated as Black studies. As Heng notes, at its core, her project challenges "[c]anonical

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race theory," which conceives of race as something introduced, "only in *modern* time," and as "twinned with the conditions of labor and capital in modernity such as plantation slavery and the slave trade" (16).[1] I know that I reproduce similar claims about race theory when I write and when I present my research. In short, my understanding of much of the work that I do corresponds to the work that Heng interrogates in *The Invention of Race*. More than my shared personal history with Nahir, I suspect that I was considered for inclusion in this cluster as an opportunity to reflect on the challenge that Heng's work puts forward to scholars grounded in "canonical race theory," to engage with the many, deeper histories of race and to find affinity and community across the often seemingly impassible divide that is disciplinary specificity and academic specialization.

Before I turn to Heng's work directly, I want to spend a bit more time situating my understanding of Black studies as a project. In 2008, as part of a different cluster published in *PMLA*, Fred Moten articulated Black studies through a reframing of Cedric Robinson's rephrasing of a claim made by C. L. R. James. As Robinson says, "To paraphrase C. L. R. James, who insisted that Black Studies was the study of Western Civilization, Black Studies is a critique of Western Civilization" (8).[2] Moten builds on Robinson's claim, adding that "what is called Western civilization is the object of black studies" (1743).[3] Moten continues to clarify that this articulation of Black studies operates through "the 'paraontological distinction' between blackness and the people (which is to say, more generally, the things) that are called black" (1744). To insist on Blackness as a critique of Western civilization is to insist, as Moten goes on to write, that "blackness is a general, material aspiration, the condition of possibility of politics understood, along but also off Foucauldian tracks, as the irreducible unconventionality of race war" (1744). Blackness, understood this way, is the continuous, consistent possibility of change, the possibility of a politics grounded in "the faithful, postfatal assertion of a right to refuse, in the prenatal instantiation of a collective negative tendency to differ, and in the resistance to the regulative powers that resistance, differing, and refusal call into being" (1746–47). It is through this lens that I found myself engaging with Heng's work.

Robinson's and Moten's claims were in my mind as I encountered Heng's assertion that her work is built on a "modest, stripped-down working hypothesis":

> *"[R]ace" is one of the primary names we have—a name we retain for the strategic, epistemological, and political commitments it recognizes—attached to a repeating tendency of the gravest import, to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups.* (27)

I want to briefly touch on two aspects of Heng's approach to framing her argument that lingered with me as I worked through her book.

First, Heng makes the critical distinction that race has, and is, a political construction, something that is often occluded in conversations that posit race primarily as a social category. As Dorothy Roberts traces in her work *Fatal Invention*, "The problem with this interpretation of race as a social construction is that it ignores its political—and not biological—origin. The very first step of creating race, dividing human beings into these categories, is a political practice" (4). For Roberts, this origin can be traced to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, because, as she argues race "has political roots in slavery and colonialism" (5), to which she adds that "[b]elieving in the uniqueness and superiority of one's own group may be universal, but it is not equivalent to race" (6). This disagreement reproduces a version of the canonical race theories that Heng suggests she is challenging in her work, but instead of focusing on the extent to which Heng and Roberts might disagree, I was drawn to their agreement.

I have frequently taught the opening chapter of Roberts's *Fatal Invention* to my students as the first reading we do in a class entitled Racism in American Society. I begin our semester by reading Roberts's work because I have the experience of working with many students who have grown accustomed to the claim that race is a social construction. Their interest

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in and engagement with this position certainly varies, but for those who have heard or considered this claim it has, in my experience, taken on the authority of a fact. That Roberts challenges this position, quite explicitly, in the opening paragraphs of *Fatal Invention* frequently serves two purposes. On the one hand, it allows me to encourage students to slow down in their approach to reading, as some of them (very much like myself at many points in my life) see the phrase "social construction" and anticipate the repetition of the claim that "race is a social construction," instead of Roberts's critique. On the other hand, it allows us to begin the class by interrogating both the way we might have engaged with conversations about race prior to our class and the ways in which race has been framed to exclude other possible conversations. As Roberts insists, one of the main issues with understanding race as a social construction is that such a view allows for an acceptance of biological race as a fact and social race as an ideological position that simply needs to be overcome.[4] By contrast, Roberts and Heng both articulate race as a political category and suggest that among the central issues involved in discussions of race are the epistemological projects that have been produced and sustained to obscure its specifically political origins and impacts.

Second, I was struck by Heng's claim that race functions to "*demarcate human beings through differences among humans*" (27). On its face, this is certainly a claim that makes sense to me, but it omits a significant aspect of race. While race can function to demarcate the differences among humans, it has also often been used to demarcate who, either as individuals or as part of a group, gets access to the category of the human and to whom such access is denied. As Sylvia Wynter asserts, "the struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves" (260).[5] As my colleague David Ponton III often reminds me, Wynter is usually right. So, once again, in reading Heng's work I found it to be potentially at odds with the kinds of canonical race theories that sit at the foundation of my own relationship to scholarship and teaching, and yet, while I do not want to undervalue the differences that I noted between Heng's and Wynter's work, once more I found myself noticing an affinity more than a contradiction.

Wynter challenges us to take seriously the overrepresentation of Man as human to acknowledge the epistemic limitations of thinking inside and, perhaps, against Western civilization, even if, and when, we might find ourselves located outside its rigid borders. Heng similarly asks us to consider the rigidity with which we, both as scholars and as subjects, have accepted an accounting that locates us in the West, even when we fall outside its rigid borders. As Heng writes, "For the West, modernity is an account of self-origin—how the West became the unique, vigorous, self-identical, and exceptional entity that it is, bearing a legacy—and burden—of superiority" (21). The West, much like Man, is overrepresented. This happens both temporally and geographically. As Heng notes, premodern time is "fictionalized as a politically unintelligible time, because it lacks the signifying apparatus expressive of, and witnessing, modernity." And she asserts that because "the prime movers and markers of modernity are exclusively or overwhelmingly discovered in the West, the non-West has long been saddled with the tag of being *pre*modern: inserted within a developmental narrative whose trajectory positions the rest of the world as always catching up" (21). One of the problems with overrepresentation, to which both Wynter and Heng seem acutely attuned, is the overwhelming force and authority imparted to the projects of European modernity and the Enlightenment through the work of taxonomization, classification, and periodization. I find it unavoidable to understand either of these approaches as anything other than direct attempts to articulate a "critique of Western Civilization," which is the same goal to which I aspire.

I am certain that some of the connections I was able to draw while reading *The Invention of Race* between Heng's work and Black studies scholarship reflect my own intellectual and critical priorities. My

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research grapples with the lasting significance of clarity, and the imperative to be clear, to contemporary life in and against the structures and realities of "Western Civilization," drawing on Robinson's understanding of this concept. My work traces the demand for clarity as one of the enduring legacies of cybernetics as it has shaped contemporary technocultural worlds, including the ways in which that demand influences the kinds of cultural works that can be created using production and manufacturing technologies. I also trace how artists have worked to undermine or resist this demand, engaging, using Moten's terms, in projects that can only be understood as articulations of "Blackness." Central to the work I am trying to do is to understand that the significance of being clear has been naturalized and normalized, that part of the project of Western civilization has been to teach and to discipline people to the expectation that they should be clear while expecting clarity from others from an early age. I have too many examples of this to share with you here, but perhaps the starkest is how frequently I was told, in a variety of different ways, that I need to be clearer in the work I produced as a student and the acritical ease with which I often repeat these demands to my students. Even now, I catch myself falling into these same practices, reproducing these same expectations, despite my research and my own experiences of the violences of the demand for clarity.[6] It is this assumption and imposition of the demand for clarity that undergirds systems of taxonomization and control that I view as fundamental to maintaining racial and other hierarchies.

This is why one of Heng's assertions stood out to me: "A blind spot inhabits the otherwise extraordinary panorama of critical descriptions of race: a cognitive lag that makes theory unable to step back further than the Renaissance, that makes it *natural* to consider the Middle Ages as somehow outside real time" (20). The demand for clarity that produces the taxonomization of knowledge that is foundational to the epistemological projects of Western civilization works to sustain the periodizations that Heng's work challenges. As she notes, this blind spot matters for several reasons, perhaps most significantly because it forces medieval scholarship (and all nonmodern scholarship), "*[n]ot* to use the term *race*," which serves "the reproduction of a certain kind of past, while keeping the door shut to tools, analyses, and resources that can name the past differently," asking scholars to "dance around words they dare not use," instead relying on concepts such as "otherness" and "difference" (23). Through Heng's work, I see another iteration of the demand to be clear being weaponized to police and control the conversations we can have about the past, the present, and the future.

As I was working on this essay, I found myself returning to one more resonance between Heng's analysis of the medieval and questions of the contemporary, which I want to share by way of ending. Soon after I was invited to work on this essay, Kendrick Lamar performed at the 2025 Super Bowl halftime show. Lamar's performance, along with his prominent beef with Drake, garnered significant cultural and media attention. What I noticed more than anything, however, was a frequent response to Lamar's performance that echoed across social media and that seemed to reflect some form of consensus among users who appeared to be middle-aged or older, and white.[7] These comments had little to do with the message of Lamar's lyrics or his performance, nor did they critique the gender and sexual politics that he was espousing, especially in his criticisms of Drake. They did not address the significance, or insignificance, of accusing a rival artist of pedophilia, nor did they engage with the politics of Drake's lawsuit against his own record label for promoting Lamar's work, since they were both under contract with Universal Music Group. Instead, they repeatedly criticized Lamar for being unclear. There were, in truth, so many such instances that I felt overwhelmed by them. Luckily, Doug Cohen documented several such examples on his blog *M10 Social*. Just as I have found in my own research and just as Heng comments about the premodern, as a historical period identified as "politically unintelligible time," Lamar's performance was reduced to being impossible to understand, unintelligible, unclear.

Watching Lamar on stage at the Super Bowl, I had a reaction that was very different from those

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Cohen included in his blog post. To me, the performance was vibrantly filled with the kind of meaning making that connects people into community, that can bridge gaps, and that both starts and ends conversations. It reminded me of work that has already been done, of work that is happening right now, and of how much work is still left to be done. Reading Heng's work left me feeling something similar. Her book forced me to consider a deeper, longer history of Western civilization, as well as the possibilities of engaging with resistances to the imposition of the demand for clarity along different timescales and in different ways. As she repeatedly reminds readers, "the story of race does not end, but re-begins again and again, finding its way through strange corridors, and always with surprises" (449). For me, part of the surprise of reading Heng's work was realizing that despite having personally framed the medieval as "not like us," the urgent discussions of clarity, civilization, and white supremacy that need to take place in the present must also be applied to the past. If not, then the story of race really can never end.

Notes

1. Heng does not challenge the significance or the content of much of this work but instead asks her reader to consider the limitations that are produced and sustained through this approach to historicization and periodization.

2. Robinson is referring to a claim James made in an interview that was part of an interview series in *The Black Scholar* (James 35).

3. I would be remiss not to mention that Moten repeats this claim in Arthur Jafa's 2014 film *Träume sind kälter als der Tod* (*Dreams Are Colder Than Death*), a film that has deeply influenced my scholarship and my teaching.

4. The emphasis placed on scientific racism in canonical race theories is, to Heng's mind, one of the main obstacles to engaging with deep histories of race: "So tenacious has been scientific racism's account of race, with its entrenchment of high modernist racism as the template for *all* racisms, that it is still routinely understood, in everyday life and much of scholarship, that *properly* racial logic and behavior *must* invoke biology and the body as their referent, even if the immediate recourse is, say, to theories of climate or environment as the ground by which human difference is specified and evaluated" (19). I mention this to further identify the many differences between Roberts's and Heng's claims.

5. Wynter expands this claim by reminding her reader that "all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth resources (20 percent of the world's people own 80 percent of its resources, consume two-thirds of its food, and are responsible for 75 percent of its ongoing pollution, with this leading to two billion of earth's people living relatively affluent lives while four billion still live on the edge of hunger and immiseration, to the dynamic of overconsumption on the part of the rich techno-industrial North paralleled by that of overpopulation on the part of the dispossessed poor, still partly agrarian worlds of the South)—these are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle" (260–61). I feel confident in saying that the past twenty-two years have not been marked by noticeable improvements in most of these struggles. To put it another way, we remain embroiled in the same moment that Wynter described.

6. I am a biracial man. My mother is the youngest daughter of two Japanese immigrants to the Hawaiian town of Lāhainā on the island of Maui in what was then the Territory of Hawaii (Panalāʻau o Hawaiʻi), right before the attack on Pearl Harbor. This meant that my maternal grandparents asked their eight other children what would be a suitable, American name for my mother, which is how she ended up as their only child with the decidedly non-Japanese first name of Shirley (after Shirley Temple). My father was born in Harbin, China, the city to which my Russian grandmother arrived after fleeing the violences of the Russian Civil War. The story of his birth is not mine to tell, but his father was a Chinese man who did not leave Harbin along with my grandmother and my father when they left the city fearing the possibility of forced repatriation to the USSR before ultimately arriving in San Francisco. My last name is that of my Russian grandmother, which I am frequently asked how to pronounce, and in my experience that name often produces dissonances with people's typical assumption that I am some version of East Asian based on my physiognomy and, I suspect, skin tone. I have never found it easy or comfortable to clearly answer the question of who I am, which is a question that has often felt, and been, weaponized in my experience. When I began pursuing a graduate degree, I thought I wanted to avoid discussing myself and my own experiences in my work, instead holding to the significance of a critical opacity described by Édouard Glissant. Often, I still aim for that kind of opacity, but I have come to recognize that my work might always reflect my life and my experiences. Glissant discusses opacity in his work *Poetics of Relation*, but here I also want to refer to a comment Glissant made in Manthia Diawara's 2010 film *Édouard Glissant: Un monde en relation* (*Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation*). In it, Glissant says, "a person has the right to be opaque in my eyes. That doesn't stop me from liking that person, working with him, hanging out with him, etc. A racist is someone who refuses what he doesn't understand. I can accept what I don't understand. Opacity is a right we must have."

7. I want to emphasize here that I am not a social media scholar, and I recognize that social media is rife with fake accounts ranging from bots to users assuming multiple identities. Nevertheless, I could not help noticing how many comments I saw that reflected the same response to Lamar's performance.

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