theories and methodologies

Why the Humanities Matter for Race Studies Today

SUSAN KOSHY

WE HAVE NO ADEQUATE LEXICON FOR DEALING WITH THE TRANSFORMATION OF RACIAL ORDERS. RECENTLY, COMMENTATORS HAVE SOUGHT to pinpoint a shift in racial meanings by announcing the advent of a "postidentity," "postracial," or "cosmopolitan" social order. These appellations suggest that we are now past racial or identity politics in some crucial way. But it is not so much that we have gone beyond race as that race has gone beyond us, morphing at a speed with which academic expertise has not kept pace. The content of racial, gender, and sexual identities has been significantly transformed, and this change has, in turn, fostered the illusion that we no longer inhabit racialized realities—hence the proliferation of posts to tell us that temporally and politically we are no longer where we were. The representational strain of dealing with the elusive and dynamic qualities of racial and sexual identities makes us too eager to declare that we are over difference. The recourse to posts seems, however, more an admission of helplessness at identifying the nature of the shift than a sign of transcendence. It stems from our dependence on social schemas that offer us only two options: we are in the racial order or we are out of it. But we are not out of it, not yet. And herein lies a rare opening for the humanistic study of race.

The social sciences, which have long been accorded epistemological authority and disciplinary priority in diagnosing our racial condition, have hit a limit in representing the nature and forms of racialization in the present. This has a great deal to do with the nature of the present but even more to do with the analytic tools and positivist theoretical premises that undergird the sociology of race. Social-scientific paradigms, which laid the groundwork for the modern study of race, are suffering from representational fatigue in addressing the way in which racial realities have morphed. Symptoms of this representational crisis are everywhere, but they take the form of two major arguments: first, that racialization has assumed new forms because of the co-optation of civil rights discourses and initiatives by conservative and neoliberal agendas but that the structural

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opposition between whites and nonwhites persists as does the central role of the racial state; second, that since most present-day racial tensions and conflicts involve "ambiguous facts and inscrutable motives," which are not amenable to legal remedy, we now inhabit a postracial, or color-blind, society (Ford 339). The first argues that the problem of race has not gone away, the second that it is no longer treatable in the old way. The quandary for both is that the new racial subject must be framed within old disciplinary paradigms or must be acknowledged to be beyond its jurisdiction. Either way, I would argue that this impasse in the sociology of race gives a new salience to the humanities, which, in the disciplines of literature, ethics, visual arts, and performance studies, have been receptive to just such a troublesome subject—how to depict and understand a world of "racism without racists" (32), in which "ambiguous facts and inscrutable motives" rather than overt barriers shape racial encounters. The humanities, often held to be further removed from the real than the social sciences, seem now, in an ironic reversal, to have become better equipped to intervene in and interpret the realities of race in the new millennium.

The legal forms and limits of justice have for the last half century dominated our thinking about racial, gender, and sexual progress and emancipation because the law was one of the principal instruments through which redress was sought during civil rights struggles. But once the multiple and ambiguous conflicts that mark racial inequalities and disease in our time move outside the purview of the law, a fundamental shift is effected in the representation of racial injury. Indeed, I would argue that in the contemporary context, racial injury comes to operate as a differend since it marks the impossibility of articulating an injustice within the existing system of discourse. The differend, for Jean-François Lyotard, is a case of a wrong that is inadmissible in a courtroom because it does not meet the established rules of procedure or judgment. Furthermore, the differend introduces a distinction between a plaintiff and a victim; while the plaintiff has the ability to make a case under the existing rules of judgment, the victim is someone who has a grievance but has been deprived of the means to represent it (9). Yet even as racial injury has come to operate as a differend by being largely banished from the legal domain, it nevertheless continues to find expressive life in literary and cultural texts that are not held to the protocols of the courtroom. Thus, the humanities and the arts offer a generative space for the representation and study of race that has assumed greater importance in the current conjuncture.

In the course of analyzing the unique contribution humanistic approaches to race offer now, I will consider three major questions: Historically, what has been the effect of the sociological study of race (including Michael Omi and Howard Winant's study *Racial Formation in the United States*) on humanistic fields of study and on literature in particular? What innovations and developments in literary studies diverged significantly from sociological models over the last decades? What bearing do new developments in racial politics have for the study of race in the humanities?

The study of race in the humanities is an assemblage of disciplinary and interdisciplinary interventions that have been differentially affected by the sociological study of race. Legal studies and history, straddling the border between the humanities and the social sciences and drawing methodologies and theoretical concepts from both, have been directly influenced by sociological scholarship, especially in subfields like critical race theory and whiteness studies. In literature departments, the influence has been more dispersed: on the one hand, constructivist sociological models of identity articulated with cultural studies projects that focused

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on race, representation, and cultural politics and on the analytics of discourse, (bio)power, hegemony, and intersectionality; on the other hand, literary-historical projects that centered on transforming the canon by recovering and interpreting the writings of women, Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos and Latinas, and Asian Americans were less influenced by sociological models, although there was some theoretical overlap around paradigms of opposition and resistance.

Sociological and literary approaches to the study of race differ in important ways, and they do so strikingly in articulating the relation between ethnicity and race. In the sociological study of race, ethnicity-based paradigms have typically competed with race-based paradigms in explaining inequality in society; each paradigm attempts to subsume the other in explaining the primary structural divides in society (Omi and Winant 14–23). In literary studies, however, the relation between ethnicity and race has usually been explored in more fluid and open-ended ways. Literary scholars working with language, cultural products, and literary traditions are perforce examining the constituents of ethnicity, even as they explore the meanings of race through these texts. The impetus to expand the canon opened up debates about the national or transnational frameworks for studying minority literature: in certain cases, ethnic literatures were examined as explicitly national formations, but in others the boundaries of African American, Asian American, and Latino-Latina literature traced multilingual, diasporic, hemispheric, or transoceanic sites for the circulation and production of minority writing. These studies highlighted transnational literary influences, multilingual traditions that traversed national boundaries, and multinational public spheres produced by the translation and circulation of texts, ideas, and people. By focusing on the circuits of ethnicity formation in conjunction with racial formation and exploring these relations in and across nations, such studies diverge from sociological models of racial formation in which the state plays a central role. The embedding of literary texts in circuits of ethnicity that have varied and multivalent relations to race discourse means that literary study is less prone to producing a competitive interaction between race and ethnicity. This flexibility helps explain why sociological paradigms had an uneven influence on literary studies. But it also points to the critical role literary studies can play in reclaiming ethnicity from its entanglement with racist discourse. Stuart Hall points to the urgency of this task:

> If the black subject and black experience are not stabilized by Nature or by some other essential guarantee, then it must be the case that they are constructed historically, culturally, politically—and the concept which refers to this is "ethnicity." . . . The fact that this grounding of ethnicity in difference was deployed, in the discourse of racism, as a means of disavowing the realities of racism and repression does not mean that we can permit that term to be permanently colonized. That appropriation will have to be contested, the term disarticulated from its position in the discourse of "multiculturalism" and transcoded, just as we previously had to recuperate the term "black" from its place in a system of negative equivalences. (168–69)

Hall speaks from the context of Thatcherite Britain, where the discourse of English ethnicity simultaneously enabled and disguised the consolidation of English racial identity as a core national identity, while fragmenting nonwhite resistance through encouraging ethnic differentiation between these groups under the banner of multiculturalism. Hall is, therefore, calling for British antiracist politics to move from opposing government-sponsored ethnicity to constructing a "positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins" (169). In the context of the United States, the discourse of white ethnicity

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emerged as a way of disavowing the realities of racism in the post-civil-rights era, even as ethnic identification intensified among some minority groups with the influx of new immigrants after 1965 (Koshy 184–94). Both these developments have immensely complicated the terrain in which the relation between race and ethnicity is articulated in the United States, yet the challenge lies not in rejecting the claims of ethnicity but, as Hall suggests, in reworking them. The methodological orientation and institutional history of the study of race in the humanities has afforded a more congenial environment for pursuing this project and thus has made literary studies capable of thinking race as ethnicity to a degree unrivaled by sociology.

Another crucial difference between sociology and literature lies in their capacity to explore the limits of sovereign agency in their conceptualizations of the racialized subject. Sociological studies may point to the permeation of psychic life and everyday experience by racial meanings, but their analytic tools restrict them from investigating racial formation at the level of the desires, anxieties, memories, and dispositions that lie beneath the threshold of rational consciousness. Sociologists are "capable exorcists" methodologically bound to stabilizing the parameters of their investigation by positing a coherent and conscious racial subject (Kingston 92). By contrast, literature is more receptive to the contingencies of racial formation: the opacities of otherness, the partial light in which action and agency unfold, the ineluctable gap between intervention and outcome, and the temptations and perils of authenticity and full description. In other words, the politics of race that emerges from an analysis of literary texts differs from the politics of race as it is represented in the texts that provide the primary sources of sociological analysis, like surveys, census categories, legal documents, or interviews. This tension between aesthetics and politics goes to the heart of the production and reception of ethnic literature, but it has not received the theoretical attention it deserves. Instead, it is often settled in brisk asides about the reductiveness of seeking blueprints for political action in literary texts or, conversely, in uncritical attempts to posit the oppositionality or resistance of literary texts that overlook the distinctiveness of the aesthetic as a formal category and a sphere of production. Ironically, some of the most compelling articulations of the political and the aesthetic have emerged not in the theory or criticism of ethnic literature but in the fictions themselves, in texts like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*. Only recently have the tensions between the aesthetic and the political, inchoate and submerged in the 1980s and 1990s, come to the forefront of critical consciousness, propelled by the aesthetic and affective turn in critical theory. These theoretical developments are pulling literary studies even further from sociological approaches to race.

To argue that literary texts represent the subject of race in distinctive ways is not to deny altogether the influence of sociological approaches on literary studies. As I have indicated, work in cultural studies was enriched by social-scientific approaches to race. Even among scholars focusing on ethnic literature, there are some who drew their paradigms of opposition and resistance from the practice of sociology rather than from the products of literature. The assumed proximity of sociology to the real and the particularities of lived experience reinforced the authority of sociological accounts of racial oppression. In addition, the historical and materialist turn in literary criticism during this period multiplied the linkages between sociological paradigms of race and literary critical analyses. The attempts to theorize minority discourse, the focus on the resistant subject in minority literatures, and the thesis of oppositionality as the governing logic of minority texts

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exemplified to differing degrees the influence of sociological paradigms of oppression and contestation on literary studies.

The methodological divergences between sociological and literary treatments of race, latent in the 1980s, intensified in the 1990s, as developments in feminist, queer, and diaspora studies and poststructuralist theory emphasized the intersectionality, transnationality, and catachrestic nature of racial categories. It might be useful to see the shift as a transition between two historical moments shaped by the conjuncture of civil rights struggles. In speaking of moments, I am pointing to a reconfiguration in the questions, concerns, and modes of engagement entailed in the struggle for cultural and political representation; I mean to imply not that the earlier moment is superseded but rather that the contestation opens up new fronts that in turn generate, indeed necessitate, new interventions and possibilities. While the struggle over race and representation in the 1980s focused on overturning negative stereotypical images and replacing them with more complex images created by minority subjects, in the 1990s the focus shifted toward an exploration of the heterogeneity and internal diversity of racial groups (Hall 166). This transition can be characterized as a shift from a politics of external recognition to a politics of internal recognition. The first turns on a politics of inclusion and recognition that focuses on the struggle between dominant and marginalized communities. In the second moment, the struggle for inclusion and recognition is internally directed toward collective negotiation of diversity in minority communities. Framing the transition in these terms illuminates why the tensions between humanistic and sociological studies of race were exacerbated at this juncture. In the earlier historical moment, recognition is understood to be an acknowledgment of an identity that is fixed and stable. In the later moment, the struggle for recognition is complicated by an awareness that acts of recognition do not simply acknowledge identity, they refract and reconstitute it. When the identity for which recognition is sought becomes an epistemological and ontological problem, it raises a challenge to the positivist drive of sociological paradigms.

If past developments in the study of race have intensified the divergence between social-scientific and humanistic models, current developments emphasize the new salience of humanistic approaches. While most commentators have seen recent changes in racial politics as marking a postidentity era that extends the antiessentialist and intersectional politics of the 1990s, I differ on at least two counts with this view. First, I suggest not that we have arrived at a new historical moment different from the earlier two moments but that we have entered a new conjuncture that is rearticulating the racial, gender, and sexual identities shaped by the conjuncture of the civil rights era. Second, I contend that neither antiessentialism nor intersectionality can adequately grapple with the ethical and political challenges produced by the radical interpenetration and realignment of identity categories in the present.

The civil rights conjuncture produced a vision of minority identities affirming their common struggle against white supremacy. The civil rights and antiracist coalitions of the 1960s were founded on the convergence of working-class and nonwhite identities and developed models of minoritization that foregrounded racial oppression, resistance, and oppositional consciousness. Based on an implicit construct of *parallel minoritization* rather than *stratified minoritization*, the racial politics of the 1960s challenged white supremacy by positing the opposition between white and nonwhite positionality and strategically deferred theorizing the relation between racial minorities outside this framework (Koshy 155). However, the coalitional rationality of the civil rights conjuncture has been undermined by waves of new immigration; class

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divisions in minority groups; the racialization of religious identities after 9/11; the selective incorporation of minority identities into neoconservative, liberal, and conservative politics; the mainstreaming of queer politics; the emergence of Latinos and Latinas as the largest minority group; the reconfiguration of regional white identities; and the growing salience of multiracial identity. These changes have taken place alongside the shift from a bipolar to a unipolar to a multipolar geopolitical order. Geopolitical realignments have transformed the mode of nationalism in the United States and the context and boundaries of racial and sexual identities within its borders.

The new conjuncture coincides roughly with the new millennium, and it has been shaped by but is not reducible to the politics of 9/11, since it draws on and recasts antecedent racial and sexual projects. I would define the new conjuncture as a shift from *strategic essentialism* to *strategic interracialism*. The former focused on defining and clarifying the meaning of group identities to advance political and cultural interests; the latter is driven by provisional interracial alliances that are continuously reworked according to the openings, fissures, and connections of the moment. The redistribution of economic, social, and cultural capital in and between racial groups, genders, and sexual identities as a result of the changes produced by the struggles of the civil rights era means that formerly marginalized subjectivities—black, Asian American, Latino and Latina, gay, female—assume shifting political valences in alignment with other identity formations in a given context. These political realities do not readily conform to the models of oppositional racial politics produced in the 1960s, which turn on a structural divide between racial minorities and whites and are unable to acknowledge the extent to which the axis of stratification has multiplied and shifted so that it runs within and between marginalized and dominant identities, reconfiguring them in unprecedented ways. We have entered the era of composite identities, not the era of the end of identities.

The politics of strategic interracialism has been evident in events that lead into and follow the new millennium: the Los Angeles riots; the recent debates about affirmative action; the racialization of Arab, Muslim, and South Asian religious identities; and, most recently, the intensely protracted battle between Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton for the Democratic party nomination. I will focus on this last instance because it exemplifies most dramatically the scope of the transformation, imaged at the scale of national electoral politics. Describing the epochal significance of the Obama candidacy, Toni Morrison observed that "this opportunity for a national evolution (even revolution) will not come again soon" (qtd. in McGeveran). The political contest between Obama and Clinton riveted national and international attention because it created the context for one of the most sustained and broad-based conversations about race that we have had as a nation for many years. It brought different constituencies into the dialogue, reshaping understandings of these identities in the process. The unexpectedness of the election results and the ongoing uncertainty of the Democratic contest forced experts and laypersons alike to reevaluate existing scripts about race, gender, and national identity against real-time results that overturned more often than they confirmed preconceptions.

Indeed, the contest confounded conventional wisdom about the nation's readiness for a black president, not least because it confounded conventional wisdom about blackness. Obama's composite identity became the center of the national conversation. The personal history of Obama—the son of a Kenyan father and a white mother from Kansas who has a part Asian half-sister, a Christian with a Muslim middle name who grew up in Hawai'i and Indonesia, a graduate of Harvard Law School who is married to a black woman

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and worked as a community organizer in Chicago—conjoined blackness, whiteness, and Asianness, immigrant and heartland identities, and mainland and transpacific topographies. This constellation of identities recast the referentiality of blackness while amplifying the transfigurative political power signified by blackness.

The high drama of this narrative, indeed its utter unpredictability, punctuated by headlines announcing "Polls Wrong Yet Again" and surprise victories and defeats at every turn, allegorized the difficulty of reading racial meanings and highlighted the recombinant capacities of racial, gender, and class referents in the current conjuncture. If this was true of the candidates, it was even truer of the electorate. Obama's first, unexpected victory was handed to him by a midwestern state with a majority white population. Support for Obama and Clinton brought into focus novel alliances and divisions that coalesced in unpredictable ways across states. Initially, supporters of Obama were largely young voters, African Americans, white males (outside the South), and educated and liberal whites; supporters of Clinton were older voters, white women, Hispanics, Asian Americans (outside Hawai'i) and working-class and less educated voters. But as the contest progressed, voting patterns shifted, highlighting divisions in groups along gender, regional, class, and generational lines or across immigrant and native-born cohorts. The fallacy of referring to a monolithic Latino-Latina, Asian American, or Jewish voting bloc became apparent as support from these groups varied across regions and as momentum built up behind a particular candidate. Meanwhile, the Obama candidacy was read outside the United States as a test of the possibility of a new geopolitical identity for the nation after the debacle of the Bush years. My eighty-four-year-old father calls regularly from India to check in on Obama's prospects before remembering to inquire about me. His refrain: "If this is possible in the United States, then. . . ."

What are the implications of this conjunctural shift for the study of race in the humanities? To begin with, it demonstrates the need to understand race through the lens of intersectionality as well as through an analytic of interracialism. The study of interracialism necessitates a comparative turn, a move from specifying the boundaries and internal heterogeneity of particular groups to an understanding of their interarticulation. Furthermore, the study of comparative racialization must critically evaluate not only the possibilities and limits of comparison but also the axes of comparison. The structural opposition between white and nonwhite that organized race studies during the civil rights conjuncture is no longer tenable because the nature and forms of stratification have multiplied and cut across racial groups. For this reason, scholarship in the humanities must take up the urgent task of comparative study among minority groups so as to undermine the axiomatic status of whiteness as the referent against which minority subjects define themselves and others. Finally, as racial injury and disease assume forms that are less susceptible to legal redress, as advantage and disadvantage are redistributed across and within racial groupings, and as cultural scripts increasingly engage multiracial constituencies and interracial alliances, the humanities matter even more today. These transformations often erupt and are manifested in films, stories, theatrical and quotidian performances, and new media before they assume a social density and critical mass that enables empirical analysis of these phenomena. In other words, they inhabit and operate in a dimension of the human and the social that the humanities are uniquely positioned to investigate and illuminate. Thus, the humanities matter now because of how race matters now.

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