theories and methodologies

Once More, with Feeling: Reflections on Racial Formation

MICHAEL OMI AND HOWARD WINANT

OUR CONCEPT OF RACIAL FORMATION WAS ADVANCED IN 1986 AS A CRITIQUE OF PREVAILING NOTIONS OF RACE IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES. We challenged approaches that treated race as epiphenomenal to supposedly more fundamental axes of stratification and difference: ethnicity, class, and nation. But we were disappointed—depressed, in fact—by the reception our analysis received. Some years would pass before our approach was seriously taken up by sociologists, political scientists, and other social science scholars. What kept our spirits buoyed during this period was the surprising discovery that our work was resonating with scholars in other disciplines, most notably in history, law, and literary studies. We learned much and greatly profited from these newfound colleagues' engagement with our work, from the ways they creatively extended our concept of racial formation, and from their advancement of new ways to think about the ongoing evolution of racism and its multiple dimensions.

With this history in mind, we are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this *PMLA* dialogue about racial formation and its influence in the humanities. We hope to respond to some of the themes that Susan Koshy, James Kyung-Jin Lee, and Viet Thanh Nguyen have thoughtfully raised and compellingly addressed. We also hope to extend and deepen our own theory of racial formation. What significance does this work have today, in a troubled period characterized by the simultaneous pervasiveness of color-blind racial ideology and the persistence of structural racism?

Three themes stand out in the reflective essays by Koshy, Lee, and Nguyen. First, these commentators are deeply concerned with the vicissitudes of racialized experience and the politics of racial identity. We want to emphasize the politicization of the social as an issue that links the micro and macro levels of racial formation. Race always operates at the crossroads of identity and social structure.[1] All three authors engage this connection in their framings of the issues they raise about identity—problems of identity and recognition, for example, or of alienation from a white supremacist society—but they never

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1565 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fully situate racial-formation processes in the context of structural racism. We shall attempt to do that here, in an admittedly sketchy fashion, in order to reassert the importance of the large political and historical processes and structures, the macro level, in any analysis of identity politics, racial or otherwise.

Second, all three authors have an abiding concern with self-activity and self-recognition in a racialized world. Here we encounter problems of the racialized self and questions about the possibilities of self-definition in a world of comprehensive racialization. Here too we encounter crucial problems of the intersectionality of race, class, and gender.

We approach both these issues, self-activity and race-class-gender intersectionality, from a standpoint deeply shaped by pragmatism. A pragmatist current has been present in American understandings of race since the origins of that philosophical approach in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in the legal theories of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and in the philosophical interventions of Charles Sanders Peirce and William James. W. E. B. DuBois himself is not intelligible without pragmatism: his framework of double consciousness and his figure of the veil, besides arguably constituting the first modern, sociopolitical theory of race and racism, are explicitly grounded in his concept of the sociohistorically located, racially self-aware black actor. Sociological pragmatism (notably in George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer) is key to the study of social psychology, socialization, and identity. Radical pragmatism has developed extensively in racial studies, owing a great deal to the influence of Cornel West but also, once again, grounded in DuBois. Key to our thinking here on self-activity are the Deweyan notions of situated creativity and self-reflective action.[2] Numerous dimensions of intersectionality theory are also greatly clarified by radical pragmatism, which addresses theories of performativity, multiple identities, and subjectivity in ways that anticipate and overlap with the work of Michel Foucault, Ann Laura Stoler, and Judith Butler, among many others.

Third, all three commentators reflect on questions of interdisciplinarity in the study of race: they ask how cultural studies, literary criticism, and the humanities illuminate problems of race and racism in contrast to, or in dialogue with, the social sciences. In our view, the very process of studying race and racism reveals how thoroughly arbitrary and capricious the boundaries between the disciplines really are.

Disciplines continually borrow from one another. They refashion one another's ideas, reinvent one another's concepts, and purloin one another's methods. For example, the sociology of culture, with its roots in Émile Durkheim's theory of collective representation, has generated productive studies of literature, such as Avery Gordon's work on racism as "haunting" or Saidiya Hartman's work on the slave trade as narrative (and haunting as well). The historical and literary interrogation of whiteness takes its cue from DuBois's analysis of the "psychological wage" that whites derive from racism (*Black Reconstruction* 17–31; see also Roediger). Is his account one of psychology, political economy, history, or folklore? Of course, prolific interdisciplinarity in racial studies does not entirely negate the value of a disciplinary orientation, which still provides the means for the ordering of canonical literatures, subfields, and methods. But as long as no field arrogantly claims preeminence, we're cool.

To be sure, the three themes we highlight for comment here are but a partial selection of the issues and concerns that Koshy, Lee, and Nguyen address. We have intentionally tried to synthesize some of these authors' main concerns in order to offer reflections of our own.

The Politics of Racial Identity

These commentators make a number of insightful observations and claims about the

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politics of racial identity. Lee, for example, expresses a desire to "become Asian American rather than simply to be called one." He also evokes Butler's double sense of subjectivity: the claim to the status of autonomous subject is always linked to, and in a sense betrayed by, one's inescapable subjection within a social structure.[3] Nguyen longs for a "safe house of race," invoking Toni Morrison's eloquent longing for "home," but he simultaneously recognizes that in the bigger picture there is no real safety from the contradictions and ambiguities of racial identity and racial feelings.[4] Koshy observes that some critics have suggested that we have moved past racial or identity politics in a crucial way. But, she argues, "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."

While Lee recognizes the need to "look for race across scale" and to be more attentive to both the micro processes of everyday experience and the macro dimensions of social structure, in general the commentators do not systematically address structural racism and the inextricable connections between it and the politics of identity.

One of the central arguments we make in *Racial Formation* is that the post–World War II movements for racial equality and justice in the United States politicized the social. The long-delayed eruption of racial subjectivity and self-awareness into the mainstream political arena set off a massive transformation in the very nature of politics. Through its politicization of the social, the black freedom movement and its allies both undermined and contradicted traditional concepts of politics and, in so doing, reshaped both the democratic and despotic prospects for American politics. This was an unstable and at times explosive transition with seismic effects. Though centered on the issue of race, the political transformation went far beyond race to encompass issues of gender and sexuality, war and peace, and citizenship, among a host of other issues. Postwar social movements in the United States provided the link between the experiential and institutional dimensions of politics.[5]

What we call a "racial project" establishes this link. We defined a racial project as "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (56). Reflecting on this definition, Nguyen misunderstands our notion of "racial projects," suggesting that our usage of the term is "primarily about material resources." Nguyen claims that our concern with the state and with politics "leads them to argue that race is chiefly articulated through class." We were a bit surprised by this misreading in an otherwise excellent piece, since we are at pains in our book to challenge reductions of race to class and indeed include a chapter that addresses the problem. In fact, we are more accustomed to the opposite criticism: that we don't take class seriously enough.[6]

We argue that racial projects large and small—from mass actions or comprehensive legislation (examples located at the macrosocial level) to speech acts or personal experiences of prejudice or discrimination (examples located at the microsocial level)—accrete over historical time to shape both the racialized social structure and our psychic structure as racial subjects. The linkages between racial signification and racialized social structure are ongoing and intrinsic as well as unstable and conflictual. Any claim to a racial identity necessarily connects the claimant to others making similar claims and to the sociohistorical system in which that identity acquires meaning. This equation works in reverse as well: when social, political, or economic institutions allocate resources along racial lines, they necessarily assign individuals and groups to racial categories. They are "signifying" race—even when denying that they're doing so.

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Self-Activity and Self-Recognition in a Racialized World

Koshy writes, "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." Indeed, if we cannot act outside the domain of racism, if we cannot understand our identities outside the interpellative reach of racialization, how can we achieve the more autonomous self-recognition that we desire? Lee asks, "How can we make race matter so that it attends to the 'exile of our longing' . . . and invites others to imagine resistance as a life's work and power as acts of making and remaking?"

In many ways, racial identity continues to embody what DuBois called "unreconciled strivings" (DuBois, *Souls* 11). The simultaneous avowal and disavowal of racial politics shapes (and debilitates) political language and strategic thinking: in electoral politics, vocabularies of personal, collective, and national identity and visions of equality and social justice. The challenges in the post-civil-rights era seem daunting, and the problems that have emerged seem irresolvable. Koshy notes that in this 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." Lee states that "[a]ll we have to work with are the master's tools, and we dream for other ones; we look for resistance but settle for multiculturalism; we critique the power that power imposes on us, and this intellectual work leaves us breathless at the end of the day."

Though it may be heretical to say so, we do have more to work with than the master's tools: we have pragmatism, the radical pragmatism that proceeds from deep commitments to democracy. Radical pragmatism suggests that we see racial politics (and politics) as an ongoing creative practice, that we understand self-reflective action as an everyday matter. Conscious or unconscious, acknowledged or denied, the racial organization of everyday life is omnipresent: where we live, the work we do, what we eat and what we wear, the language we speak and the idioms we use, the television programs we watch; in short, nearly every aspect of our everyday lives is shaped in crucial ways by race.

Self-activity and self-reflective action are at the heart of the radical pragmatist perspective.[7] It reflects a more robust view of democracy, something already visible in John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, W. E. B. DuBois, Alain Locke, Iris Marion Young, and many others. Such an approach can help us develop a more advanced theory of race and racism.[8]

A radical democratic pragmatism, for example, might help us rethink the pressing issue of race-gender-class intersectionality (Crenshaw; Hancock; Collins). Nguyen notes (citing Sau-ling Wong) that there is a rampant tendency to "ethnicize gender." There is also the opposite tendency, the "gendering of race": consider the "threat" posed by young black men, the age-old debates over masculinity in black intellectual and political territories, the associations made by Islamophobes (when convenient) of Islam and sexism.

For all this traffic across the race-gender frontier, however, the explanatory framework for intersectionality studies remains elusive. Unquestionably, a general parallel exists between racial and gender-based oppressions and emancipatory claims. Simone de Beauvoir explicitly modeled her pioneering account in feminist theory, *The Second Sex,* on working-class and anticolonial struggles of emancipation. The key parallels she stressed included rule through chattelization, the assignment of political status based on corporeal characteristics, "isolation effects" such as "seriality" and alienation, and the internalization of domination. Numerous other common experiences link these axes of power and resistance. Yet movements based on race, gender, and labor have always teetered between

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convergence and divergence, in the United States and elsewhere. That's at the macrosocial, institutional level. At the microsocial, or experiential, level a similar uncertainty operates: involvement in multiple oppressions, for example, often forces us (and especially forces women) to choose our battles. We confront competing demands for solidarity, often across race, class, or gender lines.

Rather than lament the dilemmas encountered across different axes of stratification and difference, we must learn from them—chiefly about the instability in practice of our concepts of race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and so forth. Understanding intersectionality requires a strong recognition that self-reflective action shapes the production and transformation of individual and collective identities. Self-activity happens as we choose our battles in the contradictory conditions of the post-civil-rights and, yes, post-second-wave-feminism periods that we are now in. The achievements of past decades provide a new repertoire of political and performative resources, a more developed political-armaments depot, if you like, from which we can draw our ammunition. Perhaps coded racial appeals have lost some of their effectiveness.[9] Raciality and gender status now operate much more comprehensively in the contradictory fashion we have suggested than they did in the past. As inheritors of the politicization of the social, they are today formidable vehicles of collective interpellation and self-interpellation, but at the same time they operate in a continuing framework of structural racism, neoliberalism (i.e., superexploitation on a world scale), and masculinism. Leaders and movements—indeed, all political actors—are steering their boats through these treacherous shoals.

Interdisciplinarity

Where scholarly works on race are concerned, interdisciplinarity should be more properly the norm than the exception. We should be suspicious of imposed disciplinary boundaries and should mistrust claims to preeminence from those in the social sciences and the humanities, as well as the natural and biological sciences.

Koshy argues that "[s]ocial-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." While we can certainly see her point, we doubt that it can be applied so comprehensively to any discipline (much less a group of disciplines) without immediately eliciting relevant counterexamples. This is as true of the humanities as it is of the social sciences, of course.

Social science has long been divided by what Immanuel Wallerstein—drawing on a long tradition in the history of ideas—characterized as "nomothetic" versus "idiographic" forms of knowledge. Literary scholarship, especially over recent decades, has sought to manage theories based on a heterodox set of approaches: remember deconstruction, reception theory, historicism? If these frameworks are more than trends or fads, it is at least in part because they attempt to synthesize perspectives that cut across disciplinary lines and refuse the division between the humanities and the social sciences. In our view there are no serious claims to be made for coherence on the part of any discipline, or group of disciplines, beyond those of taste—for a certain canon, method, or focus of inquiry. This is especially true for racial studies, which (among their many sins) turn out to be constitutive of our disciplines rather than constituted by them.[10]

Returning once more to the concept of racial projects, we see that one key idea underlying this concept—of what might be called building blocks in racial-formation processes—is that there can be no racial representation, no signification on race, that does not immediately and necessarily invoke

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social structures, power relations, lived experiences of identity and difference. This point might be seen as Foucauldian, an association we happily uphold, but it can also be linked to the pragmatist current. Consider Herbert Blumer's equation of prejudice and group position, DuBois's veil, or Eddie Glaude's quest for a "post-soul" politics of black liberation.

In the Twenty-First Century

Lee discerns a "resignation" in *Racial Formation*, especially in the second edition, and links it with various works on the "melancholia" that succeeded the containment of the movement for racial justice (especially under Reagan). There is something in this. Of course, structural racism persists: it is visible in the accumulated weight of past racist practices—in the legacy of a system of slavery that has been "unwilling to die" (Douglas's concurring opinion in Jones v. Mayer 445; Feagin), in the continuity of nativism and white racial nationalism (Brimelow; Berlet and Lyons; Huntington), in the way the racially unequal distribution of resources in the past has structured continuing inequality and injustice in the present (Oliver and Shapiro), and in a potentially long list of cognate examples. The racial reforms won by our movements were not only real victories; they also marked a defeat of our more radical aspirations. The incorporation of our demands (equality, justice, inclusion) in the warped and denatured form of "color blindness" reinforced the underlying racist system we set out to destroy. Yet that is not the end of the story.

To challenge the new racial hegemony will require a serious engagement not only with the politics of identity but also with the structural racism against which race-conscious subjects must contend and in which they are simultaneously embedded. The politicization of the social made that engagement more possible, because it allowed us to see everyday life as a field of struggle against racism.

We live in racial history. Structural racism is not a fixed feature of United States society. It can be named; it can be challenged; it can be reduced. We ended the second edition of *Racial Formation* with an injunction to "notice" race. The contradiction between that necessity and the uncertain denial involved in color blindness identifies the racial battlefield of the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Of course, this location at the micro-macro crossroads applies not only to race. The same thing could be said about gender, for example (Miles 87–88). But we suggest that the peculiarities of race as a uniquely sociohistorical construct, as a trope partaking fully of both the fused (consciously collective) and serial (isolated individual) dimensions of identity (Sartre 256–66), position race uniquely as a crossroads phenomenon.

2. For more on these ideas, see Joas. For their application to racial studies, see West; Glaude. See also Outlaw; Taylor.

3. Butler's marvelous analysis should be read in the light of Mead's pragmatist social psychology, which anticipates it in a way that is perhaps less surprising when one recalls Mead's Hegelian origins.

4. This is a recognition that Morrison herself makes in virtually all her work.

5. We stress that in real life no sharp distinction can be made between the micro and macro levels of identity or conflict. Focusing on racial identity, our chief interest here, we can see that it is lived both by individuals and by groups, while simultaneously shaped by social structure and collective action.

6. We will not comment on Walter Benn Michaels's shallow dismissals of the significance of race, although we share Nguyen's criticisms of Michaels.

7. Although the term *self-activity* has clear affinities with pragmatist thought, it is at its root a revolutionary and emancipatory concept. As far as we can tell, it was introduced into the political lexicon by C. L. R. James and developed further in *Facing Reality*, an influential analysis by James, Grace Lee, Martin Glaberman, and Cornelius Castoriadis that appeared in the 1950s. Because self-activity cannot be delegated to others, it embodies radical democracy. Of particular interest to James and his school are working-class and black rebellions, such as sitdown and wildcat strikes, slave revolts and black urban resistance, the anti-Soviet Hungarian uprising of 1956, and similar

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mass uprisings. These acts of rebellion also challenge attempts to harness mass movements on the part of political parties (including those of the left), reformist state policies, trade unions, and so forth. James, Lee, Glaberman, and Castoriadis write that "[t]he end toward which mankind is inexorably developing by the constant overcoming of internal antagonisms is not the enjoyment, ownership, or use of goods, but self-realization, creativity based upon the incorporation into the individual personality of the whole previous development of humanity. Freedom is creative universality, not utility" (qtd. in Rawick 31n3).

8. Pragmatist philosophy itself arguably has its roots in race. Its origins have been traced to New England abolitionism and the ethico-philosophical crisis of the United States Civil War. See Menand; see also Locke; Dickstein; Glaude.

9. Consider the former United States senator George Allen's "macaca" moment, when he effectively wrecked his reelection campaign with a single ill-considered racial slur, in a southern state no less.

10. Just to pick a few examples: the social sciences owe inferential statistics to eugenics; we owe our concepts of class and stratification, of nation and market, to distinctions rooted in race. The fields of sociology, psychology, anthropology, and others as well would be unrecognizable without their racial (and racist) provenance. On the humanities side, similar patterns hold: defining the literary canon has meant framing and reframing the identity of the other, the subaltern; it has meant "playing in the dark" (Morrison). Then there's the small matter of the dialectic of enlightenment. We refer to the core philosophic commitment of the West to self-distinction from the rest and the breakdown of Western commitments to rationalism in favor of the greater attractions of domination. And who are the dominated anyway?

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1565 Published online by Cambridge University Press