

# BLACKNESS AND RELATIONALITY: AN ACLA FORUM

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## On Relationality, On Blackness: A Listening Post

One way ashore, a thousand channels

—Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

Meanwhile, Michael Brown is like another fall and rise through man—come and gone, as irruption and rupture, to remind us not that black lives matter but that black life matters, that the absolute and undeniable blackness of life matters.

—Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, “Michael Brown”

IN THEIR INTRODUCTORY ESSAY to *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, Ruth Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman ask, “How do we rethink the structures of comparison and the history of its uses in order to do justice to past and current postcolonial and global contexts?” (1). A similar question surfaces as part of the recent “critical turn” in Comparative Ethnic Studies. In their introduction to a special issue of *Critical Ethnic Studies* reconsidering “racial comparativism,” Danika Medak-Saltzman and Antonio T. Tiongson, Jr. query the field’s epistemic investments in a priori forms of “congruency, symmetry, and commensurability” (5). These parallel lines of inquiry suggest that the substance of and space between the *comparative* in Comparative Literature and the *comparative* in Comparative Ethnic Studies continue to prompt substantive investigation. Both formations have housed consonant and sometimes overlapping scholarly projects and critical approaches, converging around issues of postcoloniality and coloniality, regimes of power/knowledge that produce and contest the “worlding of the world,” and the subaltern and fugitive figurations of other-worldliness present yet buried in sedimented histories of violence and degradation. Yet what the “comparative” names in each of these formations remains distinct, emerging as much from particular ways of knowing difference as from specific institutional loci and their

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engagement with the domain of the political. The analytical openings and foreclosures limned by this adjective produce specific, and sometimes contrary, frames of reference, given the ways both formations labor in the intimately entangled afterlives of slavery and colonialism. This forum is a listening post to hear the sometimes-cacophonous echoes resonating out of the space between Comparative Literature and Comparative Ethnic Studies, particularly as they conjugate Blackness and relationality.

One might render comparison's interstices this way. Comparative Literature's genealogy of comparison recalls the Euro-American university's institutionalization and displacement of cosmopolitanism, philology, national narrative, and translation across the last two centuries (Damrosch et al.). Comparative Ethnic Studies' genealogy of comparison reveals the tension among the coalitional imaginaries of race radical insurgency, sociological approaches to minority difference, and the proliferating terms of inclusion on offer from the U.S. state and the academy (Critical Ethnic Studies Editorial Collective). The ongoing friction between postcoloniality and coloniality, as much an epistemic referent as a temporal one, names one persistent rub that seeks the emancipation of Comparative Literature from its Eurocentrism. That rub in Comparative Ethnic Studies travels under a number of associated guises, one of them "incommensurability." Incommensurability is shorthand for the recognition that the institutional, disciplinary, and social grids of intelligibility through which Ethnic Studies' knowledge projects advance claims encode a will towards commensuration on the purportedly shared grounds of the Human, the national subject, the worker, the citizen, and so on, that does as much to obscure as it does to enlighten.

Comparative Literature draws in part from investigations of incommensurability that, as Natalie Melas clarifies, bring to the surface a thorough-going set of critiques of its operative adjective, many of which have emerged out of interventions in postcolonial theory to refuse liberal humanism's hollow gift of equivalence. Such epistemic disruptions have offered insights into the persistence of coloniality as a locus structuring power and knowledge (Saldívar); the mutable and contingent articulations of state, capital, and culture (Spivak); the interventions of an indigenist critical theory whose point of departure is the ongoing logic and practice of settler invasion and indigenous dispossession and elimination (Byrd); and interventions that draw on the likes of Édouard Glissant and Sylvia Wynter to query the continuous relation of Middle Passage and chattel slavery to capitalist political economy, its noncontradictory formulations of liberal democracy, and the psychic and libidinal structures of the United States that come to organize the scene of the social (Weheliye).

Comparative Ethnic Studies also knows a few things about incommensurability, albeit different things, perhaps, and known in different ways. At once an adjectival description and a ground for incorporation into the U.S. university, the *comparative* as a modifier to Ethnic Studies offers an entry-point into a set of projects staked on the differentiated production of and relationships between ethno-racial groups. As Roderick Ferguson demonstrates in *The Reorder of Things*, insofar as revolutionary cultural nationalisms provided one narratological telos for interventions into U.S. academic knowledge production, Ethnic Studies was incorporated into the university as the verso to the recto of Area Studies. Ethno-racial positivisms framed the legibility of minoritized difference in ways that readily yielded to

social scientific regulation by the Cold War university. At the same time, as Ferguson elsewhere underscores (see “University”), the cross-group coalitions that mobilized for student-led strikes at various moments in the history of Ethnic Studies also provide alternative comparative imaginaries that offer resources towards a “politicized agenda” of comparison (46). The nominal accession of minority difference into the U.S. university co-occurred with longstanding localized resistance movements and globalized movements for decolonization and national liberation. As historian Martha Biondi underscores, student-led strikes for Black Studies and Ethnic Studies forged a double-edged epistemic demand: an inclusionary demand to desegregate the student, faculty, and staff populations inhabiting the university and, in so doing, a demand for the university to serve as a lever for a downward redistribution of wealth that would concomitantly catalyze the transformation of self and society beyond the university’s elite protocols. More often than not, however, the realities of minority access and inclusion were narrated as the promise and progress of U.S. liberal democracy, conscripting an exceptionalist narrative of Black inclusion as a benchmark against which to figure the state’s minoritized analogs. When retrospectively told solely as a national allegory of civil rights, the settlements that gave rise to Ethnic Studies offered a storehouse for the fantasy of racial inclusion: formal equality privileged the terms of the liberal state as the hegemonic container through which institutionalized violence and systemic degradation were to be remediated. The purported neutrality of law’s regime of recognition served as the engine to produce an abstract commensurability, the effects of which bracketed the social, symbolic, and historically sedimented modalities of differentiation catalyzing and absorbed into social institutions.

In this sense, scholarly investments in ethno-racial positivism meant that minority discourses were called upon to articulate, through the discourses of the liberal state, a transparent reality about difference (Mirpuri). In order to reveal and, perhaps, to intervene in the depoliticization that this form of comparison’s institutionalization has wrought, an array of critical interventions have emerged to unsettle the field’s comparative impulses across the prevailing dialectic of race and colonialism. The intellectual resources to fuel such interventions have been present in the field for some time. The “comparative” in Comparative Ethnic Studies has long been polysemous, a shorthand for the complex articulation of the multivalent, heterogeneous, and insurgent critiques of, and mobilizations against, state violence that materialize at a variety of sites and scales, from the psychic to the intimate, the corporeal to the globalized. An express methodological impulse to direct comparativism towards these ends has resonated in the field at least since Ronald Takaki’s *Iron Cages* (1979). “Unlike other books on the history of racism in America,” Takaki begins,

this study seeks to offer a comparative analysis of racial domination within the context of the development of capitalism and class divisions in nineteenth-century American society. Where scholars have examined separately the oppression of blacks, Indians, Mexicans, and Asians, I have tried to analyze the ways the experiences of these different groups *related* to each other. Where scholars have tended to isolate racism as a history of attitudes, I have attempted to *relate* it to the broad political, social, and economic developments that occurred during this formative and crucial century. (xiii; emphasis added)

The innovation of his comparative approach, Takaki underscores, is that it aims both to make visible relationships between distinct racialized communities and to conceptualize racism’s autonomy in relation to a materialist analysis of dynamism

and dissent. As in Melas's reworking of incommensurability, the jagged horizontality that is the effect of chattel slavery, settler conquest, imperial expansion, and labor migration forms the ground of Takaki's comparative analysis in a complexly articulated historical ecosystem. These methodological commitments are echoed, deepened, and transmuted in a wide range of recent scholarship. The historian Natalia Molina underscores that, when analyzing narratives of immigration and citizenship, "a comparative treatment of race compares and contrasts groups, treating them as independent of one another; a relational treatment recognizes that race is a mutually constitutive process and thus attends to how, when, where, and to what extent groups intersect" (3). Critical theorist David Theo Goldberg deepens the distinction between comparison and relation in treating the racial in particular, arguing that "Race and racisms are also and at least as importantly globally circulating, interacting, relational conditions as they are locally indexed, resonant, impacting" (1274). Given that comparative heuristics have the propensity to delimit in advance the terms of address for subaltern knowledges and practices, an approach to relationality that emerges from Black feminist theorizing, as Alexander Weheliye argues, "reveals the global and systemic dimensions of racialized, sexualized, and gendered subjugation, while not losing sight of the many ways political violence has given rise to ongoing practices of freedom within various traditions of the oppressed" (13). These and cognate relational approaches reckon with the ways liberal multicultural policies of state, scholarly, and market-based recognition have hinged on a thin reading of the field's comparative impulse—a hinge that fictively evacuates differentials of power in ways that produce a veneer of incorporable minority equivalence to legitimate an ongoing social formation structured in dominance, while winnowing away a material politics of redistribution.

The relational as a critical concept thus surfaces in part as a way to account descriptively and analytically for connections, linkages, and articulations across the institutionalization of difference in disciplines and the nation-state cartographies they reference. As much a seeing as a doing, the interconnections revealed by a relational methodology are otherwise hidden or buried by modern frames of the nation-state, the scale and scope of research agendas, and the disciplines and interdisciplines that draw on genealogies of comparison themselves. "Delinking" from a comparative methodology invites shifting from an "ontology of essence" to what Walter Dignolo calls a "relational ontology." Relationality disrupts the positivist pretense of race, gender, and sexuality as in the first or the last instance sociological facts. Relationality enables us to think the doing of difference, difference as it constitutes and evades the capture of the world (Puar). Relationality invites the development of literacies that can read circuitries of power across uneven terrains (Layoun). Scholars interrogate archives and objects in ways that reveal relational imaginaries in their contexts of emergence—from the archives of Anglophone liberalism in the construction of colonial domination and imperial management (Lowe), to the material formulations of "strange affinity" encoded in U.S. women of color feminisms and queer of color critique (Hong and Ferguson), to the impetus of transnational feminisms to frame differentially arrayed and always already linked contexts of struggle (Alexander and Mohanty). Genealogy renders such relations in their particular and provisional dispersion, and thus their relation to the differentiated contexts of their emergence. The predicates of

a relational methodology invite us to uncover, reveal, desediment, unveil, and excavate, prompting us to account for entanglement and its obfuscation or burial. From another angle, liberal capitalism strives to produce individuated subjects properly calibrated for the rational management of their possessions, including their possessions of self and of others and possessions qua property, as abstractions commensurable through the equilibrations of value (Singh). Relationality uncovers those interconnections that liberal capitalism seeks to obscure, revealing the violence that appends recognition, unbound from redistribution, in arcs of settler colonial capitalism (Coulthard), racial capitalism (Melamed), and the juridical armature of neoliberalism (Cacho).

Yet, even as relationality garners a certain kind of scholarly momentum, countervailing tendencies caution against its universalization. Think of these as not simply going against the relational by positing narrow parochialisms whose object is at best a fictive autochthony. Rather, think of them as ante-relational: as that which enunciates, in Yumi Pak's words, "outside relationality." Such approaches recognize how the epistemological transparency of the minoritized subject is forged and honed in the longstanding expression of what Denise Ferreira Da Silva terms Enlightenment reason's "raciality": those moral statements on the contours of the "human" that oscillate between stuttering denunciation and full-throated legitimation of conquest, enslavement, dispossession, and evisceration. These formations of violence create the conditions of possibility for relation in the modern world precisely because they inaugurate the modern world as such. Revealing interconnections only as a play of visible surfaces hazards obscuring such foundational forces.

To mobilize a critique of raciality thus requires a refusal of what Frank Wilderson calls the "ruse of analogy": the trick such forms of commensuration play in obscuring both the generality of world-ordering violence and the specificity of captivity and embodied violation and degradation of enslavement. Such structuralist accounts of domination offer a critical short-circuit to any liberal or radical formulations of relationality. Here, Blackness emerges out of an antagonism with the unequally arrayed category of non-Blackness (Sexton), while formulations of indigeneity are produced through transhistorical modalities of settler colonial invasion, conquest, and transfer (Wolfe). As Jodi Byrd underscores, indigenous claims to legal and territorial forms of sovereignty are over-written when internal colonialism marks the primary conceptual grounds from which race radical movements articulate the narrative horizons of liberation. While racial demarcation has lubricated the production of colonial knowledges as a protean marker of indigenous difference, enfolding the discourse of indigeneity into that of race casts national or tribal dreams, desires, and histories as excess, as that which falls outside the scope, outside the frame. Projects of coalition have the propensity to unwittingly smuggle in the same erasure of anti-Blackness (Sexton) and settler colonial violence that the liberal state enunciates through its logic of inclusion. In this line of thinking, decolonization as an ongoing ethical relation to indigenous futurities falls away as the liberal state comes to manage the terms of anti-racism. In other words, as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang emphasize, the terms of social justice and decolonization are essentially antagonistic; their incommensurability serves as a point of departure for research, praxis, and engagement.

The social is always already a scene of presumptive relation, and particularly relation's ongoing iterability, transferability, and structured (if also improvised) performance (Butler). The social is where heterogeneity reckons with differentiation, where the hierarchical effects of force relations are elaborated, navigated, negotiated, contested, and transformed. Ethics are prompted by the scene of the social. But the social, as scholarship on coloniality and social death reminds us, concomitantly signifies relation's foundational conditionality. That is, the social as it has been rendered through coloniality has already been structured in advance by the elaboration of modernity's engines of fatality: captivity, confinement, and genocide (Rodríguez). Coloniality iterates what Nelson Maldonado-Torres calls a "death-ethics of war," wherein relation is routinely precluded by a pathological will towards conquest. If being in relation (a relational ontology) in the trans-Atlantic world is understood as both an ethics and the fashioning of a phenomenology, then the conditions of possibility for relation are the foundational worldings that are made in conquest and enslavement.

Are these two sides to the scene of the social reconcilable? Their divergent temporalities would suggest otherwise. If the former has invited (or been conscripted into) the narration of progress through the linear telling of liberal democracy, the latter renders the ways the social is articulated through the production of that which is out-of-time, out-of-joint, on hold. Because the latter is thought to emerge out of, and reproduces, that hold—the site that marks the transit of captive bodies and their circulation through the space of the auction block, the plantation, the convict-lease system, the ghetto, and the prison (Childs)—it is foundationally and intentionally incommensurate with the place-making of the former (McKittrick).

Where and how, then, are we to think Blackness in relation? Such a question could be answered in advance by the ante-relationality sedimented in the anti-Black ordering of the modern world. At the same time, Blackness also elucidates a field formation suffused with descriptive and analytical concerns with a deep and enduring relation to the contours of a modernity animated by the lacerating trade winds of diaspora. Indeed, Black life emerges out of always already heterogeneous "overlapping diasporas" (Lewis), a horizon at once stilled, fixed, and determined from without and at the same time, as Harney and Moten evince in the above epigraph, enacted in excess, beyond and beneath the regulatory functions of state and capital. As Glissant elaborates (see epigraph), the channels of Black diaspora are both the condition of and the counterpoint to modern globality. It is a heteroglossic languaging that routinely announces and enunciates the practice and theory of the impossible on the uneven terrain of the transatlantic world. The study of Blackness forecasts insights into diasporic relationalities even as it renders the structural and systemic foundations of capitalist/colonial modernity as concerned fundamentally with anti-relationality. Coloniality binds diaspora to institutionalizations of violence and forces diaspora into the frame of the nation-state, deploying an epistemic containment policy that buries, obscures, and delimits relationality's unbounded potentiality. Diaspora, as Stuart Hall reminds us, signals the interconnections of difference. The dispersion at its mercurial core renders diaspora in persistent apposition to the violence of the nation-state, a condition that is simultaneously a mark of the unhomey and the worldly.

The positivist presentiments that give the lie to what once might have been called liberal multiculturalism and now often travels under the name "diversity"

have begun to fall away (Ahmed). Its hegemony was never complete, to be sure. It was always contested, and hence always worked over and through. Those policies for representation that obscure plans for redistribution have been targeted by heterogeneous forms of resistance to state-sanctioned anti-Blackness expressed intimately, affectively, bodily, structurally, an anti-Blackness that is both cause and consequence of the ongoing violence of capital accumulation (Kish and Leroy). In their respective contributions to this forum, Therí Pickens and Vincent Schleitwiler foreground contemporary movements to contest anti-Black state violence, as well as the pressing invitations to relationality—connection, solidarity, linkage, resonance—that such movements evince. They also identify a relation to Blackness as a sign and scene of futurity, of hosting forms of relation yet to come. Pickens underscores how Arab American cultural production that relates to Blackness confronts the impulses both to universalism and to exceptionalism, as well as to the volatility of an anti-Black antagonism that circumscribes entry into U.S. civil society. Arab American fiction invites exploring the possibilities of relation to Blackness with eyes wide open to these tensions. For Pickens, the Arab American literary relation to Blackness has the capacity to interrupt the exceptionalist linear narrative of progress that organizes conventional immigrant narratives and yields alternative insights into formations of affect, kinship, and history. By theorizing Blackness as a “when” as much as a “what,” Pickens reveals the potentialities as yet encrypted in Arab American literary and cultural narratives.

Schleitwiler takes the contemporary flourishing of collective action against anti-Black state violence as an invitation to engage the ethically troubled matrix of comparison required to write through the modalities of lynching that underwrite but also exceed their denomination as such. With Du Bois’s turn-of-the-century “colorline” heuristic in mind, Schleitwiler formulates imperialism as animated by a will both to rule over and to do justice to difference. While both Comparative Literature and Comparative Ethnic Studies have critically investigated the former for some time now, the latter invocation of “imperialism’s racial justice” allows us to see how practices of imperial rule are catalyzed not just through spectacular domination, torture, and violence, but also through an articulated investment in the inclusion of hierarchically differentiated humanity in liberal educative and juridical institutions. That is, imperialism always seeks to regulate the terms through which difference is included. Rather than cede the field of comparison wholly, Schleitwiler calls on us to attend to comparison’s “demons”: those “figure[s] of unpredictability and indeterminacy lurking within the knowledge of a world ordered by competing imperialisms that can never finally guarantee the universality to which they aspire.” Because imperialism’s comparative imaginary is always partial, incomplete, and haunted, Schleitwiler finds in that always-provisional claim to totalizing its rule over difference potential critical lines of flight.

Genealogies of American empire, as Pickens and Schleitwiler provide, crystallize the problematic of Blackness and relation. Provincializing these genealogies is another matter altogether, and, in her contribution to the forum, Shu-mei Shih takes up precisely this task. In extending a method of “relational comparison,” Shih identifies the “Global 1960s” as the explosive flashpoint that reveals a decolonial arc of transnational and comparative epistemes producing imagined geographies rich with symbolic and material articulations of anti-imperialism. Part of that thread signifies China in general, and Maoism in particular, as quintessentially

animating a generative Third Worldism for the times. This is the China embraced by Du Bois in 1959, a site through which revolutionary racial brotherhood signified as Afro-Asian solidarity was to be conceived. Yet, a practice of “relational comparison,” as Shih argues here, reveals another crucial thread in stark counterpoint to Du Bois. To the South of China (both geographically and epistemically) lay violent minoritizations, such as of the Hoa in Vietnam and Chinese Malaysians, predicated not simply on the long shadow of European colonialism but also on the active imperial race-making emerging out of China. The geographic impetus of the color line as the figure par excellence of racial solidarities is persistently interrupted by a rendering of the South of the South that reveals its fractures, frictions, and racial contradictions.

This forum as a whole thus presents four cuts that sound out the multiplicity that Blackness signifies along numerous and sometimes contrary scholarly trajectories. Emerging from distinct institutional locations, it raises questions that are as much articulated to the conjuncture in which we live as to the registers of futurity that both precede and open out in advance of their very asking. As with the sharpest questions, their answers are hardly preordained.

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