Response Essay

Race as sedimented history

Sara Ahmed
Department of Media and Communications, Centre for Feminist Research, Goldsmiths, University of London, London, UK.

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I write this response to Cord J. Whitaker's important edited collection 'Making Race Matter in the Middle Ages' as a scholar for whom the medieval seems rather remote, whose lodging is so firmly modern that I do not really think of this lodging as lodge. And yet I write this response as a scholar who is enthralled by (and often lost in) etymology dictionaries, enthralled by (and often lost in) the histories of words, histories that often leave me taken aback, as well as take me back. I write this as a scholar for whom race matters, for whom the idea of race is not simply an invention (I might have once, before reading this collection, thought of race as a *modern* invention), but an invention that lingers as and in life, in how we see things, in how we do things: how the world appears for us, falls for us; how we fall, in shadows, with shadows, in darkness, in light.

Something can matter without being something. Something can matter because it is made to matter. For, as all the contributors in this edited collection show, if race was invented as a way of ordering humanity, a technique for making difference and distinction, then race is, in some sense, *about* what it does; it is how similarities and differences are enacted by being assumed. There is no doubt that during the modern period, there was what Michel Foucault called 'an incitement to discourse' that rendered race a useful instrument, race not simply as an idea, but as a system, a systemization of an idea (Foucault, [1978] 1990). The idea of race, the idea that humans exist as distinct groups with common lines of descent,

was a useful idea, which in turn gives us a different idea of ideas: ideas as techniques *for* rule; ideas as interests *in* rule.

It is not that there are distinct races. But once human beings are understood in these terms, race comes to have a certain kind of existence. Richard Dawkins, eminent evolutionary psychologist and biologist, formerly Oxford University's Professor for the Public Understanding of Science, tweeted on 8 August 2013: 'All the world's Muslims have fewer Nobel Prizes than Trinity College, Cambridge. They did great things in the Middle Ages, though.' How interesting: to place 'great things' in the middle as a way of not seeing things in the present. And how wrong Dawkins was when he said later that what he said was not racist because Islam is not a race. The creation of the idea of there being race as being apart is what racism is doing. Racism is how others are created as beings apart, as those who lack what we have (because of what we built, a history of how and who gives awards, a history that is built is a history of how some bodies dwell). Hierarchy can be enforced through many means. I sometimes think even *any means*: any means matter; they are lower because of their culture, their tradition, their phenotype, their biology, their brains, their kind, their history. There can be an indifference to what difference is the difference that matters, to what difference is the difference that converts into hierarchy. Difference becomes whatever it is that is heavier; to be lower is to weigh things down and to slow things down.

What this means: differences become congealed in entities; differences become sediment, heavy histories that weigh us down. You can encounter someone, and recognize them in an instant, as black, as brown, as white, as to be feared, not to be feared, because of what you have already swallowed. Phenomenology as a way of approaching things teaches us about 'sedimented histories,' how histories become second nature, what bodies do not have to think (to think). To think of race as a sedimented history is to think of how race matters as matter. Something becomes sedimented, when it has settled, often near a barrier, as that which stops a flow. And race is precisely this: a congealing, a solidifying: a history that becomes concrete, a physical barrier in the present: stop. Or not: go.

What I learnt from reading this collection was that a history of race, as the history of the emergence of categories of thought that have become unthinking, that have become categories of being, is a *longer* history than we might think, at least if we are used to thinking of race and modernity as tangled up. We learn for instance the distinctions between white and black, light and dark, diagnosed so acutely by Frantz Fanon as central to how Europe establishes itself in relation to others, are distinctions with a longer history. We witness this historical length through Robert S. Sturges's reading of *Aucassin et Nicolette*, as well as Jamie's Friedman's discussion of *King of Tars*. A history of whiteness, of how bodies become white, not necessarily by being marked but in their fluidity, in their instability, is a longer history. If the history of whiteness is a longer history than we might have thought, perhaps this is how whiteness

becomes lighter in time: the lightening of a load over time. Fanon's words echo still as wisdom:

> In Europe the Black man is the symbol of evil… . The torturer is the Black man, Satan is black, one talks of shadows, when one is dirty one is black – whether one is thinking of physical dirtiness or moral dirtiness. It would be astonishing, if the trouble were taken to bring them all together, to see the vast number of expressions that make the black man the equivalent of sin. In Europe, whether concretely or symbolically, the Black man stands for the bad side of the character. As long as one cannot understand this problem one is doomed for ever to talk in circles about 'the Black problem.' Blackness, darkness, shadow, shades, night, the labyrinths of the earth, abysmal depths, blacken someone's reputation: and on the other side, the bright look of innocence, the white dove of peace, magical heavenly light. (Fanon, 1967, 188–189)

It would be astonishing. Dark and light: ways of creating different classes of being, even if, even when, color can be unstable, even if, even when, bodies can fluctuate and pass through the border. And of course ways of encountering others as strangers – I called these 'strange encounters' in my own book on strangers as not only 'not us,' but 'not like us' (Ahmed, 2000) – have classical as well medieval roots: from the figure of the Barbarian, to that of the Amazon explored by Dennis Austin Britton in this issue. These figures, these darker sides of history, congeal as history even when they move around – heavy, down, brown. A history of battles and conquests might be a history of lines, of racial lines, of lines drawn between people, such as Romans and Carthaginians, as explored by Randy P. Schiff, or Christians and Mongols, as explored by Jamie Friedman. This is also a history of monstrosity, one that does not require us to assume monsters as race, as Asa Simon Mittman shows in his essay. These monstrous histories are histories of whiteness in the making.

Race exceeds race. A sedimented history: many particles swirling around; particles settling down. Making race matter shows us how race matters. And we realize how making race matter becomes intrinsic to a project of queering space as well as time. As Roderick Ferguson notes in *Aberrations in Black*, the presence of minorities and racialized others has an 'eccentric' effect, given that such bodies are placed outside the logic of normative whiteness (Ferguson, 2004, 26; see also Muñoz, 2000, 68). Time too can be eccentric. Elizabeth Freeman explores queer time as 'non-sequential forms of time' that can 'fold subjects into structures of belonging and duration that may be invisible to the historicist's eye' (Freeman, 2010, xi). Race is often temporalized as well as spatialized: 'over there' becomes the past that some have left behind in arriving 'here.'

We have been here before. And we can be jolted because what is before is here, or because here points us back there. What appears in front of us, racism as what we have to confront, is already behind us. This edited collection gives us a longer

behind; it encourages us to look, to look further back. It can be queer: the traces we find of a history that is not over. The papers in this collection offer unusual juxtapositions, strange couplings, showing how materials from different times, medieval and modern, have resonances, how race can be heard *as* resonance, something one can hear, a sound that connects things up, a disturbance in the rhythm of things – a disturbance that connects Fanon and *Aucassin et Nicolette*, for instance, or Chaucer and DuBois. When we follow the sound, we are dislodged. The final paper of this collection by Michelle R. Warren reminds us of how dislodging can be a promise: that by misquoting the past, getting things wrong, we can bring things to life, create new life, for those who have to struggle for life, to struggle with histories that settle like sediment.

We have been here before. There will be more.

About the Author

Sara Ahmed is Professor of Race and Cultural Studies and Director of the Centre for Feminist Research at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her most recent books are *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Duke, 2012) and *Willful Subjects* (Duke, 2014) (E-mail: s.ahmed@gold.ac.uk).

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