

Race and Computation

An Existential Phenomenological Inquiry Concerning "Man", Mind and the Body.

*"Meditative thinking demands of us that we engage ourselves with what at first sight does not go together at all"*¹

My dissertation is concerned with two modern phenomena, race and computation, their emergence in Modernity and their convergence today in our Modern Technological Age. At first blush the concepts of race and computation seem incommensurable. Formally race refers to a hierarchical schema for classifying humans while computation refers to the formal logic of digital machines. I argue that race and computation share a peculiar modern conception of the body in relation to thinking. According to this schema one is more fully human if one appears toward the pole of mind and therefore less or not human at all if one appears toward the pole of the body. It is this artificially strained relation between body and mind that had come to define the human in Modernity. In this way race became the measurement of the polarity between mind and body and as such the modern measure of humanity.

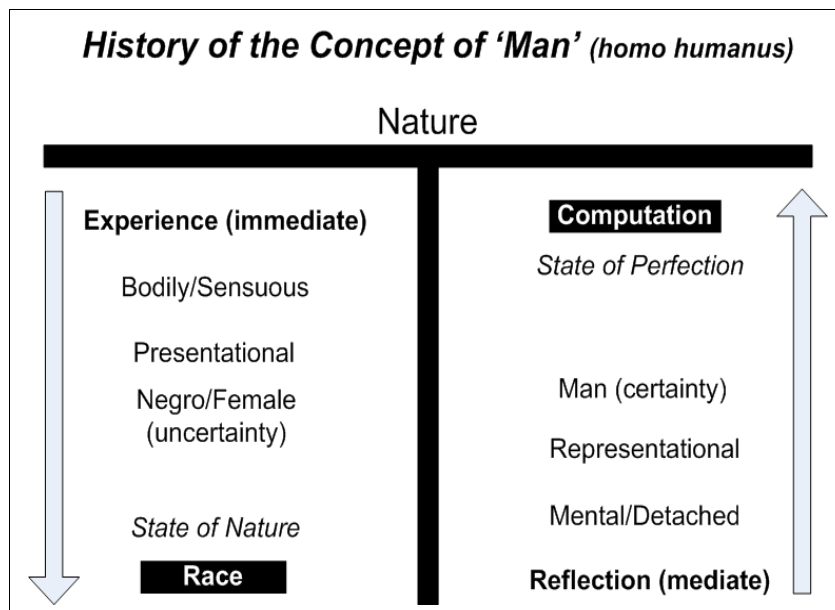
The distinction that race makes is not lost in computation because it inherits this narrow model of the human as *animal rationale* and mechanizes it. Computation is then the formalization of the apogee of human reason, logic. On the one hand the digital computer decouples the bodily from existence; while on the other hand, race delimits existence to the bodily. It can be said that computation is the angelic ascent from one's body, while race is the hellish descent into one's body. I argue that this defining characteristic of the modern human as rational is both computational and racial and finds itself historically anchored in the normative conception of the human, "Man" [*homo humanus*]. It is the norm of "Man" (not humanity proper in all of its richness and diversity) which grounds our modern concept of race.

This project is organized into three parts, 1) Prolegomena to the History of the Concept of "Man" 2) "Man" in the Machine 3) Techné of Race and the Phenomenal Body. In part one of my dissertation I argue that the historical idea of "Man" developed through the violent devolution of bodily experience in favor of detached technological rationality of which computation is a *prima facie* exemplar. In part two I examine the functionalist theory of mind that the early founders of computer science used as the model for the digital computer. My argument here it is not that our mind/brains are complex computers but rather computation is a meta-model of our model of ourselves. What's more the emergence of computation radicalized the concept of "Man" by further exacerbating the divide (see Graphic 1) between experience (body) and reflection (mind) pushing us into a new epoch, what Heidegger called Modern Technology. Today our experiences with digital technology such as cellphones and computers are private, autonomous, yet flexible and always on, all of which are modeled on the norm of "Man" as computational, whose logic is black boxed or concealed from us. By reorienting computation through the lens of race I am able to shed new light on the field of Artificial Intelligence and its universalist claims of human cognition.

In part three I argue that the body, the aspect computational "Man" desires to jettison, is foundational to human being and without coincidence it is the realm in which the underside of the norm of "Man", that is racism and sexism, is experienced. In part three I arrive at the critical conclusion that the norm of "Man" is not simply a mental representation but is in fact interpreted and concretely lived through us as our bodies in everyday experience. Working through both Fanon and Sylvia Wynter I show how this norm is manifest in the embodied experience of race, what I call the *phenomenality of race*, our pre-

1 Martin Heidegger. *Discourse on Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row 1966), 53.

reflective understanding of others as already racial. In conjunction I critically engage the dominant view that race is a social construction which I argue is based on the presumption that embodied experience of race is marginal to racial meaning. What's more I show how this constructivist of view race shares a Modern Technological interpretation of the human similar to computation, that renders the phenomenal body obsolete. My chief aim in this dissertation is not to indict computation as racist but to show how race and computation reveal the bipolar aspects of our normative schema for human being, one that has had a long “romance with disembodiment”².



Graphic 1: This graphic depicts the scission of Nature via theoretical reflection in Western thought, beginning with Plato. In this division, race emerges in the direction of the bodily (the state of nature), while computation moves towards the rational, as the transcendence of the bodily (the state of perfection).

2 Evelyn Fox Keller. *Secrets of Life, Secrets of Death: Essays on Language, Gender, and Science* (New York, Routledge 1992) p 180.