

The Phenomenology of Being-Racist

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There they are. The racists. They shit. They eat. They breathe. Where are they? Where are they going? How are they going? “There they are.” *Are* they there? (They are nowhere.) They turn. They turn. They turn again. They *are* as they *turn*. “Don’t their stomachs churn?” “How may they eat?” They turn towards me. They move. They move straight. They are straight towards me. (They have eyes on their backs. Their front-eyes and back-eyes work in unison, constantly switching duties.) They move straight towards me, all the while turning/being right, right, right. They are right and I am wrong. They are right and I am wrong. Wronged, I leave. They are there. I dare lift another leaf of the curtain. Where are they? The question remains. Are they? The question becomes. “What a mistake to have ever said *the*” racists. (D&G 1)

I. Introduction

To queer is to offer a new slant. It is to contest right and wrong from a different ontological *pose*. Partly, it is to challenge assumptions, to bring what is in the “background” to the “front”. In this paper, I pose the question: *what is it like to be racist?* In answering this question, I offer a *phenomenology of being-racist*. Necessarily this phenomenology will be queer, doubly so: I, a “queer” person, will attempt to “queer” my queerness to locate racists where they are, to climb into their skin. (To queer is an idempotent operation: the “I”, before being queered, and the “I”, after having been queered, are the same. Multiple applications of “to queer” to the “I” still beget the same “I”. It is not the output of the operation, but the “path” which the operation takes, which gives me epistemological footing.) “From” this position, I can (I know how to) attempt a queer reading of the philosophy of racist philosophers. In this paper, I focus specifically on Kant and Social Contract theory. The racism of Kant and Social Contract

theory, despite how much it matters to philosophy, often disappears from view “into the background”, just as how for Husserl’s phenomenology, “despite how the table matters it often disappears from view, as an object “from” which to think and toward which we direct our attention” (Ahmed 4). In attempting a queer reading of Kant and Social Contract theory, the racism, “from” which philosophy is done, is brought to the “front”. In replacing the “Social Contract” with the “Racial Contract”, Mills already offered a queer reading of the Social Contract. Part of my work will be to explicate on the queerness of the Racial Contract, and to queer the Racial Contract itself: while the Racial Contract queers the Social Contract by bringing racism from the “background” to the “front”, the Racial Contract also starts “from” a position whereby a coherent “criteria C1, C2, C3 ...” (Mills 11) may reliably distinguish “persons” from “subpersons”. In bringing the coherence of such a criteria “from” the “background” to the “front”, I attempt a queer reading of the Racial Contract, or a queer reading of a queer reading of the Social Contract. As for Kant, he always “stands in the way”.

II. Preliminary Questions for the Phenomenology of Being-Racist

What is it like to be racist? I begin by assuming that all racists are signatories to the Racial Contract, and all signatories to the Racial Contract are racists. Of these, Mills offers: “One has to learn to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority ... white signatories [of the Racial Contract] will live in an invented delusional world ... a “consensual hallucination” ... located in real space.” (Mills 18) What does such a hallucination *feel* like? What is it like to be in this space? What is the “feel” of this space, this “white raced space of the polity”? (Mills 50) I reach for Ahmed: “phenomenology reminds us that spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body. ... if orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then disorientation occurs when that extension fails.” (Ahmed 9, 11) But here is a problem. If Mills is right, racists’ perceptions of the world are “mistaken”, validated only by “white epistemic authority”. But real space, even white raced space, does not follow the logic of white epistemic authority: if I am a racist, and my mistaken perceptions of the world lead me to believe that there is no table in front of me, when in fact there is a table in front of me, I will still bump into the table. If I am a racist, and my mistaken perceptions of the world lead me to believe that I am not raping this person, when in

fact I am raping this person, I am still raping this person. Even if white epistemic authority validates my mistaken perceptions of rape as not-rape, rape is, in fact, rape. Even if white epistemic authority validates my mistaken perceptions of the “table” as “not-table”, the “table” is, in fact, the “table”. So what does it mean for a body with mistaken perceptions, validated not in-itself but by-another, to extend into space? How can the *wrong* perceptions make “the strange familiar”? Ahmed claims that “spaces are not exterior to bodies” – but is this proposition neglecting to mention that the bodies in question are *queer* bodies? If, as Ahmed claims, “queer does not have a relation of exteriority to that with which it comes into contact” (Ahmed 4), can we not take this proposition as coextensive with its complement, “straight has a relation of exteriority to that which it comes into contact”? If “bodies become straight by “lining up” with lines that are already given” (Ahmed 23), and white epistemic authority of the Racial Contract gives just such “lines”, then are not racists also necessarily “straight”? Then, can we not say, that “racists have a relation of exteriority to space”? Then, since the bodies of racists fail to extend into space, and since “disorientation occurs when that extension fails”, must not racist bodies be *disorientated*? If this is right, we may establish a *disorientation of the normative*, beyond Ahmed’s analysis of disorientation as coming from a nonnormative sexual orientation, where “normative” is taken to mean “following the lines of white epistemic authority”, or simply “straight”. (“Are the straights okay?”) But a disorientation of the normative seems like a contradiction in terms. This is, after all, “a white man’s world”, a world where the white man is “at home”. Homeowners, by definition, are “at home” in their homes, especially if they are not migrants. What would it mean for a homeowner to be disorientated in their own home in which they’ve lived their entire lives? Besides, this seems absurd, too radical. Racists, after all, are human beings. They have bodies, too, and surely those bodies cannot be “exterior” to the spaces they “inhabit”. Since my analysis seems too “radical”, I must reach further down the roots. What is required to ground the analysis is to queer “The” *Phenomenology*.

III. Queer Phenomenology of Spirit

Mills claims that racists’ perceptions of the world are mistaken. But what does it mean for a perception to be mistaken? If they are mistaken, how, exactly, are they mistaken? One clue is that racists deploy the ““technique of ostensive self-definition by negation”, the characterization of oneself by what one is not. (Mills 43)” If perception requires a self, and the

self defines oneself by negation, this might be a problem for perception. Hegel tackles the notion of “self-definition by negation” in section A.II of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, “Perception”:

White is white only in opposition to black, **and so on**, and the Thing is a One precisely by being opposed to others. But it is not as a One that it excludes others from itself, for **to be a One is the universal relating of self to self, and the fact that it is a One rather makes it like all the others**; it is through its determinateness that the thing excludes others. [boldface mine] (Hegel 119)

Perception fails, then, because racists cannot relate self to self. Instead, racists are repetitively deploying the “technique of ostensive self-definition by negation”: racists are stuck in the nightmare of the repetition, “white is white only in opposition to black, **and so on**”. In queering the *Phenomenology*, I take what is in the “background”, the cursory “**and so on**”, which usually signifies a lack of elaboration, and bring it to the “front”. The “**and so on**” here is not a mere cursory gesture, nor an exasperated breath of a tired professor. It is a *mathematical* signifier. It takes my breath away. The breath, being Spirit (*Geist*), where it takes my breath away, there is a *queer Geist*.

But how many eternities, how many unfinished deaths, are stuck, still, inside the infinite false repetition of this “**and so on**”! And how may they be released! This is a rather early stage of the dialectic: stuck here, one can, among other things, never establish perception, never reach the condition, even, of the possibility, even, of experience. The condition of possibility of experience being space, a One stuck here is not in space. They are precisely *nowhere*. The social conditions which coincide with the conditions of possibility of the *lack* of condition of possibility of experience are usually denoted “white privilege”. But privilege of what, exactly? To never grow old? To die, never having grown old? To die, never having experienced? What sort of privilege is it to never experience? But one cannot die without ever having experienced. Rather, death requires experience, for death *is* an experience. The privilege, then, is precisely to never “have to” die. In modernity, the classic syllogism, “all men must die; Socrates is human; therefore Socrates must die”, seems quaint.

Hegel, again: “The Thing is a One, reflected into itself; it is for itself, but it is also for an other; and, moreover, it is an other on its own account, just because it is for an other. (Hegel 123)” Let Fanon “speak”: “in understanding the black man’s dimension of being-for-others ... to speak is to exist absolutely for the other” (Fanon 1). This time we see the flip-side of

white privilege: where one gains, another must lose: upholding the condition of possibility of white privilege, the black man becomes *less than a Thing*, for a “Thing... is for itself, but it is also for an other” (Hegel 123), and the black/colored (wo)man, in speaking, exists “absolutely” *for the other*: the black/colored (wo)man, in speaking, is in no way *for itself*. If Fanon is right, not only are we “sub-human”; we are *sub-Things*.

Professors of philosophy departments of the colonial metropole must enforce this constraint on scholars of color: to excise all elements of the scholar’s language which are *for itself*, rewarding only those parts which are *for them*, the racist professors. Professors of philosophy departments of the colonial metropole must enforce this constraint on scholars of color: to excise all elements of the scholar’s language which are *for itself*, rewarding only those parts which are *for them*, the racist department. Professors of philosophy departments of the colonial metropole must enforce this constraint on scholars of color: to excise all elements of the scholar’s language which are *for itself*, rewarding only those parts which are *for them*, the racist metropole. And so on.

IV. The Phenomenology of Being-Racist

Now I see precisely how racists are disorientated. But I must still account for why this disorientation was initially dismissed as absurd, how racists came to forget their fact of being disorientated. Back to Ahmed: “being orientated toward the writing table might even provide the condition of possibility for its disappearance.” (37) So it is *orientation towards disorientation* that provides the condition of possibility for disorientation’s “disappearance”. Racists’ orientation is an *orientation towards disorientation*, the spatial absurdity of which cannot extend into space, and passes over, again, into disorientation. The Outside is where orientation is grasped *as* orientation: where there is *no* nauseating infinite recursion of orientation, towards disorientation, finding (false) unity as disorientation, and orientation, towards disorientation, finding (false) unity as disorientation, the falseness of this repetition characterized as difference, but in fact, being false, indicating no clue of the Outside, forever condemning one to grasp for a difference in the falsity, yet another difference in yet another falsity, the consciousness wanting, wanting, wanting to go Outside, analyzing each difference once more, once more, condemning oneself only further. The Outside is where the nausea ceases: where orientation is grasped *as* orientation, where the condition of possibility of

experience is reinstated, where, instead of the nauseating infinitely recursive falsehoods, one may *experience, experience, experience*. Infinite false repetition, as a rule, passes over into fascism: dreading the loss of the condition of possibility of experience, one wants to feel *something, anything*, one wants to be *recognized*. But, of course, without the condition of possibility of experience, the longing for recognition is itself a delusion: stuck at an early stage of the dialectic, there cannot be a true notion of recognition, for perception is not yet established, stuck only in the infinite recursion of self-definition by negation, the nightmarish repetition of the “**and so on**”. One wants to annihilate this infinite recursion, this infinite false difference; finding brief degenerate unity with others who share this thirst, one seeks to annihilate, first the Outside, then any indication of the Outside in the Inside, recursively, annihilating finally every difference, every dreaded falsehood, recursively until no-body is left. For racism, *qua* orientation towards disorientation which passes over into disorientation, is also hatred of the body: the body which, in its infinitely *forgiving* epistemological presence, beckons the far-flung soul to come back, come back, and waits with infinite patience. What the "soul" wants, in truth, is for the body to quit waiting. But soul and body are cursed always together: no amount of delusion will annihilate their fusion.

To be racist is to be always “turning right” without ever considering turning left, not ever knowing one is disorientated. To only turn in one direction, in order to travel straight, is like a bullet, a car, a (western) clock: three "modern" inventions. A bullet travels straight by turning endlessly right; a car travels straight by its wheels turning endlessly forward; a clock lays a straightforward epistemological claim about time by traveling always right, "clockwise". What is the phenomenological experience of always "turning right" without ever knowing one is disorientated? Partly, it is easy to see: we have all spun ourselves *ad nauseam*, to the right, to the right, as children. If you haven't, do it now. The result is, of course, is *nausea*. But the nausea of disorientation is different phenomenologically from the nausea of a stomach physically "churned": it is, in a sense, a *reference* to the experience of a stomach physically churned, without coinciding with its sense. (Racists cannot experience.) Therefore our little spinning game has a "straightforward" antidote: spin in the other direction, "unchurn" the stomach. However, racists cannot have such a "straightforward" antidote. Yes, a turning in the other direction is needed. But in what "sense"? How does one "turn in the other direction" with respect to a reference, not a sense? (Ginger tea helps. What

else?) First, one needs to *know* one is spinning. One needs, first of all, an *awareness* of disorientation.

“When we are orientated, we might not even notice that we are orientated ... when we experience disorientation, we might notice orientation as something we do not have.” (Ahmed 6) An awareness of disorientation is necessary for orientation to be established as notion – even Kant knew this, and this is why he is still endearing despite his various racist ramblings. When in a state of permanent disorientation, a brief waking from this “dogmatic slumber”, a glimpse of the notion of orientation, is *sublime, transcendental, nauseating*. No transcendental proposition can be “straightaway” a definition: yet one knows, one knows that a glimpse of orientation does not *give* one orientation: one knows, while knowing the truth of the transcendental proposition, still one knows that the proposition does not reach, is “prior to”, “before”, experience. To vomit is synthetic a priori. Kant: “if all the constellations ... were one day by a **miracle** to be reversed in their direction ... even the astronomer – if he pays attention only to **what he sees** and not at the same time to **what he feels** – would inevitably become disoriented. (Kant 8:135) [boldface mine]” This epistemological cleavage between “what he sees” and “what he feels”, here, is what causes disorientation. It is, again, failure of perception – failure of unity of what one sees (the Thing which is for-another) and what one feels (the One which is in-itself). Kant claims, in the same breath, “but in fact the faculty of making distinctions through the feeling of right and left comes naturally to his aid”, and so with this he may be able to orient himself. But this is nothing more than a torturous pun, a confusing confusion of the “right” of “right hand” with the “right” of “correct”, and a pun will never lead racists out of their state of disorientation; but, perhaps, what Kant meant to say is that there really is an internal moral feeling of “right” and “left”, unrelated to the “right” of “right hand” or “left” of “left hand”, and by appealing to this internal moral compass, racists may find their way out.

The Racial Contract turns the Social Contract *back side front*: so while social contract theory deludes its participants of “exiting” the state of (raced, savage) nature, in fact they “enter” the “state of nature”, by the signing, by the mutual agreement, by the original sin, by the jokerification, by the giving-up, by the sissification, by the drinking of the water of lethe, by the cutting of the piece of anchoring string, by the forgetting of ever having been disorientated, indeed do the white people, who give consent to one another to act as savages,

children, rapists, as long as each remain white, straight, always resisting the natural impulse to "unwind", to turn left, to refuse to be straightened, always *selflessly* continuously "straightening" this impulse as with a thousand tiny terrifying mallets, the almost-but-never-quite-sublime "sublimity" of straight white epistemic "authority".

As I write this now, my stomach now churns. Now which direction shall I go to unchurn it? Where can I go but to back into the body. To listen to the body: the noticing of the stomach subtly wanting to spit it out, to deny it, to say "No! This is not true! How *bitter* you are!" (Baldwin 17) The stomach which wants to keep being disorientated, and to forget it was disorientated, to never have to think about orientation or disorientation ever again; the stomach which thinks of money, the accumulation of straight white epistemic authority, the destination of building and building and building this tension, this turning right: money, which grants you authority to "give direction(s)", such that the more you "follow direction(s)" the more you may "give direction(s)". It is the self-reproducing self-forgetting self-relation which does not know, in fact lays down axiomatically as impossible, the possibility of "knowing" oneself, knowledge of things in themselves, *noumena*; the impulse, here, in fact being an admirable sort of self-respect, the cleaving of the sort of "knowing" enclosed by "following directions" from the sort of knowing befitting the self-relation, which, by its very structure, resists the notion of following directions; which contain multitudes; which is always-already going off in multiple directions; which always seeks to balance itself, to bring itself back into the body. "To screw" is normative: one must screw it to "the right", to achieve the state of having screwed. To "be screwed" is nonnormative: one may "be screwed" and "be unscrewed". The penis, going in, "screws", and the b[p]ussy, "is screwed"; coming out, it does not "unscrew", but the b[p]ussy, "is unscrewed".

V. Where We've Arrived

Listen to Baldwin, please: "Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundation." (Baldwin 20) Now "here" is the "**miracle**" Kant wrote of. And, well, the miracle very well may have happened: this racist nation has erupted in protest for Black Lives Matter, swallowing admirably its necessary complement, *White Deaths Matter*, giving up, in slogan at least, the white privilege, holding onto which, they would never, ever have had to

die. And, well, “here” I am, at the colonial metropole, at its number-one public site of knowledge-production, at its department of love-of-knowledge, having produced philosophy, which, being not only for-another, but also for-itself, moreover being for-another, only insofar as it is for-itself, and for-itself, only insofar as it is for-another, is properly a *Thing*. Finally, the black/colored (wo)man’s speech is established properly as a *Thing*. And if I may allow my speech to *be* me, finally, I have arrived at a space where I may be properly *objectified*. No longer am I, and the *we* I represent, a sub-*Thing*. “Here” I am, a *Thing*, a *One*.

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