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What is This?

A phenomenology of whiteness

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Abstract The paper suggests that we can usefully approach whiteness through the lens of phenomenology. Whiteness could be described as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space, and what they 'can do'. The paper considers how whiteness functions as a habit, even a bad habit, which becomes a background to social action. The paper draws on experiences of inhabiting a white world as a non-white body, and explores how whiteness becomes worldly through the noticeability of the arrival of some bodies more than others. A phenomenology of whiteness helps us to notice institutional habits; it brings what is behind to the surface in a certain way.

keywords *bodies, habits, institutions, orientations, phenomenology, space, whiteness*

The field of critical whiteness studies is full of an almost habitual anxiety about what it means to take up the category of 'whiteness' as a primary object of knowledge. Richard Dyer for instance admits to being disturbed by the very idea of what he calls white studies: 'My blood runs cold at the thought that talking about whiteness could lead to the development of something called "White Studies"' (1997: 10). Or as Fine, Weis, Powell and Wong describe: 'we worry that in our desire to create spaces to speak, intellectually or empirically, about whiteness, we may have reified whiteness as a fixed category of experience; that we have allowed it to be treated as a monolith, in the singular, as an "essential something"' (1997: xi). Does speaking about whiteness allow it to become an 'essential something'? If whiteness gains currency by being unnoticed, then what does it mean to notice whiteness? What does making the invisible marks of privilege more visible actually do? Could whiteness studies produce an attachment to whiteness by holding it in place as an object? Such questions are addressed by scholars not in order to suspend the project of whiteness studies, but to consider what it means for a project of critique to be complicit with its object.

  We could say that any project that aims to dismantle or challenge the categories that are made invisible through privilege is bound to participate

in the object of its critique. We might even expect such projects to fail, and be prepared to witness this failure as productive. And yet, we can get stuck in this position, endlessly caught up in describing what we are doing to whiteness, rather than what whiteness is doing. In this paper I want to consider whiteness as a category of experience that disappears as a category through experience, and how this disappearance makes whiteness 'worldly'. To put this simply, what I offer here is a vocabulary for re-describing how whiteness becomes 'worldly'. Whiteness describes the very 'what' that coheres as a world. My aim is not to bypass the risk of reifying the category of whiteness, but to re-locate that risk, so that it is not seen as originating with 'our desire to create spaces to speak, intellectually or empirically to speak about whiteness' (Fine et al., 1997: xi), which is not in any way to dismiss this concern. We can consider how whiteness becomes worldly as an effect of reification. Reification is not then something we do to whiteness, but something whiteness does, or to be more precise, what allows whiteness to be done.

In this paper, I re-pose the question of whiteness as a phenomenological issue, as a question of how whiteness is lived as a background to experience. In so doing, I will consider what 'whiteness' does without assuming whiteness as an ontological given, but as that which has been received, or become given, over time. Whiteness could be described as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space. In formulating my argument, I follow from the work of Frantz Fanon, and also philosophers who have sought to offer a 'phenomenology of race', such as David Macey (1999), Linda Martin Alcoff (1999) and Lewis R. Gordon (1995, 1999). Within this literature, a starting point is the refutation of nominalism and the idea that race does not exist, or is not real. Such philosophers would certainly accept that race is 'invented' by science *as if it were* a property of bodies, or of groups. But they also show that it does not follow from such a critique that race does not exist. Phenomenology helps us to show how whiteness is an effect of racialization, which in turn shapes what it is that bodies 'can do'. In this paper, I offer a phenomenology of whiteness as a way of exploring how whiteness is 'real', material and lived. I will draw on experiences of inhabiting a white world as a non-white body, and explore how whiteness becomes worldly through the noticeability of the arrival of some bodies more than others.

Orientations

We can begin by considering how whiteness involves a form of orientation. If we start with the point of orientations, we find that orientations are about starting points. As Husserl describes in the second volume of *Ideas*:

> If we consider the characteristic way in which the Body presents itself and do the same for things, then we find the following situation: each Ego has its own domain of perceptual things and necessarily perceives the things in a certain orientation. The things appear and do so from this or that side, and in this mode of appearing is included irrevocably a relation to a here and its basic directions. (1989: 165–6)

Orientations are about how we begin, how we proceed from 'here'. Husserl relates the questions of 'this or that side' to the point of 'here', which he also describes as the zero-point of orientation, the point from which the world unfolds, and which makes what is 'there' over 'there'. It is from this point that the differences between 'this side' and 'that side' matter. It is only given that we are 'here' at this point, that near and far are lived as relative markers of distance. Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann also describe orientation as a question of one's starting point: 'The place in which I find myself, my actual "here", is the starting point for my orientation in space' (1974: 36). The starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the 'here' of the body, and the 'where' of its dwelling. Given this, orientations are about the intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places.

If orientations are about how we begin from 'here', then they involve unfolding. At what point does the world unfold? Or at what point does Husserl's world unfold? Let's start where he starts, in his first volume of *Ideas*, which is with the world as it is given 'from the natural standpoint'. Such a world is the world we are 'in', where things take place around me, and are placed around me: 'I am aware of a world, spread out in space endlessly' (1969: 101). Phenomenology asks us to be aware of the 'what' that is 'around'. The world that is 'around' has already taken certain shapes, as the very form of what is 'more and less' familiar. As Husserl describes:

> For me real objects are there, definite, more or less familiar, agreeing with what is actually perceived without being themselves perceived or even intuitively present. I can let my attention wander from the writing-table I have just seen or observed, through the unseen portions of the room behind my back to the veranda into the garden, to the children in the summer house, and so forth, to all the objects concerning which I precisely 'know' that they are there and yonder in my immediate co-perceived surroundings. (1969: 101)

The familiar world begins with the writing table, which is in 'the room'. We can name this room as Husserl's study, as the room in which he writes. *It is from here that the world unfolds*. He begins with the writing table, and then turns to other parts of this room, those which are, as it were, behind him. We are reminded that what he can see in the first place depends on which way he is facing. In Husserl's writing the familiar slides into the familial; the home is a family home as a residence that is inhabited by children. In a way, the children who are 'yonder' point to what is made available through memory, or even habitual knowledge: they are sensed as being there, behind him, even if they are not seen by him at this moment in time. The family home provides, as it were, the background against which an object (the writing table) appears in the present, in front of him. The family home is only ever *co-perceived*, and allows the philosopher to do his work.

By reading the objects that appear in Husserl's writing, we get a sense of how being directed towards some objects and not others involves a more general orientation towards the world. The direction you face is not simply

casual: the fact that Husserl faces the writing table is a sign of his occupation.[1] So Husserl's gaze might fall on the paper, which is on the table, given that he is sitting at the desk, the writing table, and not at another kind of table, such as the kitchen table. Such other tables would not, perhaps, be the 'right' kind of tables for the making of philosophy. The writing table might be the table 'for him', the one that would provide the right kind of horizontal surface for the philosopher. As Ann Banfield observes, 'Tables and chairs, things nearest to hand for the sedentary philosopher, who comes to occupy chairs of philosophy, are the furniture of that "room of one's own" from which the real world is observed' (2000: 66). Tables are 'near to hand', along with chairs, as the furniture that secures the very 'place' of philosophy. The use of tables shows us the very orientation of philosophy in part by showing us what is proximate to the body of the philosopher, or 'what' the philosopher comes into contact 'with'.

What you come into contact with is shaped by what you do: bodies are orientated when they are occupied in time and space. Bodies are shaped by this contact with objects. What gets near is both shaped by what bodies do, and in turn affects what bodies can do. The nearness of the philosopher to his paper, his ink and his table is not simply about 'where' he does his work, and the spaces he inhabits, as if the 'where' could be separated from 'what' he does. The 'what' that he does is what puts certain objects within reach, just as it keeps other things in the background. What comes into view, or what is within our horizon, is not a matter of what we find here or there, or even where we find ourselves, as we move here, or there. What is reachable is determined precisely by orientations we have already taken. Or we could say that orientations are about the directions we take that put some things and not others in our reach.

Whiteness as an orientation

How then does whiteness involve orientation? We can turn to Frantz Fanon's work, which directly addresses the question of the relation between phenomenology and race. Take the following description:

> And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man's eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. I know that if I want to smoke, I shall have to reach out my right arm and take the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table. The matches, however, are in the drawer on the left, and I shall have to lean back slightly. And all these movements are made not out of habit, but out of implicit knowledge. (Fanon, 1986: 110–11)

Fanon is describing what seems to be a casual scene. By speculating on what he would have to do if he wants to smoke, Fanon describes his body as ready for action. The feeling of desire, in this case, the desire to smoke, leads the body to reach towards 'the other end of the table', in order to

grasp an object. Such a performance is an orientation towards the future, insofar as the action is also the expression of a wish or intention. As Fanon suggests, bodies do this work, or they have this capacity to work, only given the familiarity of the world they inhabit: to put it simply, they know where to find things. 'Doing things' depends not so much on intrinsic capacity, or even upon dispositions or habits, but on the ways in which the world is available as a space for action, a space where things 'have a certain place' or are 'in place'.

   And yet, Fanon implies that this scene is far from casual. Sure, he might find the cigarettes, and the matches, although as we can see, he does not simply happen upon them. This example is not really about a happening. It follows, after all, an extraordinary claim. The claim takes the form of an argument with phenomenology. As he puts it later on this page:

> Below the corporeal schema I had sketched out a historic-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me not by 'residual sensations and perceptions primarily of a tactile, vestibular, kinaesthetic, and visual character,' but by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details. (Fanon, 1986: 111)[2]

In other words, Fanon is suggesting that attending to the corporeal schema is not sufficient as it is not made up of the right kind of elements. Where phenomenology attends to the tactile, vestibular, kinaesthetic and visual character of embodied reality, Fanon asks us to think of the 'historic-racial' schema, which is 'below it'. In other words, the racial and historical dimensions are beneath the surface of the body described by phenomenology, which becomes, by virtue of its own orientation, a way of thinking the body that has surface appeal.

   For the black man, Fanon implies, we have to look beyond the surface. He writes: 'I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all *historicity*, which I had learnt about from Jaspers. Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, *its place taken by the racial epidermal schema*' (1986: 112, second emphasis mine). Clearly, then, Fanon's example of what he would do if he wanted to smoke, which is an example of being orientated towards an object, is a description of a body-at-home. Such a body extends into space through how it reaches towards objects that are already 'in place'.

   Fanon's example shows the body *before* it is racialized, or made black by becoming the object of the hostile white gaze. In this sense, for Fanon, race 'interrupts' the corporeal schema. Alternatively, we could say that 'the corporeal schema' is already racialized; in other words, race does not just interrupt such a schema, but structures its mode of operation. The corporeal schema is of a 'body-at-home'. If the world is made white, then the body-at-home is one that can inhabit whiteness. As Fanon's work shows, after all, bodies are shaped by histories of colonialism, which makes the world 'white', a world that is inherited, or which is already given before the point of an individual's arrival. This is the familiar world, the world of whiteness, as a world we know implicitly. Colonialism makes the world 'white', which is of course a world 'ready' for certain kinds of

bodies, as a world that puts certain objects within their reach. Bodies remember such histories, even when we forget them. Such histories, we might say, surface on the body, or even shape how bodies surface (see Ahmed, 2004a). Race then does become a social as well as bodily given, or what we *receive* from others as an inheritance of this history.

It is useful to recall that inheritance is crucial to the Marxist conception of history. For Marx, although we 'make history', this making is shaped by inheritance: 'Human beings make their own history, but they do not make it arbitrarily in conditions chosen by themselves, but in conditions always-already given and inherited from the past' (cited in Balibar, 2002: 8). If the conditions in which we live are inherited from the past, they are 'passed down' not only in blood or in genes, but also through the work or labour of generations. If history is made 'out of' what is passed down, then history is made out of what is given not only in the sense of that which is 'always-already' there *before our arrival*, but in the active sense of the gift: as a gift, history is what we *receive upon arrival*.

Such an inheritance can be re-thought in terms of orientations: *we inherit the reachability of some objects*, those that are 'given' to us, or at least made available to us, within the 'what' that is around. I am not suggesting here that 'whiteness' is one such 'reachable object', but that whiteness is an orientation that puts certain things within reach. By objects, we would include not just physical objects, but also styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, habits. Race becomes, in this model, a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do 'things' with.

The world too is inherited as a dwelling. Whiteness might be what is 'here', as a point from which the world unfolds, which is also the point of inheritance. If whiteness is inherited, then it is also reproduced. Whiteness gets reproduced by being seen as a form of positive residence: as if it were a property of persons, cultures and places. Whiteness becomes, you could even say, 'like itself', as a form of family resemblance. It is no accident that race has been understood through familial metaphors in the sense that 'races' come to be seen as having 'shared ancestry' (Fenton, 2003: 2). Race in this model 'extends' the family form; other members of the race are 'like a family', just as the family is defined in racial terms. The analogy works powerfully to produce a particular version of race *and* a particular version of family, predicated on 'likeness', where likeness becomes a matter of 'shared attributes'.

What does it mean for attributes to be shared? Whilst sharing is often described as participation in something (we share this or that thing, or we have this or that thing in common), and even as the joy of taking part, sharing also involves division, or the ownership of *parts*. To have a share in something is to be invested in the value of that thing. The word itself we might note comes from the Old English word *scearu*, which refers to cutting or division. So the word 'share' which seems to point to commonality depends on both cutting and division, where things are cut up and distributed amongst others.

In everyday talk about such family connections, likeness is a sign of inheritance; *to look like a family is to 'look alike'*. I want to suggest another

way of thinking about the relationship between inheritance and likeness: we inherit proximities (and hence orientations), as our point of entry into a familial space, as 'a part' of a new generation. Such an inheritance in turn generates 'likeness'. This argument builds upon my claim in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004a), where I suggest that likeness is an *effect* of proximity or contact, which is then 'taken up' as a sign of inheritance. Here, I would also argue that likeness is an effect of proximity, rather than its cause, with an additional claim: we inherit proximities, although this is an inheritance that can be refused, and which does not fully determine a course of action. To suggest that we inherit proximities is also to point to how that past that is 'behind' our arrival restricts as well as enables human action: if we are shaped by 'what' we come into contact with, then we are also shaped by what we inherit, which de-limits the objects that we might come into contact with.

I would not wish to dismiss the discourse of 'family resemblance', but to offer a different account of its powerful function as a legislative device. One of the sayings that has always spoken to me is 'like two peas in a pod'. Anyone who has shelled peas would know of course that peas are not only alike and that seeing them as being alike is already to overlook some important differences. But it's the pod and not the peas that interests me here. This saying suggests for me that likeness is as an effect of *the proximity of shared residence*. This is not just an argument about nurture over nature (that the pod is a nurturing device), as this way of thinking relies on an overly simple logic of causality (the pod causes the peas). Rather the very proximity of pea-to-pea, as well as the intimacy of the dwelling, which surrounds them like a skin, shapes the very form of the peas. Likeness is not then 'in' the peas, let alone 'in' the pod, but is an effect of their contiguity, of how they are touched by each other and envelop each other. Or if we say that the peas 'share' the pod, then we can immediately see how the 'pod' does not simply generate what is 'shared' in the sense of what is in common, but also what gets divided or distributed into parts.

In the case of race, we would say that bodies come to be seen as 'alike', as for instance 'sharing whiteness' as a 'characteristic', as an effect of such proximities, where certain 'things' are already 'in place'. The familial is in a way like the 'pod', as a shared space of dwelling, in which things are shaped by their proximity to other things. 'The familial' is after all about 'the familiar': this is the world we implicitly know, as a world that is organized in specific ways. It is the world Fanon speaks of when he describes the 'implicit knowledge' we might have of 'where things are', as a knowledge that is exercised by orientations towards objects. Objects are familiar, for sure, but familiarity is also about our capacity to use objects, how they are within reach as objects we do things with. To think of this implicit knowledge as inherited is to think about how we inherit a relation to place and to placement: at home, things are not done a certain way, but the domestic 'puts things' in their place. Whiteness is inherited through the very placement of things.

Habit worlds

But how does whiteness hold its place? In this section I explore how white-ness 'holds' through habits. Public spaces take shape through the habitual actions of bodies, such that the contours of space could be described as habitual. I turn to the concept of habits to theorize not so much how bodies acquire their shape, but how spaces acquire the shape of the bodies that 'inhabit' them. We could think about the 'habit' in the 'in-habit'.

We need to examine not only how bodies become white, or fail to do so, but also how spaces can take on the very 'qualities' that are given to such bodies. In a way, we can think about the habitual as a form of inheritance. It is not so much that we inherit habits, although we can do so: rather the habitual can be thought of as a bodily and spatial form of inheritance. As Pierre Bourdieu (1977) shows us, we can link habits to what is un-conscious, and routine, or what becomes 'second nature'.[3] To describe whiteness as a habit, as second nature, is to suggest that whiteness is what bodies do, where the body takes the shape of the action. Habits are not 'exterior' to bodies, as things that can be 'put on' or 'taken off'. If habits are about what bodies do, in ways that are repeated, then they might also shape what bodies *can do*. For Merleau-Ponty, the habitual body is a body that acts in the world, where actions bring other things near. As he puts it:

> my body appears to me as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task. And indeed its spatiality is not, like that of external objects or like that of 'spatial sensations', a *spatiality of position*, but a *spatiality of situation*. If I stand in front of my desk and lean on it with both hands, only my hands are stressed and the whole of the body trails behind them like the tail of a comet. It is not that I am unaware of the whereabouts of my shoulder or back, but these are simply swallowed up in the position of my hands, and my whole posture can be read so to speak in the pressure they exert on the table. (2002: 114–5, emphasis in original)

Here, the directedness of the body towards an action (which we have discovered also means an orientation towards certain kinds of objects) is how the body 'appears'.[4] The body is 'habitual' not only in the sense that it performs actions repeatedly, but in the sense that when it performs such actions, *it does not command attention*, apart from at the 'surface' where it 'encounters' an external object (such as the hands that lean on the desk or table, which feel the 'stress' of the action). In other words, the body is habitual insofar as it 'trails behind' in the performing of action, insofar as it does not pose 'a problem' or an obstacle to the action, or is not 'stressed' by 'what' the action encounters. For Merleau-Ponty, the habitual body does not get in the way of an action: it is *behind the action*.

I want to suggest here that whiteness could be understood as 'the behind'. White bodies are habitual insofar as they 'trail behind' actions: they do not get 'stressed' in their encounters with objects or others, as their whiteness 'goes unnoticed'. Whiteness would be what lags behind; white bodies do not have to face their whiteness; they are not orientated 'towards' it, and this 'not' is what allows whiteness to cohere, as that which bodies are orientated around. When bodies 'lag behind', then they extend their reach.

It becomes possible to talk about the whiteness of space given the very accumulation of such 'points' of extension. Spaces acquire the 'skin' of the bodies that inhabit them. What is important to note here is that it is not just bodies that are orientated. Spaces also take shape by being orientated around some bodies, more than others. We can also consider 'institutions' as orientation devices, which take the shape of 'what' resides within them. After all, institutions provide collective or public spaces. When we describe institutions as 'being' white (institutional whiteness), we are pointing to how institutional spaces are shaped by the proximity of some bodies and not others: white bodies gather, and cohere to form the edges of such spaces. When I walk into university meetings that is just what I encounter. Sometimes I get used to it. At one conference we organize, four black feminists arrive. They all happen to walk into the room at the same time. Yes, we do notice such arrivals. The fact that we notice such arrivals tells us more about what is already in place than it does about 'who' arrives. Someone says: 'it is like walking into a sea of whiteness'. This phrase comes up, and it hangs in the air. The speech act becomes an object, which gathers us around.

So yes they walk into the room, and I notice that they were not there before, as a retrospective reoccupation of a space that I already inhabited. I look around, and re-encounter the sea of whiteness. As many have argued, whiteness is invisible and unmarked, as the absent centre against which others appear only as deviants, or points of deviation (Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993). Whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it, or those who get so used to its inhabitance that they learn not to see it, even when they are not it (see Ahmed, 2004b). Spaces are orientated 'around' whiteness, insofar as whiteness is not seen. We do not face whiteness; it 'trails behind' bodies, as what is assumed to be given. The effect of this 'around whiteness' is the institutionalization of a certain 'likeness', which makes non-white bodies feel uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different, when they take up this space.

The institutionalization of whiteness involves work: the institution comes to have a body as an effect of this work. It is important that we do not reify institutions, by presuming they are simply given and that they decide what we do. Rather, institutions become given, as an effect of the repetition of decisions made over time, which shapes the surface of institutional spaces. Institutions involve the accumulation of past decisions about how to allocate resources, as well as 'who' to recruit. Recruitment functions as a technology for the reproduction of whiteness. We can recall that Althusser's model of ideology is based on recruitment:

> ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by the very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey you there.' (1971: 163, emphasis in original)

The subject is recruited by turning around, which immediately associates recruitment with following a direction, as the direction that takes the line

of an address. To recruit can suggest both to renew and to restore. The act of recruitment, of bringing new bodies in, restores the body of the institution, which depends on gathering bodies to cohere as a body. Becoming a 'part' of an institution, which we can consider the demand to share in it, or even have a share of it, hence requires not only that one inhabits its buildings, but also that we follow its line: we might start by saying 'we'; by mourning its failures and rejoicing in its successes; by reading the documents that circulate within it, creating vertical and horizontal lines of communication; by the chance encounters we have with those who share its grounds. To be recruited is not only to join, but to sign up to a specific institution: to inhabit it *by turning around as a return of its address*.

Furthermore, recruitment creates the very ego ideal of the institution, what it imagines as the ideal that working 'at' the institution means working towards or even what it imagines expresses its 'character'. As scholars in critical management studies have shown us, organizations tend to recruit in their own image (Singh, 2002). The 'hey you' is not just addressed to anybody: some bodies more than others are recruited, those that can inherit the 'character' of the organization, by returning its image with a reflection that reflects back that image, what we could call a 'good likeness'. It is not just that there is a desire for whiteness that leads to white bodies getting in. Rather whiteness is what the institution is orientated 'around', so that even bodies that might not appear white still have to inhabit whiteness, if they are to get 'in'.

Institutions too involve orientation devices, which keep things in place. The affect of such placement could be described as a form of comfort. To be orientated, or to be at home in the world, is also to feel a certain comfort: we might only notice comfort as an affect when we lose it, when we become uncomfortable. The word 'comfort' suggests well-being and satisfaction, but it can also suggest an ease and easiness. Comfort is about an encounter between more than one body, which is the promise of a 'sinking' feeling. To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting the surfaces of bodies disappears from view. White bodies are comfortable *as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape*. The bodies and spaces 'point' towards each other, as a 'point' that is not seen as it is also 'the point' from which we see.

In other words, whiteness may function as a form of public comfort *by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape*. Those spaces are lived as comfortable as they allow bodies to fit in; the surfaces of social space are already impressed upon by the shape of such bodies. We can think of the chair beside the table. It might acquire its shape by the repetition of some bodies inhabiting it: we can almost see the shape of bodies as 'impressions' on the surface. So spaces extend bodies and bodies extend spaces. The impressions of the surface function as traces of such extensions. The surfaces of social as well as bodily space 'record' the repetition of acts, and the 'passing by' of some and not others.

It can be problematic to describe whiteness as something we 'pass through': such an argument could make whiteness into something substantive, as if whiteness has an ontological force of its own, which compels us, and even 'drives' action. It is important to remember that whiteness is not reducible to white skin, or even to 'something' we can have or be, even if we pass through whiteness. When we talk about a 'sea of whiteness' or 'white space' we are talking about the repetition of the passing by of some bodies and not others, for sure. But non-white bodies do inhabit white spaces; we know this. Such bodies are made invisible when we see spaces as being white, at the same time as they become hyper-visible when they do not pass, which means they 'stand out' and 'stand apart'. You learn to fade into the background, but sometimes you can't or you don't. The moments when the body appears 'out of place' are moments of political and personal trouble. As Nirmal Puwar shows us, when bodies arrive who seem 'out of place' in such institutional worlds we have a process of *disorientation*: people blink, and look again. The proximity of such bodies makes familiar spaces seem strange: 'People are "thrown" because a whole world view is jolted' (Puwar, 2004: 43).

Bodies stand out when they are out of place. Such standing re-confirms the whiteness of the space. Whiteness is an effect of what coheres rather than the origin of coherence. The effect of repetition is not then simply about a body count: it is not simply a matter of how many bodies are 'in'. Rather, what is repeated is a very style of embodiment, a way of inhabiting space, which claims space *by the accumulation of gestures of 'sinking' into that space*. If whiteness allows bodies to move with comfort through space, and to inhabit the world as if it were home, then those bodies take up more space. Such bodies are shaped by motility, *and may even take the shape of that motility*.

It is here that we can begin to complicate the relationship between motility and what I call 'institutional lines'. Some bodies, even those that pass as white, might still be 'out of line' with the institutions they inhabit. After all, institutions are meeting points, but they are also where different lines intersect, where lines cross with other lines, to create and divide spaces. We can recall here the importance of 'intersectionality' to black feminist theory. Given that relationships of power 'intersect', how we inhabit a given category depends on how we inhabit others (Lorde, 1984: 114–23; Brewer, 1993; Collins, 1998; Smith, 1998). There are 'points' in such intersections, as the 'points' where lines meet. A body is such a meeting point. To follow one line (say whiteness) will not necessarily get you too many points, if you do not or cannot follow others. How you can move along institutional lines is affected by other lines that you follow. What happens in these 'points' of intersection – whether we are knocked off course if we do not follow a given line – might not be determined before we arrive at that point, and might also depend on what else is behind us.

In a way, whiteness itself is a straightening device: bodies disappear into the 'sea of whiteness' when they 'line up'. This is not to make 'the fit' between bodies and spaces natural: white bodies can line up, only if they pass, by approximating whiteness, by 'being like'. To say that all bodies

have to pass as white is not to neutralize the difference between bodies. Whiteness is also a matter of what is behind, as a form of inheritance, which affects how bodies arrive in spaces and worlds. We accumulate behinds, just as what is behind is an effect of past accumulations. Some of us have more behind us than others at the very moment in which we arrive into the world. If you inherit class privilege, for instance, then you have more resources behind you, which can be converted into capital, into what can 'propel' you forward and up. Becoming white as an institutional line is closely related to the vertical promise of class mobility: you can move up only by approximating the habitus of the white bourgeois body (see Skeggs, 2003). Moving up requires inhabiting such a body, or at least approximating its style, whilst your capacity to inhabit such a body depends upon what is behind you. Pointing to this loop between the 'behind' and the 'up' is another way of describing how hierarchies get reproduced over time.

We could say that bodies 'move up' when their whiteness is not in dispute. And yet, whiteness does not always lag behind in the temporality of a life course. When someone's whiteness is in dispute, then they come under 'stress', which in turn threatens bodily motility, or what the body 'can do'. We could consider, for instance, how Husserl's phenomenology seems to involve an ease of movement, of being able to occupy the space around the table. Perhaps we could also see this mobile body as a body that 'can do' things, in terms of whiteness. This is not to locate such whiteness *in* the body of the philosopher. Husserl's biography might indeed help us here. For when Husserl's whiteness came into dispute, when he was read as being Jewish, he literally lost his chair: he temporarily lost the public recognition of his place as a philosopher.[5] It is no accident that such recognition is symbolically given through an item of furniture: to take up space is to be given an object, which allows the body to be occupied in a certain way. The philosopher must have his seat, after all. If we said that phenomenology is about whiteness, in the sense that it has been written from this 'point of view', as a point that is 'forgotten', then what phenomenology describes is not so much white bodies, but the ways in which bodies come to feel at home in spaces by being orientated in this way and that, where such bodies are not 'points' of stress or what we can call stress points. To make this point very simply: whiteness becomes a social and bodily orientation given that some bodies will be more at home in a world that is orientated around whiteness. If we began instead with disorientation, *with the body that loses its chair*, then the descriptions we offer will be quite different.

Being not

We might say that Frantz Fanon begins with a body that loses its chair, as a loss that precedes a relationship of having (being chaired). Rather than objects securing his place, his body becomes an object alongside other objects. The experience is one of nausea and the crisis of losing one's place in the world, as a loss of something that you have not been given. For the

black man, consciousness of the body is 'third person consciousness' and the feeling is one of negation (Fanon, 1986: 110). To feel negated is to feel pressure upon your bodily surface; your body feels the pressure point, as a restriction in what it can do. As Lewis R. Gordon suggests in his critique of Hegel, 'White people are universal, it is said and Black people are not' (1999: 34). If to be human is to be white, then to be not white is to inhabit the negative: it is to be 'not'. The pressure of this 'not' is another way of describing the social and existential realities of racism.

If classical phenomenology is about 'motility', expressed in the hopefulness of the utterance 'I can', Fanon's phenomenology of the black body would be better described in terms of the bodily and social experience of restriction, uncertainty and blockage, or perhaps even in terms of the despair of the utterance 'I cannot'. The black man, in becoming an object, no longer acts or extends himself; instead, he is amputated, losing his body (Fanon, 1986: 112). Husserl and Merleau-Ponty describe the body as 'successful', as being 'able' to extend itself (through objects) in order to act on and in the world. Fanon helps us to expose this 'success' not as a measure of competence, but as the bodily form of privilege: the ability to move through the world without losing one's way. To be black in 'the white world' is to turn back towards itself, to become an object, which means not only not being extended by the contours of the world, but being diminished as an effect of the bodily extensions of others.

For bodies that are not extended by the skin of the social, bodily movement is not so easy. Such bodies are stopped, where the stopping is an action that creates its own impressions. Who are you? Why are you here? What are you doing? Each question, when asked, is a kind of *stopping device*: you are stopped by being asked the question, just as asking the question requires that you be stopped. A phenomenology of 'being stopped' might take us in a different direction than one that begins with motility, with a body that 'can do' by flowing into space.

To stop involves many meanings: to cease, to end, and also to cut off, to arrest, to check, to prevent, to block, to obstruct or to close. Black activism has shown us how policing involves a differential economy of stopping: some bodies more than others are 'stopped', by being the subject of the policeman's address. The 'hey you' is not here addressed to the body that can inherit the ego ideal of an organization, or who can be recruited to follow a given line, but to the body who cannot be recruited, to the body that is 'out of place' in this place. In other words, the 'unrecruitable' body must still be 'recruited' into this place, through the very repetition of the action of 'being stopped'. The 'stop and search' is of course a technology of racism, as we know. The stop and search does not stop there: the search itself can be extended by practices of indefinite detention. Stopping is both a political economy, which is distributed unevenly between others, and an affective economy, which leaves its impressions, affecting those bodies that are subject to its address.

How does it feel to be stopped? Being stopped is not just stressful: it makes the 'body' itself the 'site' of social stress. Let me use a recent example of being stopped:

> I arrive in New York, clutching my British passport. I hand it over. He looks at me, and then looks at my passport. I know what questions will follow. 'Where are you from?' My passport indicates my place of birth. 'Britain', I say. I feel like adding, 'can't you read. I was born in Salford', but I stop myself. He looks down at my passport, not at me. 'Where is your father from?' It was the same last time I arrived in New York. It is the question I get asked now, which seems to locate what is suspect not in my body, but as that which has been passed down the family line, almost like a bad inheritance. 'Pakistan', I say, slowly. 'Do you have a Pakistani passport.' No, I say. Eventually, he lets me through. The name 'Ahmed', a Muslim name, slows me down. It blocks my passage, even if only temporarily. I get stuck, and then move on. When I fly out of New York later that week, I am held up again. This time it is a friendlier encounter. I find out I am now on the 'no fly list', and they have to ring to get permission to let me through. It takes time, of course. 'Don't worry,' he says, 'my mother is on it too.' I feel some strange comradeship with his mother. I know what he is saying: he means 'anyone' could be on this list, almost as if to say 'even my mother', whose innocence of course would be beyond doubt. I know it's a way of saying, 'it's not about you. Don't take it personally.' It isn't about me of course. And yet it involves me. My name names me after all. It might not be personal, but nor is it about 'anyone'. It is my name that slows me down.

In the encounter I describe at the borders of New York City, I become a stranger, again, made strange by the name I have been given. In everyday language, a stranger would be anybody we do not know. When we don't recognize someone, then they are a stranger. In *Strange Encounters*, I suggested an alternative model: I suggest that we recognize some people *as* strangers, and that 'some bodies' more than others are recognizable as strangers, as bodies that are 'out of place' (Ahmed, 2000). The stranger has a place by being 'out of place' at home.

   Not all those at the borders, such as tourists, migrants, or foreign nationals, are recognized as strangers; some will seem more 'at home' than others, some will pass through, with their passports extending physical motility into social mobility. There is no question posed about their origin. The stranger's genealogy in contrast is always suspect. The stranger becomes a stranger because of some trace of a dubious origin. Having the 'right' passport makes no difference if you have the wrong body or name: and indeed, the stranger with the 'right' passport might cause particular trouble, as the one who risks passing through. The discourse of 'stranger danger' reminds us that danger is often posited as originating from what is outside the community, or as coming from outsiders, those people who are not 'at home', and who themselves have come from 'somewhere elsewhere' (where the 'where' of this 'elsewhere' always makes a difference). The politics of mobility, of who gets to move with ease across the lines that divide spaces, can be re-described as the politics of who gets to be at home, who gets to inhabit spaces, as spaces that are inhabitable for some bodies and not others, insofar as they extend the surfaces of some bodies and not others.

   Those who get stopped are *moved in a different way*. I have suggested that my name slows me down. A Muslim name. If we do inherit habits, we can also inherit what fails to become habitual: to inherit a Muslim name,

in the West, is to inherit the impossibility of a body that can 'trail behind', or even to inherit the impossibility of extending the body's reach. For the body recognized as 'could be Muslim', which translates into 'could be terrorist' (Ahmed, 2004a), the experience begins with discomfort: spaces we occupy do not 'extend' the surfaces of our bodies. But our actions anticipate more. Having been singled out in the line, at the borders, we become defensive; we assume a defensive posture, as we 'wait' for the line of racism, to take our rights of passage away. If we inherit the failure of things to be habitual, then we might also acquire a tendency to look behind us.

To be not white is to be not extended by the spaces you inhabit. This is an uncomfortable feeling. Comfort is a feeling that tends not to be consciously felt, as I have suggested. You sink. When you don't sink, when you fidget and move around, then what is in the background becomes in front of you, as a world that is gathered in a specific way. Discomfort, in other words, allows things to move by bringing what is in the background, what gets over-looked as furniture, back to life. In a way, the experience of not being white in a white world not only gives us a different viewing point, but it disorientates how things are arranged. This 'not' does not always feel negative. Every experience I have had of pleasure and excitement about a world opening up has begun with such ordinary feelings of discomfort, of not quite fitting in a chair, of becoming unseated, of being left holding onto the ground. So yes, if we start with the body that loses its chair, the world we describe will be quite different.

Conclusion: on arrival

The experience of negation, of being stopped or feeling out of place, or feeling uncomfortable, does not 'stop' there. When the arrival of some bodies is noticed, when an arrival is noticeable, it generates disorientation in how things are arranged. But does this disorientation involve disorientating whiteness? Is arriving enough? Of course, our arrival did not just happen. It took collective work, and painstaking labour. For me, now, here, based as I am in higher education in Britain, I receive an alternative inheritance from this history of collective action, and I receive it every day, simply by walking on *this* ground, which has been cleared by such action. Our arrival at British universities was only possible given the history of black activism, both in the UK and transnationally, which has cleared this ground.

And yet, we can arrive, and things can stay in place. Organizations can recover from disorientation, and they can use disorientation to recover. I am giving a paper about whiteness to a very white audience.[6] I can feel the discomfort, perhaps. It is hard to know sometimes whether feelings are in the room or are a matter of our orientation; the impressions we have of the room by virtue of the angle at which we are placed. I feel uncomfortable, let's say that. Someone struggles to ask a question. Basically he asks, 'but you are a professor now. How does that fit?' The question can be re-phrased: 'how can what you say about whiteness be true, given that *you*

can become a professor?' The discomfort, we can see, exposes the very failure to fit.

The very fact of our arrival can be used as evidence that the whiteness of which we speak is no longer in place. I was appointed to teach 'the race course', I reply. I am the only person of colour employed on a full-time permanent basis in the department, I say. It becomes too personal. The argument is too much to sustain when your body is so exposed, when you feel so noticeable. I stop, and do not complete my answer to the question.

When our appointments and promotion are taken up as signs of organizational commitment to equality and diversity, we are in trouble. Any success is read as a sign of an overcoming of institutional whiteness. 'Look, you're here!', 'Look, look!' Our talk about racism is read as a form of stubbornness, paranoia, or even melancholia, as if we are holding onto something (whiteness) that our arrival shows has already gone. Our talk about whiteness is read as a sign of ingratitude, of failing to be grateful for the hospitality we have received by virtue of our arrival. It is this very structural position of being the guest, or the stranger, the one who receives hospitality, which keeps us in certain places, even when you move up.[7] So, if you 'move up', then you come to embody the social promise of diversity, which gives you a certain place. It is the very use of black bodies as signs of diversity that confirms such whiteness, premised on a conversion of having to being: as if by having us, the organization can 'be' diverse.

Diversity in this world becomes then a happy sign, a sign that racism has been overcome. In a research project into diversity work,[8] I encounter what I call 'an institutional desire for good practice'. This desire takes the form of an expectation that publicly funded research on race, diversity and equality should be useful, and should provide techniques for achieving equality and challenging institutional racism. In actual terms, this involves a desire to hear 'happy stories of diversity' rather than unhappy stories of racism. We write a report about how good practice and anti-racist tool kits are being used as technologies of concealment, displacing racism from public view. Anti-racism even becomes a new form of organizational pride. The response to our final report: too much focus on racism, we need more evidence of good practice. The response to your work is symptomatic of what you critique. They don't even notice the irony. You have been funded to 'show' their commitment to diversity and are expected to return their investment by giving evidence of its worth.

Within academic fields, I would argue, we can also witness this desire for happy stories of diversity, although the desire takes different form. When I give papers on whiteness I am always asked about resistance, as a sign of how things can be otherwise. Some of these questions take the form of 'what can white people do?' The sheer solipsism of this response must be challenged. We can recall Adrienne Rich's description of white solipsism: 'to speak, imagine and think as if whiteness described the world' (1979: 299). To respond to accounts of institutional whiteness with the question 'what can white people do?' is not only to return to the place of the white subject, but it is also to locate agency in this place. It is also to

re-position the white subject as somewhere other than implicated in the critique.

Other questions do not re-centre on the agency of white bodies, but just on the need for some kind of understanding of power that shows that things don't always hold; that shows the cracks, the movement, the instabilities and that appreciates how much things have changed, even whilst recognizing that there is much left to do. So one response to my considering of whiteness has been 'is there any sense that resistance is possible in this account?' And, 'if whiteness is a bad habit, what might it be replaced with?' You become obliged to give evidence of where things can be undone; to locate the point of undoing, somewhere or another, even if that location is not in the world, but in the very mode of your critique. What does it mean if we assume that critiques have to leave room for resistance, as room-making devices? This desire to make room is understandable – if the work of critique does not show that its object can be undone, or promise to undo its object, then what is the point of that critique? But this desire can also become an object for us to investigate. The desire for signs of resistance can also be a form for resistance to hearing about racism. If we want to know how things can be different *too quickly*, then we might not hear anything at all.

The desire for resistance is not the same as the desire for good practice. And yet, both desires can involve a defence against hearing about racism as an ongoing and unfinished history that we have yet to describe fully. We still need to describe how it is that the world of whiteness coheres as a world, even as we tend to the 'stresses' in this coherence, and the uneven distribution of such stress. A phenomenology of whiteness helps us to notice institutional habits; it brings what is behind, what does not get seen as the background to social action, to the surface in a certain way. It does not teach us how to change those habits and that is partly the point. In not being promising, in refusing to promise anything, such an approach to whiteness can allow us to keep open the force of the critique. It is by showing how we are stuck, by attending to what is habitual and routine in 'the what' of the world, that we can keep open the possibility of habit changes, without using that possibility to displace our attention to the present, and without simply wishing for new tricks.

Notes

1. The signs of occupation are also signs of gender. In other words, philosophy can be described as a gendered form of occupation, which is not to say that only men do philosophy, but rather that 'doing philosophy' has historically been a masculine form of work. For an exploration of gender and orientation see Young (2005). See Ahmed (2006) for an extension of these arguments.
2. This quote within the quote is drawn from Jean Lhermitte's *L'Image de notre corps*.
3. For work that uses Bourdieu's concept of habitus, to explore the racialized body see Wicker (1997), Hage (1998) and Puwar (2004).
4. It is worth noting here that the word 'habit' comes from the Latin for condition, appearance and dress.

5. Thanks to Imogen Tyler for encouraging me to think about the significance of Husserl's loss of a chair for my argument about whiteness, and to Mimi Sheller for her insights into the politics of mobility.

6. I am very indebted here to Audre Lorde who described so well the dynamics of resistance to hearing the force of critique implicit in black women's anger about racism. Lorde gives us accounts of her interactions with white academics at conferences to show the subtle and not so subtle mechanisms of defence against hearing black women's arguments about racism (see 1984: 124–6).

7. For papers on the continued marginalization of black women in British higher education institutions see Mirza (2006) and Jones (2006).

8. I was involved in a project assessing the turn to diversity within the learning and skills sector (including adult and community and learning, and further education), as well as higher education between 2004–6. I was co-director of this project with Elaine Swan, and the project team included Shona Hunter, Sevgi Kilic and Lewis Turner. My own study was based in higher education, and involved 20 interviews with diversity practitioners in Australia (Ahmed, 2007a) and the UK (Ahmed, 2007b).

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