

# TOWARDS A MORE CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF WHITENESS

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Grounded in and influenced by the work of thinkers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Frantz Fanon, Iris Marion Young, and Lewis Gordon, critical phenomenologists have in the last decade produced numerous groundbreaking analyses of the lived experiences of racialization and racism, disability, misogyny, and transphobia. Additionally, thinkers such as Lisa Guenther, Linda Martín Alcoff, George Yancy, and Sara Ahmed have also approached whiteness through a phenomenological lens. Yet rather than proceed by primarily describing and analyzing the lived experience of any given white individual, these analyses proceed by revealing how whiteness operates and is reproduced not only through laws and political institutions, but also more “locally” through the habits and perceptual practices of white and white-adjacent people. Thus, unlike Blackness, which for W.E.B. Du Bois (2007) stands out as a “problem,” whiteness is that which is seldom considered, and which thus operates as a “transcendental norm,” a “background to experience,” a “natural attitude,” and a “sociogenic force.” Whiteness remains invisible while structuring the world, its benefits, and its privileges in favor of those who consciously and unconsciously participate in it, and through the exclusion of everyone else. However, in this article, I want to suggest that such accounts ultimately collapse whiteness and the white subject, imagining the latter simply as an embodiment of the former, and for this reason, lack explanatory power. I argue that a critical phenomenological account of whiteness must go further by looking more closely at the relationship between white subjects and whiteness, and more specifically, at the tensions, gaps, and contradictions between them, as these are not accidental but central to the very constitution of whiteness and to the power it wields over its subjects.

I begin by reflecting upon critical phenomenology as a method and orientation by briefly looking at one of its foundational texts: Fanon’s (1967) discussion of the corporeal schema of Blackness in chapter five of *Black Skin, White Masks*. Then, I sketch Ahmed’s (2006; 2007) and Guenther’s (2019) critical phenomenological analyses of whiteness. I

show that Ahmed and Guenther do not adapt or expand Fanon's analysis to account for whiteness so much as they simply *invert* it, thereby collapsing the relationship between the white subject and whiteness. In both accounts, that is, the white subject, as the inversion of Fanon's Black subject, is taken to successfully embody and fulfill the norms of whiteness: a sense of motility, of being at ease in the world, a constant sense of "I can." Finally, I show that Ahmed's and Guenther's accounts do not sufficiently account for the contradictions between white subjects in their whiteness, for the failure of white subjects to achieve the ideals of ease and motility constitutive of whiteness, and for the failure of whiteness to deliver upon its promises to white subjects. I argue that these analyses, while insightful, fail both as readings of Fanon and as accounts of the operations of whiteness and the experiences and actions of its subjects.

Here it is important to clarify that in making this argument, I am not asking for or pursuing a more sympathetic analysis of whiteness, nor is the goal to center injustices faced by white people. Rather, my argument is that the failure to account for white failure—for the contradictions immanent to whiteness—leaves us with an account that cannot sufficiently explain its operations, functions, and pathologies. Thus, I am pursuing here not a more sympathetic account, but a more precise, materially-grounded, and ultimately, more explanatory analysis of whiteness. A more critical analysis, that is.

## I. WHITENESS AND THE "I CAN"

Before focusing more specifically on Guenther's (2019) and Ahmed's (2006) analyses of whiteness, I provide a brief overview of what I take critical phenomenology to be and to do. In the introduction to *Solitary Confinement and its Afterlives*, Guenther defines critical phenomenology as "a method that is rooted in first-person accounts of experience but also critical of classical phenomenology's claim that the first-person singular is absolutely prior to intersubjectivity and to the complex textures of social life" (2013, xiii). Critical phenomenology, as we will continue to see, might be said to consist of two principal and simultaneous moves: 1) the use of a phenomenological approach to describe and analyze domination and oppression along the lines of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and class (understood as connected and intersecting in multiple ways) as they are lived and experienced, indeed, as they structure the world as it appears for differently-positioned subjects, and 2) as a critical and reflective approach to phenomenology itself as both a tradition and as a method. These moves are mutually supportive, as classical phenomenology—and here, "classical" is both a historical and methodological marker—has failed to analyze and account for such experiences precisely because it has so seldom been performed by those in a position to describe them, and is thus methodologically insufficient for analyzing, indeed even for being able to see and conceive of the many varieties of experience it has ignored thus far. Such analyses thus require a rethinking of the method itself and vice versa.

With these broad parameters in mind, I want to briefly look at what might be considered one of the foundational moments for the development of critical phenomenology,

namely, chapter five of Fanon's (1967) *Black Skin, White Masks*, "The Lived Experience of the Black Man." His brief but groundbreaking development of the "Historico-Racial" and "Racial Epidermal" schemas continues to influence and inform the concepts and argumentative moves utilized by critical phenomenological analyses of race in general and of whiteness more specifically. Through an engagement with Merleau-Ponty's (as well as Jean Lhermitte's) notion of the bodily schema, Fanon's analysis uncovers a constitutive contradiction at the heart of Black existence between a nonnormative (Black) subject and the norms and structures that objectify him. Such norms constitute whiteness and the white world as a quasi-transcendental structure that "generate[s] and consolidate[s] meaning by normalizing some habits of perception, cognition, and comportment while pathologizing others" (Guenther 2021, 6).

This engagement begins with Fanon's description of the body schema as it *should* function:

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. A slow composition of my *self* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world—such seems to be the schema. It does not impose itself on me; it is, rather, a definitive structuring of the self and of the world—definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world. (1967, 110–11; emphasis in original)

So far so good, it seems. Yet, Fanon's corporeal schema—his awareness of his body as it moves towards its task—is interrupted, indeed has always already been interrupted, by the white gaze and by the ongoing process of racialization. "In the white world," he says, "the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema" (110). Whereas for Merleau-Ponty the bodily schema is what Gail Weiss has usefully called an "enabling phenomenon that facilitates a dynamic rapport between myself and the world" (2015, 86), for the Black subject, "consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity" (Fanon 1967, 110). Thus, Fanon explains that

below the corporeal schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me not by "residual sensations and perceptions primarily of a tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, and visual character," but by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories. (111)

There is thus a contradiction at the heart of the lived experience of the Black subject: between self and world, between the body's motility and its imprisonment in and through the political regimes and thousand details and stories which constitute the colonial world. This tension and the Black subject's internalization of the historico-racial schema constitute the emergence of the racial-epidermal schema (rather than being their result in a causal

chain) and the Black subject's fragmentation. "Then," Fanon says, "assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema . . . I existed triply" (1967, 112). What matters here is the way that this structure forecloses Fanon's enjoyment of his bodily intentionality and of the dynamic relation between self, body, and world which Merleau-Ponty's analysis promises. But further, it opens him up (or, more specifically, renders him vulnerable) to a set of experiences and ways of being in the world which Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the corporeal schemas essentially misses and cannot properly account for. As Axelle Karera explains,

the racial epidermal schema explains the failure of Merleau-Ponty's concept in its attempt to provide an account of the co-constitution of self and world. It also reveals that, for the black, the conditions under which intersubjectivity yields self-knowledge are radically compromised." (2019, 291)

Thus, while Fanon himself does not use this formulation, Ahmed argues that

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." (2007, 161)

What does this approach look like when applied to whiteness, to the site of the white norm from which Fanon is excluded? As I show, Ahmed and Guenther invert Fanon's analysis in their respective accounts, deriving from his account of Blackness as fragmented and objectified an account of whiteness as—by definition—coherent, motile, and comfortable. And while their analyses of Fanon's Blackness rightfully emphasize the gap and failures between the Black subject and the white norm, their accounts of whiteness deemphasize and, ultimately, collapse the gaps between this norm and the white subject, thus leaving little space for an account of failure or contradiction within whiteness. A phenomenology of whiteness is therefore primarily a phenomenology of the "I can." But for this reason, Ahmed and Guenther are unable to account for instances of white failure: when the white subject, qua white, finds herself in the position of the "I cannot."

For Ahmed, Fanon's experience is that of having his body "'stopped' in its tracks" and rendered disoriented by the white world (2006, 110). With his corporeal schema crumbled and replaced by the historico-racial schema below it, Fanon finds himself interrupted and unable to move seamlessly in the world or to project himself forward toward his task. "The disorientation affected by racism," explains Ahmed, "diminishes capacities for action" (111). Whiteness, on the other hand but by the same logic, emerges as the inverse of this disorientating incapacitation, as that which has the power to orient and disorient, to enable and incapacitate. It is not merely an orientation among others, but rather, "the 'starting point' for orientation" (121). It designates "what is 'here,' a line from which the world unfolds,

which also makes what is ‘there’ on ‘the other side’” (Ahmed 2006, 121). If Fanon’s body interrupts and is interrupted by the white world, whiteness is that which gives this world coherence.

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed (2006) argues that the coherence of whiteness is maintained through a logic of sameness and proximity, which whiteness works to maintain, reproduce, and expand. In thinking about how whiteness reproduces itself and how it is inherited, Ahmed moves away from biological understandings of reproduction, inheritance, and likeness. Rather than thinking about whiteness as a biological or phenotypical property of bodies (though, she explains, it behaves *as if* it were), Ahmed suggests

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.

That is to say, what makes someone recognizable as white, which *appears* as an inherited likeness, is first and foremost an inherited proximity to whiteness. Ahmed thus reverses the apparent causal order of reproduction: “likeness is an effect of proximity rather than its cause” (123). Through proximity, whiteness renders difference (phenotypical and otherwise) into sameness.

White people are thus rendered white by their inherited proximity and thus, their orientation towards and around whiteness, which represents for Ahmed a “bodily and social orientation that extends what is within reach” (129). Fanon, as we saw, is stopped from being able to move freely towards the objects and tasks around him, made instead into an object among other objects. Whiteness, by contrast, reproduces and thus extends *itself* by enabling the white subject’s capacity to extend *themselves* and reach towards objects and goals, while also extending, and rendering available, those objects towards them. Such extensions are both actualized and naturalized through the work of habit as “dispositions and tendencies, acquired by the frequent repetition of an act” (130). As with likeness and proximity, what are, in fact, repetitive actions and habits take on the appearance of identities. “[T]he repetition of the tending *toward* is what identity ‘coheres’ *around*,” argues Ahmed, and thus, “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” (129; emphasis in original). Such habits, finally, shape and *racialize* the space in which they take place, and such spaces, in turn, welcome, enable, and naturalize the habits of such bodies. Whiteness, on this view, manifests itself as bodily comfort, as being at home in one’s body and in one’s space. “To be comfortable,” says Ahmed,

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 . . . White bodies are comfortable as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape. (134)

Whiteness capacitates such bodies in their ability to extend themselves and to reach their intended objects, rendering such objects reachable for them. “We can hence redescribe the phenomenology of the ‘I can’,” Ahmed concludes,

as a phenomenology of whiteness. Such a phenomenology, in other words, *describes the ease with which the white body extends itself in the world through how it is orientated toward objects and others.* (Ahmed 2006, 138; emphasis in original)

Whiteness is thus that which goes unnoticed, but which renders white subjects mobile and comfortable in the (white) world.

We find a similar, albeit more violent, phenomenological account of whiteness in Guenther's (2019) essay, "Seeing Like a Cop." Whereas Ahmed frames whiteness around notions of sameness and reproduction, Guenther—who grounds her argument in the relationship between property, gentrification, and policing—conceives of whiteness in terms of expansion and protection with all their violent genealogies and implications. Following Cheryl Harris's (1993) groundbreaking article, Guenther aims to provide "a critical phenomenology of whiteness as property and as collective investment in state violence to protect white property interests" (2019, 191). For Guenther, this entails thinking about whiteness not just as a "piece" of property, but more specifically, as a "property right," one which permits and incentivizes the violent policing of whiteness and its various entitlements against perceived threats. Whiteness so conceived represents a *sociogenic force*, "a material, historical power to generate and intensify particular forms of social being, including individuated subjects and the spatiotemporal order that Fanon calls 'the white world'" (192). Notably, Guenther clarifies that such an analysis is not the same as and does not entail a phenomenological description of "the thoughts, feelings, perceptions, or desires of white people, understood as individual subjects" (191). And like Ahmed, Guenther moves beyond an idea of whiteness as a simple identity, as something that a given individual *is*. Instead, Guenther conceives of the relationship between the white subject and whiteness as one of *investment*. Whiteness, as a sociogenic force, protects and expands itself as a property right, and produces white subjects who constitute themselves as white through their investment in and protection of this property. As stated above, such an investment manifests itself in the complicity and active participation in the policing and expansion of whiteness, in collective forms of state violence, and the more individual and habitual practices of "seeing like a cop."

Guenther (2019) moves on to a closer examination of this mutually supporting and mutually beneficial relationship, of this investment and its returns. She asks,

how are white people—even or especially white people in relatively marginalized positions with respect to gender, class, and ethnicity—recruited to police the boundaries of a social order that promises advancement in return for complicity with racist state violence? What forms of emotional and material investment does this recruitment demand as a condition for feelings of safety, belonging, and propriety?

Here, Guenther turns to and reverses Fanon's account, asking "to what extent might the basic structures of Fanon's analysis help us understand how whiteness as property (re)produces the lived experiences of those who think they are white?" (198). We recall,

once again, Fanon's account of the corporeal schema: its interruption and its breakdown in a white world. How, then, would a *white* corporeal schema operate within a world made for it? Guenther argues,

while the white world disrupts the corporeal schema of those who are racialized as black, it supports the coherence of white corporeal schemas and facilitates their operative intentionality, or their implicit sense of “I can.” (2019, 198)

Thus, as in Ahmed's account, Guenther's critical phenomenology of whiteness conceives of the white subject's relationship to whiteness primarily—indeed, *exclusively*—as an enabling and capacitating relationship. Guenther thus states,

the naturalized, normalized schema of white embodiment posits an ideal of unimpeded capacity—a fluid passage from *I want* to *I can* and *I do*—that facilitates a sense of comfort and ease in a wide range of different situations and spaces. It even fosters a sense of *entitlement* to feel comfortable and capable in the (white) world. (199; emphasis in original)

The white subject thus invests in and polices whiteness as property, in the ideal of unimpeded capacity, and is thus enabled to attain this ideal. It not only produces the white world, but furthermore, it promises the white subject that the world is theirs—and indeed, fulfills this promise.

## II. WHITE FAILURE

But can such promises ever fail to materialize? Can the white subject fail to meet the norms and ideals of unimpeded capacity and the feelings of belonging and security constitutive of the white world? I think it's clear that the answer is yes. We need not look far for examples of failure, despair, misery, violence, and death among and between white subjects, even as they maintain their privileged position in a white world. Here, I want to show that both Ahmed's and Guenther's analyses fail to adequately address such failures as well as the gaps and contradictions between white subjects and whiteness. To the extent that Ahmed and Guenther acknowledge such contradictions, I show, they either export the contradiction to a different category—such as gender, sexuality, or class—so as to maintain the purity of their accounts of whiteness, or, in Guenther's case, misidentify its character, and thus miscast it as a primarily *moral* contradiction rather than a material one.

Following the spatial language of her account, Ahmed (2006) thinks about the inheritance and accumulation of resources as an inheritance of *behinds*, in the sense that these resources—which are often naturalized and invisible—make possible certain orientations and certain possibilities. Thus, “*we accumulate ‘behinds,’ just as what is ‘behind’ is an effect of past accumulations*” (137; emphasis in original). We can think about class differences, even

between white people, as differences between “behinds,” which make possible their greater accumulation. “If you inherit class privilege,” she says, “then you have more resources behind you, which can be converted into capital, into what can ‘propel’ you forward and up” (Ahmed 2006, 137). Those who do not have class privilege cannot as easily accumulate capital and move forward *or* up as whiteness tends to. Thus, whiteness here appears not to be enough to achieve success or upward mobility, and not every white subject will be equally comfortable in a white world. Ahmed explains:

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 . . . 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. (137–38)

Here, we can begin to think about whiteness a bit differently, for we are faced with the possibility of a white subject who is excluded from, or who fails to approximate, the “white bourgeois body,” and thus fails to receive the upward mobility promised by whiteness. In what sense is their experience characterized by an unimpeded “I can?” But before we can ponder such questions for too long, Ahmed explains in a note that “this is why white working-class bodies can be seen as not ‘really’ white” (198n19). Indeed, as she goes to argue, we may think of such white bodies who do not meet the norms of whiteness, and who fail to move “up,” as bodies whose whiteness is called into question. Thus, she says,

we could say that bodies “move up” when their whiteness is not in dispute . . . when somebody’s whiteness is in dispute they come under “stress,” which in turn threatens bodily motility or what the body “can do.” (138)

What I hope to highlight here is a logic whereby the category of whiteness—which we saw is characterized by its motility and capacity—must remain pure and coherent, such that any account of failures and contradictions internal to it must be overlooked, or in this case, must be externalized, such that it becomes a contradiction *between* whiteness and some other category, in this case, class. In such cases, the white working-class subject fails or suffers qua working-class, rather than qua white, and in his or her failure to reproduce whiteness, the white subject *fails* to be white, and thereby, puts their whiteness in dispute. Insofar as he is white, he does not fail, and insofar as he fails, he ceases to be white. Thus, whiteness maintains its internal coherence and its promise.

Guenther’s (2019) account is in my view much closer to theorizing the contradictions immanent to whiteness, which suggest themselves throughout her analysis. She speaks, for instance, of white subjects’ investment in whiteness as a choice to “*continue to invest in whiteness as property* in the face of multiple tensions, disruptions, and contradictions” such as their relative marginalization along non-racial lines (194; emphasis in original). And, as she clarifies during her analysis of a white corporeal schema, her view does not



imply “that nothing can ever go wrong for white people, or that we never experience any friction between ourselves and the world that has been constructed to serve our interests” (Ahmed 2006, 199). “Rather,” she explains, “it means that the *logic* of whiteness as property normalizes the smooth coordination of (masculine, straight, middle-class) white bodies with a spatiotemporal context that affirms and supports their existence” (199; emphasis in original).<sup>1</sup> Guenther gives us room to think about the gaps and the friction between white subjects and the norms and promises of whiteness. Things do in fact go wrong for white people, but the *logic* of whiteness as property tends towards motility, capacity, and success. Much like Ahmed, furthermore, Guenther argues that whiteness alone is not enough, that the promise of motility is tied to a broader intersection of categories: whiteness, masculinity, straightness, and a middle-class status. But here again, the white subject’s failure would result from their poverty or their queerness, and whiteness would always have a protective and supportive power, standing as a bulwark against these deficiencies. Thus, following Harris, Guenther (2019) explains that “whiteness has continued to function as a property interest that protects white people from being at the bottom of a social hierarchy, even if they are otherwise marginalized on the basis of class, gender, sexuality, or ability.” Notably, though, protection here does not mean success or comfort in an unqualified sense. “An investment in whiteness as property may not guarantee financial stability to individual white people,” she explains, “but it does pay what W. E. B. Du Bois calls the “‘public and psychological wages’ of whiteness” (191). An account of Du Bois’s famous concept is beyond our scope,<sup>2</sup> but suffice it to say that Guenther’s invocation of the concept speaks to a more complicated view of whiteness and its promises than Ahmed’s view, one in which whiteness helps stabilize (and not always in material terms) the experience of the white subject without fully overcoming the gaps and failures immanent to whiteness, and without such failures putting the subject’s whiteness in dispute.

Guenther follows these gaps and tensions until she reaches, in her final remarks, what she finds to be a “fundamental contradiction” generated by “the corporeal schema of whiteness as property” between two divergent tendencies felt by the white subject who invests in their whiteness: a tendency towards enclosure, and a tendency towards expansion (199). Like the Black subject in Fanon’s analysis, Guenther argues that the white subject is also constructed as an object in and by the white world and through the operation of a racial epidermal schema. Yet this objecthood is not the source of immobility and incapacity, as it is for Fanon, but rather a property relation, the white subject constituting a form of “self-owning property that inherits and invests in its own value” (201). And yet, it is this relationship of self-ownership and self-valorization that produces a contradiction in the experience of the white subject. Guenther states that “the spatiotemporal effect

<sup>1</sup> It is not clear, however, why Guenther and Ahmed focus on “middle-class bodies” as normative rather than “ruling class” ones, especially given that Ahmed also refers to such bodies as “bourgeois” (2006, 137–38).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to clarify that Du Bois does not imply that these so-called “public and psychological wages” are equal to, or make up for a lack of, financial stability (1998, 700). Rather, Du Bois theorizes these “wages” as a political tool through which the former plantocracy recruited poor whites in the postbellum South into a cross-class alliance to foreclose any cross-racial solidarity between workers and former slaves. This analysis in fact points us to a central tension within whiteness, and to the fact that whiteness cannot be theorized apart from a materialist analysis of capitalism.

of this construction is not imprisonment,” as it is for Fanon, “but rather self-seclusion in a securitized zone that is served and protected by racist state violence,” and which nevertheless continues to expand (Guenther 2019, 201). The white subject thus experiences a contradiction between the desire for security and for expansion: “How can I both secure my investment and also take the risks that will allow my investment to grow?” (202).

But, as we know, in a capitalist society people do indeed protect *and* expand their property. And though the attempt to expand might expose one to risks and render them less secure, there is nothing logically or empirically contradictory between these two desires. Thus, it is not a *material* contradiction which Guenther offers, that is, a contradiction between the promises of whiteness and what it ends up delivering. Rather the contradiction is experienced in *other* areas of the white subject’s experience as a result of this pursuit of secure and expansive property—in this case, in their capacity for social and ethical relations. Guenther thus explains that

while there are many material benefits to be drawn from this construction, and while the white world is structured to normalize and incentivize the fusion of personhood with property, whiteness is a (very privileged) form of “corporeal malediction” in the sense that it degrades others and diminishes its own social capacity for ethical connection and community. (201)

The “fundamental contradiction” generated by whiteness is thus a kind of moral contradiction, and this malediction does not represent a failure for whiteness but is rather the price it pays for its success. And this conception of whiteness and its contradiction, finally, has clear and important implications. For Guenther, the choice to invest in, or to divest from, whiteness is a *moral* choice which white people must make. It is a choice between property, security, and belonging, on one hand, and humanity—both the humanity of oppressed non-white people and white people themselves—on the other (194).

Thus, in Ahmed’s and Guenther’s critical phenomenological accounts, whiteness—as orientation, habitus, sociogenic force, and property—constitutes the world as a white world, made for the comfort and movement—the “I can”—of its white subjects, whom it forms and recruits into maintaining, protecting, and expanding it at the cost of the exclusion and domination of non-white people. Though there are tensions within whiteness, especially in its relations to other social categories and identities—such as class, gender, sexuality, and ability—whiteness remains coherent and materially beneficial for its subjects. The white subject’s failure to attain or to achieve the sense of being at ease in the world, which whiteness promises, primarily represents a failure to be a proper white subject. If there is any hope for the abolition of white supremacy, then it lies in part on white people’s willingness to make a moral choice: continue to reap the guaranteed benefits of whiteness or surrender them and stand with its victims.

While these accounts are insightful and helpful, they are, I argue, one-sided insofar as they export or displace the tensions and contradictions, which are immanent to whiteness, thus isolating the “logic” of whiteness—its ideal and its promise—from its

concrete operations and from the lived experience of the subjects it produces. But for this reason, these accounts remain incomplete. To equate, as Ahmed does, a phenomenology of the “I can” with a phenomenology of whiteness is ultimately to claim that classical phenomenology has already (albeit unbeknownst to itself) theorized whiteness, and that what is needed is simply to name and make apparent the whiteness that was previously latent. Similarly, in her clarification that she is focusing on whiteness as a sociogenic force rather than on the consciousness and experience of individual white subjects, Guenther points us to the insufficiency of her analysis and to what is yet to be done by a critical phenomenology of whiteness.

Yet we can already find the seeds of a more critical analysis in Ahmed’s and Guenther’s accounts. As we saw, Ahmed (2006) argues that the subject who fails to embody whiteness thereby fails to be white. But to take this analysis seriously is to realize that the threat of expulsion from whiteness is not incidental, but central to whiteness, structuring the white subject’s relationship to it. At the same time, we must complicate the nature of this threat. In the same note in which she claims that the white working-class subject can be seen as not “really” white, Ahmed clarifies that nevertheless “the white working classes are not ‘on the same line’ as the black working classes” (198n19). That is, they can be seen as not “really” white, but not to such a degree that they truly become not-white. Thus, Ahmed’s own account of the ease and mobility of whiteness cannot help but lead us to its inherent instability: to a white subject who must work to maintain their whiteness under the threat of expulsion, and to a space *within* whiteness for subjects who have failed to meet the norm of whiteness, white subjects who in some sense can be considered not “really” white in comparison to more successful white subjects.

Guenther does not deny that there are tensions and contradictions within whiteness, but ultimately locates them in what she takes to be the divergent tendencies towards security and expansion, and finally in the moral choice to invest in one’s whiteness, in giving up one’s humanity in exchange for the material and psychic benefits of whiteness. Yet, the account would seem to overflow the moral and voluntaristic framing that Guenther gives it here. For if, as Guenther argues, whiteness “diminishes its own social capacity for ethical connection and community,” then this would also represent a diminution of its capacity to “partake in a transcendental intersubjectivity,” that is, to constitute and to participate in a world in the first place (2019, 201; 2013, 34–35). The white corporeal schema that Guenther theorizes would thus operate contradictorily, generating a set of the capacities that would ultimately be the ground for their own diminution and undoing.

In a key moment towards the end of “Seeing Like a Cop,” Guenther describes the “predicament” of whiteness as that of “the parasite that misperceives itself as a host: even as I extract wealth from others to strengthen my own fortifications, I *continue* to feel insecure” (2019, 202; emphasis added). But this undermines any simple equation of whiteness and the white subject’s experience with a sense of comfort or ease, with the motility of the “I can.” Here we must take seriously Guenther’s phrasing: whiteness is not originally comfortable and then comes to feel insecure, any more than the police (or the property owner) merely react to external and contingent threats. Rather—and despite the world it has amassed for itself—whiteness is, from the beginning, insecure, anxiously seeking out and generating the

threat from which it must protect itself. Thus, behind the ideal that it posits for itself, we find a more complex and ultimately more dangerous truth: that whiteness is always already in crisis, that it is never enough.

### III. SEALED IN THEIR WHITENESS

As I have shown, Ahmed's and Guenther's respective accounts collapse, to different degrees, the gaps and contradictions between whiteness and the white subject, casting the latter as the embodiment of the ideal generated by the former. Ultimately, however, these accounts betray the instability of the white subject's position within the white world, which continues to undermine the ability to embody and fulfill the promise of whiteness. But we must still think through what this apparent instability tells us about whiteness as a quasi-transcendental structure, its functions, and how critical phenomenology might help in theorizing it. Here, by way of conclusion, I want to return to Fanon, whose work, read more expansively than critical phenomenologists have tended to, can help us to conceive of whiteness in terms of both its privileged position *and* the instability and contradictions immanent to this position.

We began with a brief overview of Fanon's critical engagement with the phenomenological concept of the corporeal schema, which has served as a model for much work in critical phenomenology and certainly for Ahmed's and Guenther's analyses of whiteness. Fanon provides us with both a critique of the latent whiteness of traditional analyses of the corporeal schema, which in its ideal (white) form cannot properly account for the lived experience of the Black subject, and furthermore, with his own phenomenological analysis of this experience, which in a white world is always fraught and contradictory. But as I stated at the outset, the issue is not that Ahmed and Guenther adapt this approach for an account of whiteness, but rather, that they do so insufficiently. That is, because they begin from *within* Fanon's account of Blackness, Ahmed and Guenther cannot help but merely invert his categories when accounting for the lived experience of the white subject. If the Black subject is objectified, fragmented, and arrested, then the white subject must be the ideal subject, must be whole and mobile. The Black subject stands out in, and has their corporeal schema interrupted by, the white world, while the white subject is coterminous with it and recedes into it; the Black subject is pathological while the white subject embodies the norm. Although both accounts depart from a dichotomy between the "I can" and the "I cannot," which is taken to capture the opposition between Blackness and whiteness, and between the experiences they generate for their subjects, ultimately, they continue to reproduce this dichotomy under different conceptual guises.

Instead of deriving a conception of whiteness from Fanon's conception of Blackness, we should look at what he himself says about whiteness. This requires that we go beyond the fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* (which philosophers have tended to overemphasize

in their readings),<sup>3</sup> and especially beyond Fanon's engagement with phenomenology, towards psychopathology. Indeed, the dichotomous view of whiteness and Blackness along the lines of the "I can"/"I cannot" appears as the logical result of centering the fifth chapter of the text. There—precisely in an analysis of the lived experience of the Black subject—the white subject appears primarily in the form of the white gaze which assails and objectifies the Black subject from a place of power and stability. Yet as Robert Bernasconi explains,

the sixth chapter ["The Negro and Psychopathology"] goes beyond the account of lived experience found in the fifth chapter to address the "unreflected" mechanisms that lay behind the experiences of individuals described there. Accounts of the lived experience of Blacks are indispensable to an understanding of the impact of a racist society, but, however genuine these accounts may be, they are incomplete to the extent that they do not investigate the mechanism of the system that produced those experiences. (2020a, 390)

Thus, while a more systematic account of Fanon's own account of whiteness is beyond our scope, here it will suffice to show how he complicates the dichotomous view presented above (without thereby collapsing the opposition between white and Black subjects).

Fanon's purpose throughout the book is to investigate the alienation and the contradictions immanent to Black existence in a colonial society within which subjecthood is coterminous with whiteness, that is, to track the Black non-subject's failed attempts to become a subject in a world that has always already foreclosed this possibility. Though Fanon presents an intractable and hierarchical opposition between the white and Black subject throughout the text—what he at one point calls a relation of transcendence between them (1967, 138)<sup>4</sup>—the white subject's position within it is not characterized primarily in terms of comfort or capacity. Rather, it is a relation within which both subjects find themselves alienated, and thus, in which both experience what Alia Al-Saji calls, "the pathological effects and affects of racialization" (2021, 180).<sup>5</sup> As Fanon explains in a key passage in the text's introduction: "The white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness. We shall seek to ascertain the directions of this dual narcissism and the motivations that inspire it" (1967, 9).

The fact that both Black and white subjectivity appear here to be sealed in their positions need not, indeed cannot, lead us to equate the experiences or struggles of Black and white subjects in a white supremacist world. Rather, it confirms the fact that race

<sup>3</sup> See Robert Bernasconi (2020b) for an account that posits the sixth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* as central to understanding the text as a whole.

<sup>4</sup> See Jesús Luzardo (2023) for an account of Fanon's use of "transcendence" in this moment in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

<sup>5</sup> It would be productive to think through this account of racialization and its pathological effects alongside the work of Karen Ng, who equates ideologies with *social pathologies*, and defines them as "at once social practices and forms of rationality that distort the relation between life and self-consciousness and block the full actualization of human reason and freedom" (2015, 393).

itself, as an always violent colonial formation, produces a variety of contradictory and pathological forms of life for all who are subject to it. Thus, as Al-Saji explains,

if colonization and its aftermaths touch our psyches and affect our bodily selves, then, in societies built on the legacies of colonialism, slavery, or settlement, both racializing and racialized subjects will experience alienation, *albeit in structurally different ways*. (2021, 178–79; emphasis added)

In what sense, then, is the white subject alienated within this structure? At the root of this alienation, and of whiteness itself, is a pervasive and unconscious anti-Blackness anchored by “the Negro [as] a phobogenic object, a stimulus to anxiety” (Fanon 1967, 151). But while this negrophobia might manifest as a reaction to the presence of actual Black people in the world, what is more important here is the internalization of “the Negro” as myth by the white unconscious. “At its extreme,” explains Fanon, “the myth of the Negro, the idea of the Negro, can become the decisive factor of an authentic alienation” (204). Thus, while both Ahmed and Guenther articulate this relationship of repulsion and fear of the Black subject by the white subject, the former is conceived mainly as an *external* threat to the (previously stable) comfort of whiteness, which must therefore be policed and protected against. And while this is indeed how the white subject consciously experiences their negrophobia, we find here that the call, as they say, is coming from inside the house, destabilizing the white subject from within.

As Fanon (1967) shows throughout his analysis in the sixth chapter, Blackness, as phobogenic object, serves as the depositary for a variety of anxieties and fantasies: hatred, fear, desire, identification, envy, etc. (179). And this relation manifests in a variety of contradictory and pathological presentations, which do not hew to the dichotomous views discussed above. We find a striking example in Fanon’s brief discussion of the Southern writer Joel Chandler Harris, best known for his Uncle Remus stories. He writes:

It was the very essence of the man that made it impossible for him to exist in the “natural” way of the Negro. No one had barred him from it; it was just impossible for him. Not prohibited, but unrealizable. And it is because the white man feels himself frustrated by the Negro that he seeks in turn to frustrate the black, binding him with prohibitions of all kinds. And here again the white man is the victim of his unconscious. (175)

Here, then, we see how Fanon complicates any simple identification of whiteness with ease, comfort, and with the ideal of unimpeded capacity to be found in classical phenomenology. We see, too, that for Fanon the white subject is no less alienated and no less pathological by virtue of her supremacy, for this position is grounded in and subtended by a negrophobic fixation to which both white and Black subjects are differently beholden. “This work,” Fanon declares,

represents the sum of the experiences and observations of seven years; regardless of the area I have studied, one thing has struck me: The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation. (Fanon 1967, 60)

Thus, Guenther (2019) is right to say that the white subject is also, in her own way, objectified through a racial epidermal schema, which constitutes her as white—though objectified in such a way that does not negate her status as subject. But, as I've shown, this process of objectification—despite diminishing the subject's capacity for community—is still cast as otherwise unambiguously beneficial and capacitating for the white subject. But what Fanon's analysis shows us is that whiteness can be both beneficial and alienating, insofar as it benefits white subjects *within* a broader structure that tends to immiserate and consume them. Thus, he clarifies early on in *Black Skin, White Masks*: “I am speaking here on the one hand of alienated (mystified) Blacks, and on the other of no less alienated (mystifying and mystified) Whites” [*de Noirs aliénés (mystifiés), et d'autre part de Blancs non moins aliénés (mystificateurs et mystifiés)*] (29; 1952, 23; my translation). In this sense, whiteness is not only morally, but more importantly, *structurally* fraught. This inherent instability—which whiteness itself both perpetuates *and* attempts to mitigate—is part of what renders the white subject recruitable to its purposes in the first place. The failures and contradictions of whiteness are thus not exceptions to the rule of its benefits, but rather, central to its operations and its ability to rule our world. The experiences, behaviors, and actions of white people—who are increasingly militant and violent in their protection of national and global white supremacy—thus cannot be sufficiently described and explained through a framework that primarily attributes to them comfort, ease, and motility.

Rather, just as Fanon uncovered the contradictions specific to Black embodiment in a white supremacist world, and articulated the materially grounded psychopathological mechanisms which generate them, the task of a critical phenomenology of whiteness must be to describe and analyze the specific shapes that the relationship between white subjects and whiteness can take. A relationship which may be simultaneously or alternately supportive, capacitating, disappointing, and frustrating, but has always been pathological and unstable, and is always, either latently or manifestly, in crisis on an exponentially-increasing scale. Critical phenomenology can deepen our understanding of this relationship precisely by analyzing the *experiences and subjectivities generated by its contradictions*: the experience of failing to receive that which you feel entitled to *qua white*, of the loss of something that appeared promised by virtue of one's whiteness, or the experience of inadequacy—of *lack*—that inevitably awaits behind every fulfillment of this promise. Such an analysis would thus take us beyond the realm of motility and comfort, of success, of the “I can,” and make available for analysis a more expansive, generative, and explanatory set of concepts and experiences: failure, loss, insecurity, frustration, disappointment, melancholy, resentment, nostalgia. Such concepts will help us to better understand the structures and operations of our present white supremacist world, though it might prove sobering in disclosing what it would take to change it and make us more pessimistic about the future to come.

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