

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF DIFFERENCE

LEARNING FROM FANON'S ENCOUNTER WITH EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGY

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*To Richard Pearce (1944-2021),
Sartrean scholar, existential therapist, friend.*

Abstract For several critics, phenomenology is instituted on universalist views which ignore the historical realities of class, race, and gender. They also maintain that phenomenology implies suppression of difference. One of these critics was the political philosopher, psychiatrist, and activist Frantz Fanon. Usually associated with Sartre, Fanon was also engaged with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's and Fanon's writings, on black and queer studies on the body, nature, and exclusion, this paper will focus on aspects of this engagement, including the notions of bodily schema (Merleau-Ponty) and 'historical-racial schema' (Fanon). It will outline potential tenets for a phenomenology of difference.

Key words: Phenomenology, Fanon, Merleau-Ponty, bodily-schema, difference.

Reading Fanon

Fanon's dialogue with Sartre is well-documented, if seldom examined in writings and practices nominally informed by existential phenomenology. *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon, 1986), brings to life several Sartrean tropes, including authenticity, bad faith, and the subject's power/ability of being-for-others.

In his controversial preface to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* Jean-Paul Sartre, anti-colonialist advocate for the emancipation of the oppressed, wrote:

You, who are so liberal and so humane, who have such an exaggerated adoration of culture ... you pretend to forget that you own colonies and that in them men are massacred in your name. Fanon reveals to his comrades ... the solidarity of the people of the mother country and of their representatives in the colonies. Have the courage to read this book, for ... it will make you ashamed, and shame, as Marx said, is a revolutionary sentiment. (Sartre, 1963: 14).

For those who are keen to look at the socio-political reality outside/inside the clinic – including the enduring presence of colonialism and racism, Fanon's writings will provide encouragement – in the same way they provided inspiration for liberation movements across the world, from the refugee camps of Palestine to the alleys of Beirut, Tehran, and Harlem, to the poor residents of the Parisian *banlieues* (Shatz, 2017).

Despite his differences with Sartre, Merleau-Ponty too aimed at divesting Western politics from their clear conscience and their sense of superiority towards other cultures, reminding us (Merleau-Ponty, 2000) that our fêted capitalist democracies are built on colonial exploitation, wars, unemployment, the violent suppression of strikes, anti-Semitism, and racism. The backdrop of Fanon's encounter with Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, outlined below, is in itself inspiring.

The *body*, not the subject

Born in 1925 in the island of Martinique in the Eastern Caribbean sea, as a young man Fanon became a pupil at the Lycée Schoelcher of the poet, educator, and founder of the *Négritude* movement Aimé Césaire, a key literary and anti-colonialist figure who famously referred to the process of colonization as *thingification*, the commodification of human beings. Writing about the *Négritude* poets in his *Black Orpheus*, Sartre reflected on the sad irony of the colonized who, having rejected the colonizers' culture, is compelled to use their language, to "rely on the words of the oppressor's language ... pale and cold like our skies... this language which is half dead for them" (Sartre, 1948: 23).

Published in 1955, Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (Césaire, 2001) is still relevant today. This is because, as Jasbir Puar (2007) points out, current culture is still characterized by "a lack of engagement with postcolonial theory" which leaves racial dynamics unexplored" (p. 48). This is also true of psychotherapy culture – including *majoritarian* existential therapy. One of Fanon's merits is to have developed and expanded the anti-colonialist direction of Césaire's work. He saw *Négritude* as "the emotional if not the logical antithesis of that insult which the white man flung at humanity" (Fanon, 1963: 212), a shift in thought and praxis which requires the expansion of cultural identity (in this case *racialized* cultural identity) within the context of political struggle, including struggle for national liberation (Wallerstein, 2009).

As a young black man in the early 1940s, Fanon experienced first-hand the violence and bigotry of the collaborationist Vichy regime; the experience accelerated his appreciation of *lived experience* (what phenomenologists call *Erlebnis*). Lived experience is no longer seen as universal factuality, but as an occurrence *specific*, in Fanon's case, to the black person under the yoke of colonialism and racism.

Factuality is only *one* aspect of facticity. Another aspect is *contingency*: factual lived experience is subjected to historico-political contingencies. These are felt at a visceral level. It is a mistake to speak of subjective experience in terms of a universal 'subject', as the philosophical tradition has done since time immemorial. It did so not because of some epistemological impediment, but because the language of universality is intentionally allied to the ideology of Empire and its *legacy of violence*, in Caroline Elkins's pithy turn of phrase (Elkins 2022).

It would be likewise inaccurate to bound psychological/psychotherapeutic explorations to a unitary (Cartesian, Husserlian) self, a variation of which is the notion of a self-existing, self-bound 'psychic apparatus' of the Freudian tradition (despite its own radical but now discarded hypothesis of the unconscious). It would also be inaccurate to speak of 'relatedness' and 'intersubjectivity' as universal *givens* in human interactions (rather than aspirations), especially if one then proceeds to bypass both the inescapable asymmetry of human interactions and the contingency integral to facticity.

What is then the alternative to the questionable notion of the (universal) *self*? The answer is straightforward: *the body*. In particular, the lived experience of the *subjugated* body. The pathos and passion of bodies itemised, reviled, subjected to the violence of dominant culture and the state – to the xenophobia, racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, *aporophobia* (hatred of the poor/contempt for the homeless) orchestrated by our societies of control. Fanon's books were not written for the powerful but for the 'wretched' of the earth. His learning and praxis, as a psychiatrist and political activist, was *not* motivated by the desire to curry favour from institutions. His focus was elsewhere.

We do not learn of the vicissitudes of the psyche and the tribulations of experience by enumerating the constructs of an existential 'canon' dished out in the classrooms of existential training schools. We do so by paying closer attention to the lived experience of those who truly know 'ontological insecurity' and 'existential uncertainty' – not as the tropes of a 'universal human condition' but first-hand: as unemployment, displacement, illness, exile, exclusion, poverty, as tragic/ecstatic upheavals of bodies subjected to prejudice.

This line of thought is openly counter-traditional, anchored in contingency and the asymmetry of human interactions. Some of its insights have been articulated by feminist *standpoint theory* and they deserve a brief digression.

Standpoint Theory

For Sandra Harding (2008), who coined the term, *standpoint theory* is several things at once. It is an inquiry into the nature of epistemology, a way of asking *who* can produce dependable knowledge and *how* knowledge can be supported. It is a philosophy of science, asking which are the best practices and goals for scientific research. It is also a sociology of science, looking closely at the different conditions which generate particular forms of knowledge. As a methodology, it has lineage: from Marx, who suggested that the surest way to learn about the class system is by examining the life of a worker (rather than the life of a member of the ruling class), to feminists who a century later applied the same method to women's life. This methodology can be organically applied to any new group which at different historical turns bears the brunt of injustice and oppression – think of the civil rights and postcolonial movements, of LGBTQIA+ movements, and so forth.

For Brenda J. Allen (2023), knowledge is born out of *power relations* between dominant and nondominant groups. The latter – Fanon's 'wretched' of the Earth – possess a more extensive and incarnate knowledge of a reality dominated by power dynamics. An analysis of power dynamics, let alone of contingent/embodied *Erlebnis*, is manifestly lacking in a majoritarian world of research dedicated to turning knowledge into another *product* on the market. This is particularly true since the 1980 Bayh-Dole Act in the United States and Margaret Thatcher's REF (Research Excellence Framework) in the UK (Davies, 2023) – both measures heralding a nihilistic cultural turn, emboldening universities to become what they have now fully grown into: *businesses*, and little else besides.

These 'situational' (hence implicitly existential-phenomenological) perspectives find echoes in contemporary philosophies that rebuke so-called 'pluralism' – the multiplication of the subject in order to "accommodate all sorts of differences (i.e., a politics of inclusion)" (Puar, 2007: 206).

For those of us who care about the lived experience of subjected bodies – of black, queer, transgender bodies; of poor, foreign, exiled bodies, of bodies nonaligned, noncompliant to majoritarian views and the dogmas *du jour*. For those who want their practice to turn into *praxis* – that is, allied to active rather than reactive forces, and as such "a political force in the

wider, transformational sense of the term” (Bazzano, 2023: 193) – the writings of Frantz Fanon are invaluable.

Disalienation

The trajectory of Fanon’s life and thought progressed from the Caribbean to Europe to North Africa to sub-Saharan Africa, each time significantly altering his perspective – a journey documented in his posthumously published *Toward the African Revolution* (Fanon, 1994).

Crucial to our discussion are the two years (1947-1948) he spent at the University of Lyon attending Merleau-Ponty’s lectures on language and communication, before qualifying three years later as a psychiatrist under the supervision of the radical Catalan psychiatrist and artist Francesc Tosquelles, who emphasized the key role of culture and society in experiences of mental distress. Tosquelles is a key figure in a lineage of critical psychiatry whose methodology will be inspiring to those who believe in the transformative power of psychotherapeutic group work (Robcis, 2021). Tosquelles was the founder of *institutional psychotherapy*, an approach initially drawing on Marx and Lacan, and whose contributors included Oury, Fanon, Canguilhem, and Guattari. Institutional psychotherapy implemented a radical restructuring of mental health clinics and asylums, with patients actively involved in managing the facilities. At Saint-Alban hospital, where Fanon did his medical residency, Tosquelles, Oury, and others transformed a crumbling and underfunded hospital, where patients lived in horrible conditions, into a thriving place. Would this sort of experimentation ever be conceivable in our current climate?

This aspect of Fanon’s trajectory places his psychiatric training and understanding of mental distress firmly within a socio-political context. It constitutes the crucial backdrop to how he will subsequently approach Merleau-Pontian phenomenology and develop his own notion of *disalienation*. Fanon understood alienation as “a creation of middle-class society”. He explains:

What I call middle-class society is any society that becomes rigidified in predetermined forms, forbidding all evolution, all gains, all progress, all discovery. I call middle-class a closed society in which life has no taste, in which the air is tainted, in which ideas and people are corrupt. And I think that a person who takes a stand against this death is in a sense a revolutionary (Fanon, 1986: 224-225).

Disalienation is the process through which the othering taking place when confronted with a group can be understood and worked through. A society that perpetuates racism and alienates the other is stuck, uncreative, and ends up simply preserving stale modes of being in the world. Disalienation leaves space for the possibility of decent human interactions, a possibility Fanon phrases as a question in the very last words of *Black Skin, White Masks*:

Superiority? Inferiority? Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? (Fanon, 1986: 231).

Fanon and Merleau-Ponty

Virtually unknown – let alone examined within majoritarian existential therapy – is Fanon’s fruitful dialogue with Merleau-Ponty and phenomenology, despite the thriving literature on the subject (e.g. Weate, 2001; Salamon, 2006; Mahendran, 2007; Pish, 2016; Greenslade, 2018; Whitney 2018; Laubscher et al, 2021; Jones, 2021; Stawarska & Ring, 2023).

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau Ponty writes:

We must learn to find the communication between one consciousness and another in one and the same world. In reality, the other is not shut up inside my perspective of the world, because this perspective itself has no definite limits, because it slips spontaneously into the other's, and because both are brought together in the one single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 253).

Despite his subsequent critique, Fanon’s approach in *Black Skin, White Masks* is phenomenological, and sympathetic to Merleau-Ponty’s radical reflexivity (Weate, 2001; Salamon, 2006; Pish, 2016; Stawarska & Ring, 2023). In *The Lived Experience of the Black*, a chapter in *Black Skin, White Masks*, his dialogue with Merleau-Ponty comes to the fore. It is here that Fanon replaces Merleau-Ponty’s *corporeal schema* with two sequential notions: (a) the *historico-racial schema*; (b) the *racial-epidermal schema*. Merleau-Ponty’s corporeal schema has to do with agency and synergy – how bodies position themselves in relation to the world and objects within it.

We grasp external space through our bodily situation. A corporeal ... schema gives us at every moment a global, practical, and implicit notion of the relation between our body and things, of our hold on them. A system of possible movements ... radiates from us to our environment. Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. It applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument, and when we wish to move about, we do not move the body as we move an object. We transport it without instruments as if by magic, since it is ours and because through

it, we have direct access to space. For us, the body ... is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 5).

The permeability of body and world is not fixed, nor can it be set apart from history and contingency. The world alters this body. This body alters the world. The world affects this body. This body affects the world. They rearrange one another in “perpetual contribution” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 254). Our bodies, placed within a historical horizon, can change and subvert the horizon. The following example illustrates what is meant by corporeal schema and the ‘perpetual contribution’ between the body and the world:

No-one could separate the history of the guitar from its players. Somebody comes along, 'learns' the guitar and manipulates it as never before, and the history of guitar music is altered. With fingers and stance, their body communicates with the guitar through a pre-thetic schema that opens up the parameters of possibility (and therefore the history) of the instrument, at the same time as transforming the player's life. Moreover, even those who will not change the history of guitar music themselves are liable to be 'altered' as their practice develops and that music communicates itself through their increasingly expressive being. (Weate, 2001, Online).

The musical metaphor is apt. At a conference of black writers and artists in Rome in the late 1950s, Fanon resorted to music in order to describe his vision of a revolutionary culture and later developed this idea further.

On National Culture —later published as a chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*—[Fanon] celebrated the defiant “new humanism” of bebop, which had grown out of “the inevitable, though gradual, defeat” of segregation. Having cast off their role as entertainers for the white man, bebop musicians were shaping their own destiny as artists. In “fifty years or so,” Fanon predicted, the “type of jazz lament hiccupped by a poor, miserable ‘Negro’ will be defended by only those whites believing in a frozen image of a certain type of relationship and a certain form of negritude.” Black American jazz, with its commitment to artistic independence and innovation, was, for Fanon, an exemplary practice of cultural freedom, a model for the wretched of the earth in their efforts to invent a new, emancipated identity (Shatz, 2019, Online).

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the corporeal schema points to ways in which the affective, pre-cognitive interchange between body and world may unfasten creative possibilities – including freedom, understood as active participation in the “transformation of its expressive horizons” (Weate, 2001). The body’s involvement with the world redraws its horizons while simultaneously being itself redrawn and transmuted. Implicit in this scenario is the following insight: *one of history’s essential traits is difference*. Bodies are traversed by cultural-affective, at times enigmatic messages across years, decades, and centuries. Through their active, ‘political’ response – by turning passive affectivity into active engagement – they assert the

present historical time as *difference*. They deny the determinism of *fate* in favour of the pliability of *destiny* (Bollas, 2019) – an important distinction for any psychotherapy committed to transformation, and for a polity engaged with change. Fate is unmovable, but destiny implies direction, detours, digressions. Destiny implies *agency*. And if it is true that one of history main's traits is difference, it follows that there is *no originary age* to a culture. Harking back to a time of non-obfuscated 'Being' misses the enigma and potency of the present. A culture wanting to assert its 'originary' nature will inevitably *suppress* difference, a stance which has caused and continues to cause harm on a devastating scale.

Merleau-Ponty's version of phenomenology is unique. It leaves the path open to emancipation and to appreciation of difference. His emphasis on difference is pivotal in attempting to re-claim the value of phenomenology today, at a time when conflicts around difference are the order of the day. The so-called 'culture wars' often arise out of a compulsion to maintain rigid notions of identity and its attendant accoutrements – to prop at any cost the *empire of the self-same* (Cixous, 1986). But in order to direct phenomenology away from its beguilement with the universal human subject, closer attention is needed to critics of phenomenology such as Fanon. In *The Lived Experience of the Black*, Fanon writes:

Ontology ... does not permit us to understand the being of the black person. For not only must the black person be black; they must be black in relation to the white man. (Fanon, 1986: 110).

Anticipating the objection to the above statement (namely, that the opposite is also true), Fanon's response is that it would be a *false* objection. Unlike the white person, whose experience dictates both normativity and universality, black people "have no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man" (ibid:110). Instead,

[they] have been given two frames of reference within which they have had to place themselves. Their metaphysics, ... their customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that they did not know and that imposed itself on them (Fanon, 1986:110).

Reflecting back on his early years in Martinique, Fanon observed that the black person "among his own ... does not know at what moment his inferiority comes into being through the other" (ibid). It was only later, when meeting the white man's gaze, that he became painfully aware of something else. Explicitly referring to Merleau-Ponty bodily schema, he writes:

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 colour 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. (Fanon, 1986:110-111).

What Fanon calls *third-person consciousness* turns the body into a thing, perceived in the abstract, as an object. He goes on to explain:

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 myself 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. (Fanon, 1986:111).

The above description of the *schéma corporel* retraces favourably Merleau-Ponty's vision of the permeability of body and world. Difficulties arise, however, when trying to adapt the bodily schema to interracial interactions. There a different model is needed. Disputing the classical view of early twentieth century neurologist Lhermitte, whom he quotes in the following passage, Fanon turns the corporeal schema into the *historico-racial schema*:

Below the corporeal schema I created a historico-racial one. The elements that I used were provided to me not by "residual sensations and perceptions primarily of a tactile, vestibular, kinaesthetic, and visual order," but by the other, the White, who has woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes and stories. (Fanon, 1986:111).

It is not race that creates racism; it is the other way around. In and of itself, race is an empty construct; but the impact of racist hatred and prejudice on the person needs to be taken fully into account. Fanon replaces Merleau-Ponty's "ontogenetic (individual-centered) account of ... subjectivity" with "sociogenetic (sociohistorical relations of power)" (Stawarska & Ring, 2023, Online). The sociogenetic account does not assume the "continuity between the subject, the family, and the state" (ibid) which is a given within the ontogenetic perspective. For Fanon, Merleau-Ponty's bodily schema cannot reflect the experience of the black person in Europe: it is inextricably wedded, despite its open-endedness, to the universalizing demands of the white European male subject. These demands are also central to those majoritarian existential phenomenological analyses, now canonical in traditional existential therapy trainings in England, which draw primarily on Husserl and Heidegger, and which are largely devoid of a situated, historico-contingent, and emancipatory discourse.

What can be learned from Fanon are the entangled layers encroaching on the alleged universality of embodied subjectivity when it comes to black experience – *and* to other differential, subaltern experiences. Not only that “zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity” (Fanon, 1986: 10) to which the black subject is relegated. Not only the visible body targeted by racism, a body “marked by otherness that is forced into relentlessly surveyed objecthood” (Salamon, 2006:96), but also the body “in its innermost interiority”, and the body in its “ostensibly universal aspects” (ibid) – all moulded by racialization.

A famous example in Fanon’s writing recounts of being singled out as a child by a white child, who said to his mother, “*Tiens, Mama! Un nègre!*” (Look, Mother! A Negro!). The sequence of his bodily response, he was to reflect many years later, made the bodily schema crumble:

"Look, a Negro!" It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile. "Look, a Negro!" It was true. It amused me. "Look, a Negro!" The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement. "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!" Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible. I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all historicity, which I had learned about from Jaspers. Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial-epidermal schema (Fanon, 1986:111-112).

Scapegoats

It is necessary to grow a new skin, to develop new thoughts, to set afoot a new human being (Fanon, 1963:314).

Fanon’s insights on situated experience may help navigate one’s way through the turmoil of the ‘culture wars’. But it would be misguided to reframe his impassioned account of black experience in terms of postmodernist identity politics. For Fanon, cultural identity is inextricably situated – within a political context of national liberation and with a generous helping of a universalism of *solidarity*:

If a man is known by his acts, then we will say that the most urgent thing today for the intellectual is to build his nation. If this building is true, that is, if it interprets the manifest will of the people and reveals the eager African peoples, then the building of a nation is of necessity accompanied by the discovery and encouragement of universalizing values. Far from keeping aloof from other nations, therefore, it is national liberation which leads the nation to play its part on the stage of history. It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. And this twofold emerging is ultimately only the source of all culture (Fanon, 1963: 247).

Clearly, a universalism of solidarity is at variance with what the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (2000) calls the *coloniality of power*, a brand of universalism common to the white, cis-het European tradition. Something else is needed than mere imitation of European values, for that would be “almost an obscene caricature” (Fanon, 1963:315). Invention and discovery are needed, “if we want humanity to advance a step further, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it” (ibid). Like sexual difference, “race as a category makes its fraudulent appeal to anatomy or physiology to ‘wind up’ the question” (Rose, 2023, p. 51). To appeal to either race or sexual difference “as a physiological or moral absolute (often both together) is ... simply a way of bringing all discussion ... to a standstill” (ibid).

If psychoanalysis taught us anything, it is that personal identity is complex, multilayered, unpliant to the positivist need of turning it into a *thing*. The same may apply to national identity. Migrants attempting to cross borders are scapegoated for disrupting the identity of a nation. Trans are scapegoated for disrupting a supposedly solid sexual identity. Our fear then is legitimated and goaded to turn into legalized loathing of ‘irregular’ or ‘illegal’ migrants. Something similar applies to transphobia. “I can punch you, and take all of my hate/into your body” (Anhoni and the Johnsons, 2023). The hatred and prejudice hurled at trans in the ‘culture wars’ must give pause for thought. The false appeal to anatomy and/or physiology assumes the existence of a perfect category of women.

In a playful, moving, and learned chapter of her epistolary memoir, *Love and Money, Sex and Death*, McKenzie Wark (2023) reports a dialogue between herself and another trans woman friend in a Manhattan restaurant. They have been chatting animatedly and humorously trying to guess the sexual orientation and attitudes of people sitting at other tables, about their appearances and concealments. Then the conversation turns to ‘theory’:

“In Plato’s philosophy” – I’m getting pretentious, but you like it when I play the Theory Game – “it’s not just that the sign of the thing falls short of the thing itself. The thing itself also falls short, in turn, of the pure idea or form of the thing. Behind appearances are things. But things, too, are just a kind of mere appearance: behind things are their forms. These cannot be touched, or tasted, or seen. They are knowable only to thought itself”

“But who cares about Plato?” you dismiss me with a wave.

[...]

“So, have you been having any pleasure of the flesh lately – *with anyone I know?*” ... You are on to me, I’d better try to hold your attention by throwing a conversational curveball.

“Secular Western culture inherited a residue of Platonism via Christianity. Even some kind of Marxists imagine a world of false appearances. For them, it’s capitalism. The overthrow of capitalism restores ‘man’ to the possibility of an authentic life: no more advertising ... and bye-bye to alienation. Man is restored to himself as himself”.

“Men. Hmph. I don’t know what anyone sees in them” (Wark, 2023:95-96).

The conversation goes on, meandering back and forth from the personal to the political, to a light highbrow talk that is both affecting and thought-provoking.

I launch another move: “OK, so this is also how a certain brand of feminism thinks about the figure of woman. That she just *is*. There’s hand waving about biological chromosomes, but those are things that are outside the everyday realm of human perception. Woman is a Platonic ideal that ‘real’ women just embody by default as variations upon perfection. They then inevitably join misogynists in their distrust of femme signs as deception, and the trap as the lowest deceiver of all”.

“That’s fucked up,” you declare.

“Agreed. In this Platonic world, no sensible thing can do justice to the pure realm of the true. No readable representation can do justice even to things, let alone to the pure and true idea (Wark, 2023: 98).

Exploring one’s sexuality and sexual difference is a constant process: this is what I have learned thus far by listening to transgender activists, therapists and clients. I’ve also learned that the line of solidarity of those at the receiving end of prejudice and oppression is not a given, but something which has to be generated at every step, defended, and cultivated. It might have been a given decades ago, but it has been lost with the advent of identity politics. Even ‘intersectionality,’ *cris the coeur* of Hillary Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign and a darling idea of the liberal *belles ames*, is but a pale substitute for solidarity. At its place, Jasbir Puar suggests a notion borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari: *assemblage*. While intersectionality implies entity, identity, distinct subjects, *assemblage* is a collection of multiplicities, “an affective conglomeration that recognizes other contingencies of belonging ... that might not fall so easily into ... reactive community formations” (Puar, 2007: 211).

While the *intersectional* version of identity is a *hermeneutic of positionality*, suggesting that various manifestations – gender, race, nation, age, class, religion, sexuality – can be analysed separately, the notion of *assemblage* questions identity itself; it responds to interlacing energies that mix and disperse linear notions of “time, space and body against ... coherency ... and permanency” (ibid:212). Intersectionality requires a fixed notion of identity, in accord with the state machinery of census, demography, racial profiling, surveillance. ‘Difference’ is

then framed into a taxonomy (or is that *taxidermy?*), a gridlock which leaves the fixed structures of personal and collective identities unexamined. With these structures untouched, with the constant movement of assemblages suppressed, the possibility of social change weakens. This view says *position* comes first, then *movement*; but it's the other way around.

The *Combahee River Collective*, a Black-feminist-lesbian-socialist organization active in Boston, Massachusetts from 1974 to 1980, linked identity politics to collective liberation. They advanced a critique of both masculine forms of liberation politics *and* feminist approaches that ignored race and class. They asserted that liberation for oppressed people must be anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist (Eisenstein, 1978). One thing is an identity politics of resistance, quite another is what identity politics has become: the ideology of the neo-liberal elite (Gandeha, 2023).

'Stay Romantic'

In September 2023 I attended an event on Gender, Identity, and Sexuality, part of the Focusing-PCE Symposium in Athens. It was facilitated, among others, by Anna Apergi-Konstantinidi, President of the *Greek Transgender Support Association* (GTSA), and Parvy Palmou, Gestalt practitioner and Head of the *Department of Health for Trans and Intersex Families* (Zarogiannis, 2023). I found the event informative, unsettling, and deeply affecting. At some point I asked Anna whether my desire (that the struggle for transgender rights was one with the movement against all forms of oppression) was a romantic notion. She gave me a big smile. The short reply that followed moved me to tears. She said: 'Stay romantic'.

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