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Mickaëlle Provost

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Undoing Whiteness: A Political Education of One's Experience

MICKAËLLE PROVOST

The aim of this paper is to understand whiteness as a political category which organizes ordinary experience. I will use a phenomenological framework in order to denaturalize the white experience and make it a possible object of transformation and education. A description of whiteness as a category of experience has implications not only for our understanding of political education but also for a feminist reflection on racism within the academic field. Indeed, the fight against racism has to be led not only at the level of intent or belief, but more fundamentally in terms of pre-reflective experience, body, perception, affects. This means that a political education against racism must involve a critical attention to one's experience and perceptual habits: putting one's own experience to work. Phenomenology seems to offer a method articulating the ethical transformation of the self and the transformation of society, and then to problematize both an education of self and a reflection on educational institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 30 years, the lived experience of racist oppression has been the subject of many developments within political or 'critical' phenomenology (Gunther, 2019). These reflections are part of the history of the narratives of experiences produced by black African American authors from the 19th century and the struggle against slavery (e.g. by Frederick Douglass or Anna Julia Cooper) and extended throughout the 19th and 20th centuries by autobiographies or texts rooted in lived experience (e.g. William E. B Du Bois, 1986; Richard Wright, 1945; Chester Himes, 1945; Ralph Ellison, 1952; Toni Morrison, 1970). This African American literary tradition has been able to find echoes on a transnational scale (e.g. Frantz Fanon, 2008) underlining the 'diasporic' character of black existential thought (Gilroy, 1993). Contemporary works mobilizing phenomenology or existentialism (Gordon, 2000) extend this black intellectual tradition and, even if these reflections are not necessarily carried out by black Afro-descendent writers, they inscribe the theoretical reflection into a context permeated by racial oppression.

These works are interested in the experiential dimensions of racism: its impact on subjectivities, bodies, affects, that is, relationships to others and to the world. They also highlight the repetitive dimension of racism, its inscription in everyday and ordinary life through embedded habits (Ahmed, 2006; Ngo, 2017). Racist oppression is not seen as an exceptional, one-off situation but as a relationship to the world that structures the most ordinary and banal aspects of existence (Ajari, 2019, p. 100). However, within this corpus of contemporary political phenomenology, there are fewer descriptions of experiences characteristic of dominant groups and ways in which gender, racial or class privileges organize the world. Yet elucidating and describing dominant experiences—through a reversal of perspective—allows us to question and denaturalize what is configured as an unspoken and invisible norm. It also makes it possible to identify the mechanisms which, from within lived experience, reproduce domination and the—cognitive, physical, emotional, epistemic—barriers to social transformation. In this sense, a phenomenology of dominant experiences helps identify what, within lived experience, maintains and reinforces domination. It potentially leads to a finer understanding of power mechanisms at a structural level (how ideology and institutions shape social structures) but also at an experiential level (how individuals internalize, repeat or transform social norms).

This articulation between politics and ethics is not self-evident within political theory; in this respect, phenomenology seems to constitute a specific approach allowing both an epistemology of resistance and a transformation of the self. For Lisa Guenther (Guenther, 2019), it is precisely this ethical task that is the distinguishing feature of critical phenomenology: phenomenological description is neither neutral nor ‘unmotivated’, but must lead to an ethical and political transformation of the self: it is ‘a descriptive practice of illuminating and articulating one’s experience and also a transformative practice of changing the conditions under which one’s experience unfolds’ (Guenther, 2019, p. 14). Description is critical, in that, it changes the point of view of lived experience and reconfigures the political order of what appears, of what gives itself as real. Critical phenomenology sees ‘*Epochè*’ not as a withdrawal from the world, but as a tool for restoring a sense of strangeness to what is routine or tacit. Indeed, the critical task of phenomenology is that of denaturalization: what is given within perception as natural, inconspicuous and fixed, becomes the starting point of an interrogation. The transformative task of phenomenological description must therefore lead to a new attention to and perception of one’s own experience. Phenomenology thus articulates ethics and politics in a way that allows for the education of one’s own experience—that is, paying attention to it in a new fashion, attaching renewed interest and importance to it in order to transform it. This ethical understanding of education has been brought to light by Stanley Cavell (Cavell, 1979, 1981, 1984) and the extensions that have been given to his thought (Laugier, 2014; Standish and Saito, 2019): education is not a matter of dogmatic learning focussed on cognitive content, but rather a transformation of one’s own experience, a process of subjectivation in the sense that it brings about a new relationship to oneself. In

this sense, for Cavell, education constitutes a second birth: it is ethical but also political because it allows one to singularize one's experience.

However, the very idea of 'educating' a dominant experience is likely to provoke doubts and political suspicion within Racial Studies (Ahmed, 2007, p. 149): does making *whiteness* the object of education not run the risk of reifying or essentializing whiteness? Do these problems not tend to focus on dominant individuals and groups, thus reinforcing their hegemony? Can the anti-racist struggle expect dominant individuals to address the issue of their own *whiteness*? Putting the dominant in the foreground in the fight against racism seems politically problematic. First, because they find an (economic, political, affective or symbolic) interest in domination and also in perpetuating their privileges. Therefore it seems vain to think that the struggle will (also) pass through an 'awareness' of the dominant. Secondly, because paying attention to the dominant only seems to reinforce their presence and the care they give to themselves. Even when dominant groups are aware of their privileges and determined to change, they may tend to over-attention themselves, their feelings, their good intentions. This redoubling of attention to oneself can tend to accentuate what Robin DiAngelo calls 'White Fragility'. She defines it as the fact of becoming emotionally and psychologically fragile when the privileges of race are questioned and responding to this fragility with withdrawal, silence or with anger and defence (DiAngelo, 2011). The problem is also epistemic: how can one consider a political education of the self if indeed the white experience is tacit, invisible, pre-conscious? In what sense can *whiteness* be the specific object of an educational process, if it manifests itself through a set of habits and perceptions and bears witness to a general relationship to the world?

In this text, I wish to keep open these questions and problematize the transformation of the dominant experience through the prism of educational thinking. By understanding whiteness not only as a set of social privileges but as a relationship to the world made possible by these privileges (Ahmed, 2007; Sullivan, 2019), phenomenology questions what shapes experience but also destabilizes and transforms it. In this way, the phenomenological approach of dominant experience can identify the obstacles which make it difficult to transform oneself, but also suggest the transformations which can take place within the lived experience. Education is thus no longer addressed in terms of decision, willpower or change in representations (or 'prejudices'). It is precisely because *whiteness* is a *general* relationship to the world and structures pre-reflexive aspects of daily life that education implies a new relationship to one's own experience. Such a relationship constitutes a transformation of the self and takes place at multiple and not necessarily cognitive levels. To redefine education in such a way, using phenomenology and Cavell, implies questioning the status assigned to 'consciousness' in the process of educating oneself, the temporality of such an education, but also the experiential dimensions involved (perception, affects, body etc.). This amounts to identifying the level at which ethics and politics, self-transformation and social transformation can be articulated.

This is why it is important first to explain and describe the dominant white experience. Following the work of Frantz Fanon, but also the

contemporary works of Sara Ahmed (2006, 2007), Linda Martín Alcoff (1999, 2006) or George Yancy (2012), I will try to elucidate the typical modalities of the white experience, at a subjective, corporal, affective, epistemic levels. I will show that this experience is unthinking, non-reflexive and part of embodied habits (Sullivan, 2006). Such an analysis undermines the role of ‘awareness’ in the process of transforming this experience.

The phenomenological understanding of the dominant experience thus allows us to address education in terms other than those of momentary ‘awareness’, intentionality or willpower. How can one educate one’s own experience and reflect on one’s privileges or position of dominance if these aspects are lived in a pre-reflexive mode? These issues could be considered through a feminist epistemology of education extending the thinking of Stanley Cavell. Education is not seen as a change of consciousness or a modification of representations but from an (ethical) attention to one’s experience. This attention could be defined as a process of subjectivation, a transformation of experience which is less the aim (explicit, conscious) of education than the potentially unpredictable effect it produces. Finally, we shall extend this reflection on the relationship between experience and education by raising the issue at the more structural level of educational and academic institutions. Through the phenomenological approach, the fight against racism can be considered not as a project or as a programmatic educational discourse (Mohanty, 1989), but as a destabilization of the dominant habits and ways of being and acting within the institution.

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE WHITE EXPERIENCE

In order to understand how phenomenology leads to a distinctive political reflection on *whiteness*, it is necessary to elucidate the relationship between the institutionalization of dominant ideology and privilege, on the one hand, and lived experience, on the other. And to clarify this relationship, it is important to enquire beforehand into the *reality* of race, and more specifically into the way race structures and shapes the reality of lived experience (Bessone, 2013). In this case, *whiteness* appears as a racial category, as well as *blackness*. It is not only seen as a domination in terms of the number of white people, but more broadly as the institutionalization of the privileges related to *whiteness*. Whiteness studies begin with the idea that *whiteness* operates at several levels and in multiple dimensions (DiAngelo, 2011; Frankenberg, 1993): it is at once a ‘location of structural advantage’, a ‘standpoint’, a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, at society and a ‘set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed’ (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 1). Therefore, *whiteness* becomes ‘worldly’ (Ahmed, 2007, p. 150) when it organizes the places we inhabit and the circulation of glances, but also when it appears as the ‘background’ of lived experiences (Ahmed, 2007, p. 150). The racial system of oppression makes *whiteness* an organizing category of reality and establishes a partition of lived experiences.

For Linda Alcoff (1999, 2006), Sara Ahmed (2007), Alia Al-Saji (2014) or George Yancy (2012), the theoretical starting point for a phenomenology of race is to refute the rhetoric of colourblindness according to which race has no material or real existence. This discourse—ranging from ordinary conversations to political and academic discourse—infers from the scientific non-existence of race an ontological non-existence: to the extent that race have no viable basis (biological, cultural, anthropological), the very category is inept and only results from an illusion of consciousness or a truncated relationship to reality (Bessone, 2013, p. 83). From this epistemic postulate stems a certain conception of the fight against racism: racism is a matter of representations, prejudices and intentions. It is supposed to operate on mainly discursive, cognitive and representational levels. The phenomenological approach to race takes the counterpoint to this analysis by emphasizing, on the contrary, that racism constructs social reality, informs what counts or does not count as ‘real’. It is therefore inseparable from historical and epistemic practices which determine divisions between the visible and the invisible, forms of taxonomy that make it possible to classify and group what should or should not appear as ‘racial’ (Alcoff, 1999). Racism organizes the forms of recognition (perceptive and cognitive) but more broadly the frames of perception (Butler, 2009) from which we see, feel, hear, touch and experience what is real. The richness of this approach is, it seems to me, that it can lead to an articulation between the phenomenological method and a materialist reflection on the political construction of reality, on our senses and the sensible. Sensitivity, which seems obvious and indisputable, is in fact mediated by historical and social determinations. Far from opposing a constructivist or materialist reflection on social reality, phenomenology provides tools for thinking about the historical and political shaping of our senses and our apprehensions of reality. As the French materialist feminist Monique Wittig shows, ‘race, exactly like sex, is taken as an “immediate given” [...] belonging to a natural order. But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an “imaginary formation” which reinterprets physical features through the network of relationships in which they are perceived’ (Wittig, 1992, pp. 11–12).

Within the racial system, *whiteness* is precisely what seems to escape the materiality of the sensible. *Whiteness* is constructed as the absence of colour and the absence of reality: it is invisible, odourless, transparent, elusive. On the contrary, in a white environment, *blackness* can be constructed as hyper-visibility, a point of convergence of glances and attention. This co-implication is for Frantz Fanon a historical and institutionalized construction, linked to the colonial policy of France in the aftermath of World War II. But the structural level of the historical construction of *whiteness* is relayed by the level of individual interactions, affects and experiences. In the fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon recounts in firsthand the lived experience of anti-black racism, in its most ordinary aspects, in a context marked by the omnipresence of white glances—an experience that resonates with Fanon’s own experience as a Martinican who came to France (Paris and Lyon) to study medicine. He points out that it is impossible for

a non-white body to escape the world, that is, to withdraw from the world or to be absent: 'I came into the world, anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the origin of things, and here I am an object among others objects' (Fanon, 2008, p. 90). The privilege granted to whites in spaces where white bodies are omnipresent, is that of being transparent, 'absent', 'evanescent', a privilege of 'disappearing' (Fanon, 2008, p. 92). This is precisely why the white philosopher Shannon Sullivan describes *whiteness* as a relationship to the world marked by an 'ontological expansiveness' (Sullivan, 2019, p. 249): white bodies are neither fixed nor arrested in their movements, they inhabit a world that is already familiar to them, to which they are no stranger. As Sullivan notices, this world can be geographical (e.g. the space of the street or of the train in *White Skin, Black Masks*) or 'linguistic, artistic, economic and so on, and in that case the movement is more metaphorical (but not less bodily for all that)' (Sullivan, 2019, p. 249).

In this sense, as Sara Ahmed points out—by going back to the academic contexts where scientific events are often predominantly composed by white people—'whiteness becomes a social and bodily orientation given that some bodies will be more at home in a world that is oriented around whiteness' (Ahmed, 2007, p. 160). This world can be determined by an over-presence of white people, but also by an institutionalized presence of *whiteness* which can be articulated with class and gender privileges. The familiarity that characterizes *whiteness* can be read within classical phenomenology as an implicit presupposition. For example, the corporeal schema, which is described by the white French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is one of a body who knows implicitly the white world because this is *his* world: 'Sensation is that vital communication with the world that renders it present to us as the familiar backdrop of our lives' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 79). For a white and male subject, the body is a centre around which the world unfolds and whose coordinates he knows implicitly. Fanon's reversal in the fifth chapter consists in underlining how this familiarity is not given but distributed and constructed, that is to say, made possible by a set of economic, historical and social conditions.

This privilege of *whiteness* is not only experiential, it is also cognitive and epistemic in the sense that the experience of *whiteness* ignores itself. White is not perceived as white and no form of reflexivity is imposed on him/her from the outside: she does not have to see herself through the eyes of others or to become aware of herself through an external judgment or gaze (the classic phenomenon of 'double consciousness' highlighted by W. E. B. Du Bois, 1903). To the social invisibility of *whiteness* corresponds a production of ignorance: *whiteness* does not manifest itself, does not imply any reflexivity. It produces real racializing effects by derealizing itself: that is, by escaping sight, thought and knowledge. As shown by Alia Al-Saji, this epistemic ignorance is played out at a perceptual and affective level: racism asserts itself as an immediate and inevitable response to the body of the other, as a reaction 'that cannot be otherwise' (Al-Saji, 2014, p. 138).

From this initial phenomenological description of the dominant experience, it is possible to identify certain structural features that will guide

any discussion on the transformation of the experience and its possible education: (1) the experience of *whiteness* is not a punctual and delimited experience but a relation to the world that can concern different aspects of ordinary existence; (2) it is not understood through the prism of consciousness, will or intentionality but is, on the contrary, non-reflexive; (3) it points towards an embodied subjectivity, bodily attitudes, ways of moving, interacting, relating to the world. It is precisely these traits which give *whiteness* its structuring power and its importance. The experience of *whiteness* is part of a *continuum* of past and sedimented experiences (whose colonial genealogy and racial history allows us to trace), materialized by a set of ordinary habits and repeated acts (Ngo, 2017). As Ahmed points out, the phenomenology shows ‘how we are stuck, by attending to what is habitual and routine in “the what” of the world’ (Ahmed, 2007, p. 165). This means that the transformation of the dominant experience cannot be based on an act of the will, that is, a decision or an intention to change. In this sense, the starting point for a transformation of one’s own experience cannot be ‘awareness’ if by this notion we mean an act of sudden unveiling. On the contrary, the phenomenological perspective allows us to re-elaborate the status of consciousness in the process of transforming experience and is a sign towards a redefinition of education and political practices of the self.

CAN THE DOMINANT EXPERIENCE BE EDUCATED?

This question points towards many difficulties and paradoxes: can dominant groups be expected to engage by themselves in a process of education and transformation of their own experience? How can one think of an education of one’s own experience if *whiteness* escapes any reflexive consciousness and any ‘grasp’? Insofar as *whiteness* is not only a social status but the configuration of a relationship to the world, it seems futile to get rid of one’s own *whiteness* through a change of representations, discourses or intentions. This emptiness has been powerfully described by Richard Wright in his novel *Native Son* (Wright, 1940), when he analyses the character of Mary, a young Communist Party sympathizer, and when he shows how *whiteness* is inseparable from a class privilege. Mary is the daughter of the Daltons, the new white bosses of Bigger Thomas, a young black chauffeur living with his family in a situation of social poverty. The first time Bigger drives Mary, she imposes a forced familiarity on him, trying to shake off her own *whiteness* in order to prove her intention to establish a relationship of equality. She urges him to take her to an ‘authentic’ black restaurant, forces him to talk about himself, not to call her ‘Madame’ etc. All the violence of white paternalism and the class distance between the characters are then exercised. The discrepancy between Mary’s intentions and promises (the promise of familiarity and possible equality) and her own white behaviour (body attitudes, tone of voice, perception) leads to an unbridgeable contradiction which paralyses Bigger, making him lose all control over the situation and reality. What Wright shows is that the register of intentions, promises or representations is incapable of transforming the lived experience. The political and ethical education of one’s own

experience cannot be reduced to discourse, conscience or the desire to act well. In order to get rid of *whiteness*, far from denying it, we must on the contrary pay attention to it and reflect on it in order to consider its present effects and manifestations. The paradox is all the stronger as the Dalton family is involved in a re-education project with the Charity Office: that of giving classes to black teenagers who have dropped out of school or are known to be delinquent and more generally to re-educate them so that they can reintegrate into the job market. Education is then understood as a change of representations, as the transmission of a discursive content that has already been developed. The education of blacks leaves the experience of whites unchanged: it is not relational but deeply hierarchical and maintains the relationship of domination. Mary's desire to establish a forced equality with Bigger is symptomatic of a blindness to colour. Far from seeing her own position as structuring the relationship she has with her driver, her ignorance of her own *whiteness* leads to racist and class violence.

How, then, can we consider the 'consciousness' of one's own *whiteness* in a different way? What form of reflexivity should be implemented? Is it possible to envisage a political education of the self that is attentive to the habitual, tacit and unconscious dimensions of the dominant experience? Cavell's thinking on education here provides illuminating theoretical and methodological tools for understanding the articulation between lived experience and the education that can be drawn from it. Indeed, education implies a form of 'recognition' that does not coincide with 'awareness': recognition is rather a new attention, a contact with one's own experience and the fact that it is problematic: it escapes us, appears to us unfinished, transformable, opened to future developments. The 'Education of Grownups' (Cavell, 1979) discussed by Cavell is not a learning of dogmatic capacities or contents but an ethical practice of the self: the ability to 'trust' and 'educate' one's experience by opening it to possible and infinite transformations. More radically, education is not the acquisition of knowledge from one's experience, but the possibility of *having* an experience, that is to say, of being able to change oneself, to think differently (Cavell, 1981). 'Recognition' is therefore not self-assertion or certainty, but recognition of the vulnerability of experience (Laugier, 2014), of the fact that it escapes us, that we cannot determine its meaning or trajectory in advance. In this ethical and existential sense, education is the starting point for a questioning, for a destabilization of the self. It is a sign of discomfort or disorientation: to get rid of acquired norms, ready-made habits or conformity. Experience is not a guaranteed starting point in the construction of knowledge, but the opening up of new problems, of a questioning of oneself, of an unlearning of what, until then, had never been questioned. Epistemologically, this conception of education constitutes a shift from classical thoughts of education. Within such frameworks, education is constructed from experience and experience appears as a starting point; for Cavell, education is instead an exploration, an uncertain questioning. It turns experience into a question, rather than a starting point.

This conception of education finds a particularly rich echo among feminist educational theorists, who in the late 1970s in the United States

undertook to redefine pedagogical practices based on feminist politics of experience. For Berenice Fisher, feminist education within the academic institution is not separate from the feminist questioning of experience, as it emerges within consciousness-raising groups. Within these groups, the narrative, the discussions, the echoes between feelings and emotions are part of building a relationship with one's own experience. The experience initially appears problematic, fragmentary and incomplete. It is not 'discovered' as an obvious fact, but reconstructed in the course of discussions. Feminist pedagogy extends these practices by considering that 'experience itself cannot be taken as a self-evident guide in seeking to understand or end our oppression' (Fisher, 1981, p. 21). The experience is questioned in class, worked on through discussion and the sharing of knowledge, and re-oriented. Consequently, 'educating one's experience' can only take place within an unfinished temporal dynamic over a long period of time. It engages a form of reflexivity constructed with others, resulting from the connection of diverse and fragmentary experiences. The education of experience is thus integral to a transformation of the self, of its affects and feelings, but also of its body and perceptions. It is not limited to the classroom but encompasses the personal and ordinary aspects of daily life (Fisher, 1981; Mozziconacci, 2019).

This conception of education as a political transformation of the self has profound implications for thinking about the dominant experience of *whiteness*. First of all, the experience of *whiteness* cannot be seen as unchangeable, but is, on the contrary, moving and apt to be educated, that is, open to transformation. Secondly, this education is not solitary but is part of a collective process in which experiences resonate and are questioned. Finally, this implies conceiving education as a process of transforming experience and not as a programmatic discourse. This transformation cannot therefore be fully mastered or anticipated, and the education of one's experience implies a radical self-questioning. It is this dimension of unpredictability that Marilyn Frye emphasizes in returning to the education of one's own experience as a white feminist (Frye, 1983, pp. 110–127). Her effort to change and educate herself failed when it took the form of a voluntary project, a goal to be achieved: when she and her white feminist colleagues focussed on white women's agentivity (Frye, 1983, p. 111). Trying to create a 'white women's consciousness raising group to identify and explore the racism [...] with a view to dismantling the barriers that blocked understanding and action in this matter', she/they encountered the anger of a black woman participating in 'a later community meeting' (Frye, 1983, p. 111). She criticized them for 'ever thinking [they] could achieve [their] goals by working only with white women' (Frye, 1983, p. 111). Frye explains how this experience destabilized her and how she gradually realized that she was unable to get out from 'white solipsism', which Adrienne Rich describes as a tendency 'to speak, imagine and think as if *whiteness* described the world' (Rich, 1979, p. 299). The willingness to change oneself (through a voluntary process of consciousness raising) has paradoxically led to a strengthening of *whiteness* as a force for initiative and decision making. A political education of one's experience appears in counterpoint as a process made

possible by collective discussions and a form of conflictuality with black feminists. Awareness of *whiteness* is not 'decided' but emerges from open discussion, from dialogues through which assumptions are challenged and beliefs are displaced. For Frye, *whiteness* is a political category that cannot be reduced to skin colour: it is an inscription within a certain social space; forms of 'disaffiliation' are thus possible, even if they cannot be effected 'by a private act of will' (Frye, 1983, p. 127). To practice this disaffiliation by a stronger reflexivity, by questioning oneself and one's practices, by sharing or conflicting experiences are ways to change one's relationship to the world, at perceptive, affective and sensitive levels. This conception of education appears particularly fruitful within an institutional and academic context, where the question of racism and social reproduction creates pedagogical, theoretical and political injustices.

UNDOING WHITENESS WITHIN ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

In predominantly white Anglo-Saxon and European academic institutions, the institutional consideration of racism (to varying degrees) usually focuses on: (1) the representation within the university of non-white people (students and teachers) and their promotion within university hierarchies, (2) the valorization of non-white theoretical corpus and (3) the opening of chairs or subjects dedicated to these issues (Ahmed, 2012; Ardeï & Mirza, 2018; Mirza, 2006; Mohanty, 1989). According to this view, the hegemonic position of whites would tend to erode and these policies would make multiculturalism effective. However, these programmes often act as corrective measures and underestimate the structuring importance of *whiteness* within the institution: its power and its more tacit repercussions (Mirza, 2006). The focus of such programmes is not directly the effects of *whiteness* (in terms of theoretical questioning, institutional habits or pedagogical practices), but on how the institution should open up to non-white people (Ahmed, 2012) and how theoretical production could be diversified.

Whiteness is not radically criticized but appears as the condition of possibility, remaining tacit, for the inclusion of other groups. The assumption behind these policies is that *whiteness* will lose its hegemonic force if the institution opens its jobs, its public, its corpus to non-white people. As a result, as Sara Ahmed notices, the policies of 'diversity' in higher education (for example, in Great Britain and Australia, where she conducted her study) may act at a symbolic and representational level: 'diversity is a happy sign, a sign that racism has been overcome' (Ahmed, 2007, p. 164) which shifts the focus from the issue of racist violence (real and present) to that of white agency. Emotionally, these policies give rise to a sense of pride or self-satisfaction which is a way of overcoming guilt. Audre Lorde has described this feeling of powerlessness and guilt experienced by white feminists in predominantly white U.S. universities: the fact that they do not feel legitimate to study non-white corpus, to talk about lived experiences of racism that they would not have lived etc. This feeling of guilt then translates into withdrawal, into passivity: the attitude of not doing anything in

order not to take the place of non-white people (Lorde, 1984, p. 129; see also, Sullivan, 2019).

These ways of raising the question of *whiteness* seem to stem from the same production of ignorance about the effects of *whiteness* within the academic institution. In the case of the policies of diversity, the ignorance produced relates to the structuring effects of *whiteness* on the current organization of the university environment. There is a denial of how *whiteness* is embodied in a set of habits, ways of being, speaking, teaching and can be articulated with other relations of domination. For example, the way in which *whiteness*, articulated with class or gender privileges, organizes the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student, delineates the legitimate contours of disciplines or presupposes what knowledge, dialogue, or argumentation should be like (hooks, 1984). In the case of the guilt experienced by white feminists, there is a denial of how a position of discomfort, of self-questioning can lead to a transformation of experience and produce subjective shifts. The production of ignorance, as Frye reminds us, often acts as a form of white ‘arrogance’ (Frye, 1983, pp. 52–83): a refusal to be involved in anti-racist critique, to be oneself the subject of radical questioning. Conversely, to assume to be involved in the critique of racism implies to assume discomfort and doubt towards one’s experience. It is a question of making one’s own experience a problematic one, made up of contradictions and unthought dimensions.

This new understanding of education, as we have said, makes experience a problem and not a stable and fixed knowledge. This means that the educational practices implemented within the institution cannot be led independently from a reflection on the way personal experience is engaged in these practices. Epistemically, this implies a reflexivity with regard to one’s own experience, a reflexivity all the more necessary since *whiteness* is exercised by being non-reflexive, invisible. However, this reflexivity is not synonymous with a sudden and clear-sighted awareness. It takes place over a long period of time and requires assuming a doubt about one’s own experience (Casselot, 2018). As the feminist pedagogies previously mentioned indicate, it is a question of making doubt a productive element, indispensable for the construction of collective knowledge. In her text, ‘A Phenomenology of Hesitation, Interrupting Racializing Habits of seeing’, Alia Al-Saji calls this discomfort or doubt, a ‘hesitation’. She shows how an affective hesitation can disrupt white habits and transform perception and thinking. While hesitation is often considered as a negative or passive affect, Alia Al-Saji teaches us how hesitation could be a remedy for white ignorance *and* arrogance: ‘To experience this hesitation is to be open to the virtual multiplication of other ways of seeing, feeling and acting - alternative routes to that of objectifying vision, routes that could lead to affective responsivity and critical awareness’ (Al-Saji, 2014, p. 148). Indeed, a feminist epistemology which is based on overconfidence risks to think and act arrogantly without even questioning one’s own position in power relations (Ahmed, 2016). Doubt or hesitation are not only lack of knowledge or mere passivity: they make possible the collective construction of an epistemology and to assume the situated dimension of its positioning. They also *leave time*

to think about the forms of resistance to racism, by inscribing them over a long period of time: that of embodied practices and ways of being which can go through pedagogical experiments, failures, transformations etc.

From the perspective of a white teacher or administrator, the consciousness of *whiteness* is not a perfectly lucid and masterful consciousness of its object. It is, precisely, a reflexivity inhabited by questioning, openness to unpredictable transformations. By this, it produces discomfort and requires a form of strangeness with regard to oneself: accepting to see oneself and one's own conduct through the eyes of another (non-white). This reflexivity makes it possible to fight against white ignorance and arrogance and translates into inventive pedagogical practices. Undoing *whiteness* does not only mean integrating a non-white public or dealing with a corpus written by non-white people, according to the paradigm of representation. More radically, it means asking how teaching, listening and classroom organization are structured by *whiteness* as a social relationship. *Whiteness* is not only reducible to the omnipresence of white-skinned people. In a more tacit way, it shapes bodies and ways of moving in the classroom, guides listening and speaking practices. Thought in this way, *whiteness* is inseparable from class and gender. In reflection on education, bell hooks sees *whiteness* as a way of inhabiting the classroom and the course (hooks, 1994). Often a sign of a privileged social status, whiteness organizes who can speak, how, according to what tone etc. It also draws a separation of mind on the one hand and body, its affects and emotions, on the other. Undoing *whiteness* therefore implies rethinking pedagogical practices and allowing oneself to be destabilized by the experiences of non-white people, by what they perceive and think of hegemonic *whiteness*. Far from being blind to colour and race, education must take into account the differences between the members of the classroom in order to think about them. This collective reflexivity makes the classroom 'a space of discomfort and discontent' (Yancy, 2012, p. 54) which assumes conflictuality between heterogeneous experiences. This discomfort is creative for pedagogical practices aimed at fighting against the reproduction of social order: it requires to systematically link the lived experience, the standpoint of knowledge and the process of learning.

However, this reflection is not without raising certain difficulties: is there not a risk of creating a non-safe space or, even more so, of perpetuating relations of domination by making non-white people bear a responsibility, a specific role in the subversion of power relations? When bell hooks envisages the class as a 'democratic community' and claims to prefer a politics of confrontation than a negation of existing power relations, she reminds us that any democratic construction implies a form of conflict (hooks, 2010, pp. 85–90). The classroom is not exempt from power relations, and to postulate a real equality between each individual within the class implies recognizing these relations (hooks, 1994). The very fact of going back on one's own ignorance and arrogance requires one to confront otherness, to allow oneself to be destabilized. It is not a question of expecting non-white people to intervene or to make them take responsibility for change. Rather, it is a question of opening up another space for dialogue where each individual within the class can reflect on his or her own position, articulate it with

a broader reflection on social structures and so on. Moreover, as Vanina Mozziconacci reminds us (Mozziconacci, 2019), the idea of a peaceful education, anxious to avoid any form of conflict, is itself dependent on a bias of race and class: it is within white and well-off households that education is thought as a practice that must get rid of any conflict or adversity (even if it may take tacit forms). This white and pacified conception of education, as mentioned earlier in Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*, also supports the idea that education is above all a matter of changing representations or ideas. Once education is thought as a radical transformation of experience, this transformation is led to assume various forms, which are difficult to anticipate through rigid principles like non-conflictuality, non-confrontation and so on (hooks, 2010).

For hooks or Yancy, this rethinking of classroom as a space of transgression and challenge does not only concern the style of pedagogical conduct (speaking, listening, dealing with conflicts). It also concerns how education shapes lived experience, paying attention to affects and body in learning processes. In this way, it sheds light on how *whiteness* operates *within* theoretical knowledge, building binarities between body and mind, reason and affect, epistemic objectivity and particularity of experience. Hence, the transformation of experience is not only a transformation of the presence in classroom but also a transformation of the production of theory and its anchoring in lived experience.

Correspondence: Mickaëlle Provost, Doctorante en Philosophie, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, ISJPS - Institut des Sciences Juridique et Philosophique de la Sorbonne (UMR 8103), Paris, France.

Email: Mickaëlle.Provost@univ-paris1.fr, mickaëlleprovost@hotmail.fr

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