

According to Fanon and Ahmed, how are bodies orientated in space? What is the political significance of this orientation? Critically evaluate Ahmed's analysis of how the world inhibits or constrains the orientation of non-white bodies.

Through the following essay I will explain how, according to Frantz Fanon and Sara Ahmed, bodies are orientated in space and what the political significance of this orientation is. I will then critically evaluate Ahmed's analysis of how the world inhibits or constrains the orientation of non-white bodies, in order to show that her central argument that non-white bodies have diminished agency in the world, holds.

According to Sara Ahmed, "orientations are about the intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places" (Ahmed, 2007: 151). By this she means that when a body is orientated in a space, its sense of agency and action is heightened. This is because when we are orientated, our familiarity with and influence on the space is high, and so feelings of restriction and unease are diminished. Ahmed uses Husserl's phenomenological account of his home office to demonstrate this (Husserl, 1983: 51). Husserl argues that we are capable of perceiving 'things' (people, objects, parts of objects we cannot see) that are not physically in view, when we are familiar with the 'thing' itself. For example, when we see an apple straight on, we are capable of understanding that the apple has a back side and predicting what it looks like. This is because we have interacted with apples countless times over our lifetimes, and thus it is unlikely that the back side of the apple will be different to how we usually perceive it. According to Ahmed, this effect translates to space. When we are in spaces which we are comfortable in, our agency is highest, because we are aware of all of the possible eventualities in this space. Thus, when we are comfortable in a space, our scope of action is greater as we have a better understanding of possible pathways we could take in that space. Ahmed further argues that spaces are set up for specific reasons (or orientations). Ahmed argues, for example, that it is no coincidence that Husserl's pen and paper are both at arm's reach, as "what is reachable is determined precisely by orientations we have already taken" (Ahmed, 2007: 152). By this she means that his office has become a reflection of Husserl and what he does in the room. The desk he writes on is not any table, like the dining room table he eats on. If he were to start working in his kitchen and eating in his office, he would feel disorientated due to the very way in which he has set up these spaces. For example, he may have to spend more time looking for a book or pen in the dining room, whereas in his office they are at arm's length (because he has previously made it so). Therefore, in different spaces, Husserl is better accommodated to achieving different things (like philosophical investigation) – yet he is the same individual in all of them. This shows how our agency or 'ability to do things' is determined not only by what bodies can physically do, but also by our intimacy with and influence on the spaces through which we experience the world.

The political significance of this orientation, for Fanon and Ahmed, is that non-white bodies have diminished agency in the world. For Ahmed, "whiteness is an orientation that puts certain things within reach" (Ahmed, 2007: 154). By this, she means that the structures and institutions which form the base of society today were set up at the time to exclusively benefit white bodies. To put it in terms we have already seen, white bodies are doing philosophy at their desks whereas non-white bodies are doing philosophy in their dining rooms. While both bodies can both physically

achieve the same outcome (successful philosophical investigation), the non-white body is more likely to succeed because of the way in which the space was set up. For non-white bodies, Ahmed continues, the natural state of disorientation in the world is inherited (Ahmed, 2007: 155). This is because when non-white bodies are born, they do not only inherit their biological race, but the history associated with their race. By this history, Sara is referring to the racism toward and persecution of non-white bodies founded out of colonialism. In this sense, she argues “race then does become a social as well as a bodily given” (Ahmed, 2007: 154), as non-white bodies must inherit the world along with its structures, rules and norms despite having no collective historical input in how these structures work. Frantz Fanon therefore argues that adhering exclusively to the “corporeal schema” (what we can physically do) when attempting to describe the experience of non-white bodies, is not sufficient. Instead, we must also consider the “historico-racial schema” which forms the base of non-white experience (Fanon, 1986: 111). In the following section of the essay, through evaluation of Ahmed’s analysis of how the world constrains the orientation of non-white bodies, I will show that the central argument that non-white bodies have diminished agency in the world holds.

According to Sara Ahmed, one way in which the world inhibits or constrains the orientation of non-white bodies is through the treatment of white bodies as the default and non-white bodies as deviant (Ahmed, 2007: 157). By this, Ahmed means that white bodies are able to go unnoticed in the world, whereas non-white bodies stand out as a point of attention. This causes non-white bodies to feel “exposed” or “visible” (Ahmed, 2007: 157). Ahmed says that as a result of this feeling, their sense of agency is diminished in that they are unable to extend their bodies as freely into their environment as white bodies can, because they feel that they are always visible or being watched. Ahmed uses the example of a university conference to demonstrate this experience (Ahmed, 2007: 157). Despite being non-white herself, Ahmed is aware of every other non-white body that walks into the room. White bodies on the other hand, are not actively registered and so their actions go unnoticed. For white bodies Ahmed argues, their race “trails behind” their actions, whereas for non-white bodies their action “trails behind” their race (Ahmed, 2007: 156). By this, Ahmed means that for non-white bodies their race has already been a point of observation before they even ‘do’ anything, whereas white bodies often go unnoticed until they actually ‘do’ something. Therefore, Ahmed argues, non-white bodies are unable to extend themselves into their environment in the same way that white bodies do because of the feeling that they are being watched or judged.

Despite this argument being highly convincing in a western setting, I would like to introduce the example of a white body born into a majority non-white African country to test her premise. A white body born into a majority non-white space will undoubtedly face the same feeling of being “noticed” or “watched”, should this not translate to the same disorientation and diminished sense of agency which applies to non-white bodies in predominantly white spaces?

While Ahmed would have to concede that white bodies would in fact feel ‘noticed’ in these settings, she would argue that this does not translate to diminished agency like it does for non-white bodies born in majority white countries. This is because white bodies that are born into non-white countries inherit a history of persecuting, rather than of persecution. Through colonialism, the systems in these countries were re-

constructed to directly benefit white bodies. In fact, 'whiteness' is still a valuable orientation in post-colonial countries today. Proof of this is shown through the prevalence of the skin bleaching trade in Africa and Asia. It was found in 2011 by the World Health Organisation that a staggering 40% of African women bleach their skin. In Nigeria, one of the oldest post-colonial nations, this number was as high as 77% (Rao, 2019). This is because fairer skinned women are more likely to find a partner, more likely to get into top level academic institutions and are more likely to be employed in higher paying jobs. Pavithra Rao, investigating skin bleaching in Africa for the UN says that "African women [are] making an entirely rational, calculated, business like decision" (Rao, 2019). Therefore, while white bodies do feel 'noticed' in majority non-white countries, it does not disorientate them in the world or diminish their agency. This is because the systems in majority non-white post-colonial countries were set up, not only to accommodate the orientation of "whiteness", but benefit those who possess it. Therefore, Ahmed's premise does hold that in general, non-white bodies are treated as deviant to 'whiteness', which is a way the world constrains the orientation of non-white bodies.

Ahmed argues that another way in which the world inhibits the orientation of non-white bodies is through objectification. She uses a phenomenological account from Frantz Fanon to demonstrate this (Ahmed, 2007: 153). Fanon is sat in his home, he is aware of what is around him, and like Husserl he can visualise things in his home that he cannot physically touch or see. For example, if he wanted to smoke a cigarette, he would know exactly where to find his matches (Fanon, 1986: 111). When Fanon leaves his house however and meets "the white man's eyes" (Fanon, 1986: 110), he is suddenly aware of his race, and that he is not white. This is because according to Fanon, "the Negro's inferiority or superiority complex or his feeling of equality is conscious" (Fanon, 1986: 150). By this, Fanon is arguing that non-white bodies are constantly aware of their race and race relations, whereas white bodies do not have to be – which acts as form of privilege. Furthermore, according to Fanon, not only do white bodies not have to discuss race, they actively avoid it. This is because there is a collective guilt surrounding colonialism for white people, and thus discussions about race are difficult for white bodies. On the other hand, for non-white bodies "there is none of the affective amnesia", because they are physically experiencing being non-white (Fanon, 1986: 150). Ahmed here makes a distinction between "at-home" experience which Fanon experiences at home and his actual experience in the world (Ahmed, 2007: 153). At home, Fanon like Husserl has full agency and only experiences himself as a subject. However, when he leaves his home, he is reminded of how he appears in the objective sense. Both Fanon and Ahmed therefore, argue the ability to move around the world entirely as a subject is a privilege experienced exclusively by white bodies. One way in which non-white bodies are objectified according to Fanon is the representation of black bodies in a disproportionately sexual way. For example, black bodies are represented as being muscular, having a high sex drive and possessing a large penis. Fanon argues that this is an attempt to reduce blackness to its 'biology', in order to squash the 'threat' of blackness in the world (Fanon, 1986: 158). By doing this, black bodies are seen as having more worth when they match this description, but what they are actually capable of doing is dismissed.

However, I would argue that the "third person consciousness" described by Fanon is not experienced exclusively by non-white bodies (Fanon, 1986: 110). Female bodies,

like non-white bodies, are only capable of living as subjects when they are in an “at-home” setting. This is because like black bodies, they are constantly reduced to their biology. For example, women are often commented on or harassed because of what they are wearing. As a result of this, along with the frequent representation of women in the media as objects of desire, female bodies are constantly aware of how they are perceived in the world in the objective sense. A simple demonstration of how this reduces agency for women is the process of ‘getting ready’. As women are aware of how they will be objectified when they leave the home, they may choose to dress differently from how they would like to. Men on the other hand put much less thought into their clothing, as the threat of being objectified is much lower, and thus this acts as a form of privilege for men too. Iris Marion Young further argues that this constant objectification leads to “reduced motility” for women (Young, 1980). She argues that women are nurtured to take up as little space as possible in the gaze of others if they want to appear ‘feminine’. This explains why for example being overweight, ‘manspreading’ or talking loudly are things which are negatively received and labelled as ‘unladylike’. On the other hand, these same actions are viewed neutrally in men, or even positively as a sign of ‘strong masculinity’. Therefore, the threat of objectification also constrains the orientation of female bodies, as well as non-white bodies.

Ahmed here may argue that the “third person consciousness” for women is not structural in the same way. Whereas discrimination toward women has happened evolutionarily, structures were purposely altered to only benefit white bodies through colonialism. It could be argued that objectification, in this sense, does not restrict the agency of women in the same way that it does for non-white bodies.

While Ahmed would be correct in the assertion that discrimination toward women is more evolutionary and less structural, I would however argue that it is possible for female bodies to feel as disorientated in the world as non-white bodies. Although female bodies do not inherit a past of violent persecution or colonialism, they do still inherit a history of discrimination nonetheless. Women were traditionally thought of exclusively as child bearers and guardians of the home. As a result of this, many of the institutions we use today were set up to exclusively benefit male bodies – just as they were set up to exclusively benefit white bodies. Similarly to non-white bodies, female bodies have been given access to these institutions over time, but the history behind these institutions remains. For this reason, women experience societal structures in the same way that non-white bodies do, by being subjected to the rules and norms of institutions which were created without historical input from female bodies. One example that demonstrates this disorientation for women is the field of banking and finance. Since the conception of capitalism, finance has been dominated by male bodies as they were seen historically as more ‘rational’ and more competent at mathematics than female bodies. As we have seen already, this creates a perpetual problem. Spaces like banking offices have become more and more accommodating to the types of people who are ‘supposed to be there’. In the same way that “people are thrown” by the presence of a non-white body in a white dominated space (Ahmed, 2007: 159), men are also ‘thrown’ by the presence of a female body in a male dominated space. In banking for example, this effect is even greater for women than it is for non-white bodies. In 2013 the New York Times reported that Vetterly (a hiring marketplace) found 77.5% of first year Wall Street analysts to be male, whereas 65% were white (Alden, 2014). Therefore, it could be

argued that female bodies, like non-white bodies, feel their orientation and agency constrained in the world – in that many of the highest paying jobs and roles in our society operate in spaces which are hostile toward female bodies.

For Ahmed's overall argument to hold here, she would have to accept a spectrum of orientations, and I think she would. Ahmed here would argue that while female bodies are too constrained through objectification, if the woman working in the bank were non-white, her disorientation would be even greater. This shows that while the world benefits the orientations of 'whiteness' and 'masculinity', it is still least accommodating to non-white bodies. Thus, Ahmed would argue that there is an intersectionality between orientations as those who possess both 'whiteness' and 'masculinity' are most likely to succeed. In the next paragraph, I will show through Ahmed's example of the "differential economy of stopping", how the world constrains the orientation of non-white people in a way which it does not for female bodies.

The most convincing example Ahmed provides as way in which the world inhibits or constrains the orientation of non-white bodies is the "differential economy of stopping" (Ahmed, 2007: 161). By this, Ahmed means that non-white bodies are physically stopped and asked where they are going, or what they are doing at a disproportionate rate. Statistics published by Police UK support this claim. Between October 2022 and March 2023 there were 12.7 stop and searches for every 1,000 Black or Black British residents in London, whereas there were only 4 per 1,000 white residents (Police UK, 2023). This means that in general, black bodies are three times more likely to be stopped than white bodies in London. Shockingly however, in the City of London area, there were 637.306 stop and searches for every 1,000 Black or Black British residents and 48.284 in the same period for every 1,000 white residents. This means that black bodies are thirteen times more likely to be stopped and searched when visiting the City of London than white residents. Ahmed argues that there are two effects at play here, which both diminish the agency of non-white bodies in the world. Not only is the agency of a body removed when it is stopped (in that you cannot do anything other than engage with the 'stopper'), your future agency may also be diminished in that the threat of being stopped may disincentivise you from doing certain things or going to certain places. For example, black bodies may feel less comfortable visiting the City of London out of fear of being stopped. The City of London is also where the highest paid jobs in London are located, and thus to accept one of these jobs, black bodies must face this fear every day. This again shows the privilege which white bodies hold according to Fanon and Ahmed, which is to move in the world freely entirely as a subject. This is the most convincing example of how the world inhibits the orientation of non-white bodies, as consciousness about the threat of being stopped is something which is experienced exclusively by non-white bodies. Therefore, through the example of the "differential economy of stopping", Ahmed convincingly demonstrates that the world constrains the orientation of non-white bodies in ways which it does not for any other type of body.

Overall then, while I disagree with the premise that "third person consciousness" is an exclusively non-white experience, I accept Ahmed's conclusion that "third person consciousness" does still constrain the orientation of non-white bodies. Furthermore, the inherited history of persecution and colonialism means that disorientation for non-white bodies is more significant than it is for other bodies. Therefore, not only is

'whiteness' "an orientation that puts certain things within reach" (Ahmed, 2007: 154), it is the orientation which puts more 'in reach' than any other. Additionally, the "differential economy of stopping" (Ahmed, 2007: 161) further supports Fanon and Ahmed's assertion that, free movement in the world entirely as a subject is a privilege experienced exclusively by white bodies. Thus, Ahmed clearly demonstrates through her analysis that white bodies are better orientated in the world than non-white bodies, as their perceived scope of possible actions and pathways is broader. Therefore, Ahmed's conclusion that non-white bodies have less agency in the world than white bodies, holds.

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