

The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

**EMBODIED ORIENTATIONS AND DECOLONIAL PRAXES OF RESISTANCE**

A Dissertation in

Philosophy

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August 2020

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## **Abstract**

In this dissertation I develop an account of what I term “dynamic disorientation” to describe how the lived body can transform into a ground for decolonial resistance. I utilize a critical phenomenological understanding of the relationship between racialized embodiment and colonial power, arguing that racist hierarchies normatively structure our purposive orientations toward the world. On this basis, I contend that states of dynamic disorientation can produce resisting subjects who delink from reproducing the colonality of being human and can open the space to create new possibilities for living. My method connects recent feminist women of color accounts of marginalized subjectivities in the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, María Lugones, and Sylvia Wynter, with critical phenomenological tools for understanding the lived body as a site for domination and freedom in Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Sara Ahmed. Thinking at this intersection, I show that acts of resistance do not absolutely transcend history and the sedimentation of culture; rather the potential for resistant actions resides in the body-subject’s power to instantiate new possibilities within existing social horizons.

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## Acknowledgements

I have so much gratitude for all of the help I have received in completing this dissertation.

To philosophy, I first fell in love with you at 19 years old and it changed the course of my life. I am forever grateful to philosophy for forcing me to devote myself to something so fantastically absurd as the pursuit of wisdom.

To Nancy Tuana, thank you for your intellectual rigor and unwavering support. You have been the best example of what it means to be a feminist, academic, and public philosopher. As my advisor, your generous dedication of time has been a lifeline. Your precision and care have made me into a better writer and thinker. It is not an exaggeration to say that this dissertation would not be complete without you. Thank you also for helping me to see that I can be a philosopher and a mother at the same time.

To my committee members, thank you for supporting and affirming me through this process. Thank you to Kathryn Sophia Belle for her incisive questions and her reminders to take care of my work-life balance. Thanks to Eduardo Mendieta for introducing me to decolonial philosophy and for always encouraging provocative questions. I thank Leonard Lawlor for not only guiding me through graduate school, but for reminding me that I am a thoughtful and rigorous thinker. I am grateful to Ted Toadvine for reinvigorating my love of Merleau-Ponty and for asking me to center my own voice. Finally, thank you to Hil Malatino for your groundbreaking ideas and for being so easy to talk to.

To all of the teachers I have had along the way at Carleton University, K.U. Leuven, the University of Ottawa, and Penn State, in ways big and small, your guidance has been indispensable. I am especially grateful to Mariana Ortega for her intellect, guidance, and friendship. Thank you for opening my world to so many brilliant Latinx feminists.

To my family who are the most wonderful part of my life, without you, this would not have been possible.

To my parents, Helen and Jim Tsantsoulas, thank you for your inexhaustible support and encouragement – and for all the babysitting. My whole life, you have let me dream big. To my brother and sister-in-law, Nicholas Tsantsoulas and Laura Bradshaw, and my nephew Logan, thank you for your constant friendship and love. To my sister, Stephanie Chong, thank you for always laughing with me, crying with me, and inspiring me to go after what I want in life.

To my partner, Mark Petaja. We started this journey together and you have been there for every accomplishment and every meltdown. Thank you for always pushing me so hard to believe in myself. I have learned so much from our countless kitchen table discussions. You are the silent co-author of this dissertation.

To our daughter, Lena Sophia Petaja, thank you for making my world so full. This was all for you, even before you were here.

To my hilarious and brilliant coven, Eyo Ewara, Romy Opperman, and Emma Velez. Your collective intelligence and strength of character have vitalized me during these years at Penn State. It is so rare to find a person who can engage in deep philosophical debates and giggle about inanities. I have been lucky enough to find three.

I am thankful to so many others who have enriched my life and helped me on my way. Thank you to Mercer Gary, May Gibillini, Francisco Gonzalez, Bernice Ho, Claudia Horner, Axelle Karera, Chris Long, Efrain Marimon, Christopher Moore, Lise Nelson, Eddie O'Byrne, Ronké Oke, my extended Markos and Tsantsoulas families, and the women at Step by Step and the Bennett Family Center who cared for my child so that I could devote myself to this work.

## Introduction

I am moving to a way of speaking that more clearly seeks coalitions among the colonized across vast histories and spaces, always honoring the local, since resistance can be seen and understood only up close.

María Lugones<sup>1</sup>

María Lugones' La Escuela Popular Norteña once held a workshop on "Politicizing the Everyday" that outlined five crucial steps to pursuing this aim: (1) moving from goal to process, (2) understanding the given, (3) disrupting the given, (4) seeing resistance, and (5) backing up resistance.<sup>2</sup> The first step, to move from goal to process, was designed to transfer the emphasis of resistant political work from achievement on a particular issue to the means by which people gather together in pursuit of liberation from oppressions. In an article reflecting on the design and implementation of the workshop, members of La Escuela Popular Norteña, including Lugones and fellow feminist philosopher Sarah Hoagland, explained that they emphasized the move from goal to process as a way of disrupting the tendency in resistance work to assume that "if one wants to win on the issue in an undemocratic society, one turns undemocratic" in this pursuit.<sup>3</sup> At its heart, they explained that politicizing the everyday is about "destabilization" or the radical disruption of dominant and oppressive ways of life as an avenue of resistance.<sup>4</sup> Rather than building a coalition of resisters based around a predetermined issue, politicizing the everyday

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<sup>1</sup> María Lugones, "Methodological Notes Toward a Decolonial Feminism." In *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 72.

<sup>2</sup> Beltré et al., "Towards a Practice of Radical Engagement: EPN's 'Politicizing the Everyday' Workshop," *The Radical Teacher* 56 (Fall 1999): 13-18.

<sup>3</sup> Beltré et al., 14.

<sup>4</sup> Beltré et al., 14.



involves first engaging in a deep examination of the processes by which we become active in a world, and using this understanding to shape efforts at resistance.

La Escuela Popular Norteña's workshop put into action a manner of theorizing power that centers lived experience. Like the workshop guides and participants, I come to this dissertation project wanting to engage questions about how structural oppressions and privileges are reproduced and challenged within everyday life. My own efforts at resistance work in local correctional facilities in conjunction with the Restorative Justice Initiative have allowed me to see that when resistances happen on a small scale they are no less active and committed to radical social change. Sometimes, such as when you are faced with the unrelenting presence of a draconian institution, resistance can in fact only happen in subtle and seemingly mundane everyday interactions. Yet, reading and learning from the work of decolonial feminists like Lugones, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Sara Ahmed has taught me that thinking about resistance through the everyday is not at all the same as locating resistance in the normal unfolding of our lives within oppressive social worlds. There is a tendency when we link these ideas – the everyday and resistance – to make the mistake of assuming that resistance is just a matter of correct labeling: *'this relationship is resistance, this sign is resistance, this shirt is resistance.'* Lugones, Anzaldúa, Ahmed, and my incarcerated students have shown me how to think of resistance always as a process of transforming the everyday and of subtly, slowly, and determinedly destabilizing the status quo.

In this dissertation, I theorize the possibility of decolonial resistance to structural oppressions by embracing and engaging La Escuela Popular Norteña's commitment to resistance as a process: *understand the given, disrupt the given, see resistance, back up*

*resistance*. Using a richly intersectional perspective informed by critical philosophy of race, feminist and decolonial philosophies, and critical phenomenologies of embodiment, I take up the idea that power is reproduced by bodies in the very ways that they dynamically inhabit worlds. I use this notion to frame my exploration of the bodily expressions of racist colonial power systems and decolonial resistances. As a result, I have developed an account of what I term, “dynamic disorientation,” to describe how the lived experience of colonial oppressions can be transformed into grounds for decolonial resistance.

This dissertation is structured in two-parts. First, I develop an analysis of the reproduction of the lived conditions of structural oppressions. Informed by decolonial and critical race theorist Sylvia Wynter’s concept of the colonality of being human, I investigate how socially and culturally shaped colonial codes and disciplines insinuate themselves into our everyday lives. Wynter argues that being human today means instituting an autopoietic colonial genre of being that she names *homo oeconomicus*. This genre reproduces human and less-than-human classes of being that are defined by racist hierarchical logics and technologies of domination that first emerged in the era of European colonialization. Thus, broadly speaking, while colonality can refer to many ongoing effects of colonization after the formal end of colonial occupations, the colonality of being on Wynter’s account specifies how colonial power informs our ontological theories and affects our existential experiences of being human.

I choose to read Wynter through critical phenomenology in order to frame the colonality of being human as a particular normative modality of being oriented toward a world that centers whiteness and encourages appropriative and dominative bodily habits. I suggest that critically examining our practical orientations toward the world can reveal

embodied spatial and temporal experiences of colonial privileges and oppressions, for example, how racialization differentially affects the experience of one's own body as the power to act in the world. I am interested in detailing the experiential aspects of the colonality of being human today by focusing particularly on what Helen Ngo refers to as "the quiet hegemony of whiteness," or the ways in which the colonial imposition of racialized hierarchy continue to affect the background conditions of intersubjective embodiment.<sup>5</sup> Because I focus on colonial racialization in this study, I often draw a contrast between the embodied ease felt by white bodies and the discomfort felt by non-white bodies. This is not to erase the differences between different forms of racialized embodiment, or even more worryingly, to uphold a binary between whiteness and non-white races that can reify whiteness. I employ this binary in order to better describe the lived experience of colonial oppressions and privileges, which as Wynter argues, should be understood as consequences of the imposition of this binary. When I explore decolonial practices of dynamic disorientation, I argue that a common element in decolonial ways of being is the rejection of binary logics and of power based in the segregation and domination of what is other. My focus on racialized embodiment is also not designed to deny the ways that gender, class, sexuality, and other socially constructed forms of difference impact embodiment, indeed, including racialized embodiment. The analyses of embodied orientations and disorientations I offer in this project are intended to be able to accommodate a detailed consideration of these intersections.

The second half of the dissertation develops my account of dynamic disorientation in order to explore possibilities for critically intervening in the bodily mechanisms that

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<sup>5</sup> Helen Ngo, *The Habits of Racism: A Phenomenology of Racism and Racialized Embodiment* (New York: Lexington Books, 2012), ix.

reproduce the colonality of being human. Wynter suggests that critical practices of decolonization require nothing less than the collective redefinition of our self-conception as members of humanity and a complete transformation of our wider frames of meaning. She believes that we all struggle to think and act outside of colonial terms, and so, she calls for a radical heretical rupture in our methods of knowledge-production that would help to dethrone our current genres of being in favor of new forms of life. Decolonial responses to the colonality of being have generally fallen into two different areas of focus. There are those, like Wynter, who put forward epistemic projects of decolonization and agree with Anibal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, and Aimé Césaire in espousing the transformative effects of marginalized knowledge-production and language practices on the experience of being human. There are also those who favor an ethically-focused approach, like Nelson Maldonado-Torres in his reading of Enrique Dussel, Frantz Fanon, and Emmanuel Levinas, who devises a decolonial ethics based in the adoption of principles of love, respect, and justice.<sup>6</sup>

In this dissertation, I follow the approach of decolonial feminists Lugones, Anzaldúa, and Ahmed whose work focuses on theorizing ethical and epistemological strategies of decolonization through a more foundational analysis of what can be made possible in the immediacy of situated and embodied lived experience. These three thinkers share a commitment to what Mariana Ortega terms the “critical deployment of experiential knowledge,” which they use to critique and illuminate the oppressive circulation of racism,

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<sup>6</sup> See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) and “On the Colonality of Being,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 240-270.

sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia in colonial social worlds.<sup>7</sup> Lugones, Anzaldúa, and Ahmed thus represent an approach to theorizing decolonization that aligns with what Cherríe Moraga calls, “a theory in the flesh,” that is, a theory ultimately “interested in pursuing a society that uses flesh and blood experiences to concretize a vision that can begin to heal our ‘wounded knee.’”<sup>8</sup> Thinking explicitly from within their subject positions, Lugones, Anzaldúa, and Ahmed suggest methods for developing critical descriptions of everyday lived experiences shaped by colonial power systems. The result is an approach to decolonization that acknowledges the difficult and complex inner efforts and coalitional dialogues needed to become disentangled from coloniality. Bringing them together with Wynter, I aim to demonstrate that by framing the coloniality of being human as a historically and socially-situated embodied modality of being oriented within shared social worlds, we can think phenomenologically about the possibilities for decolonial resistance that are opened up by transforming our dynamic practical relations with the worlds we inhabit.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Mariana Ortega, *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 10.

<sup>8</sup> Cherríe Moraga, “Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh,” in *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983), 23.

<sup>9</sup> In *In-Between*, Ortega reads Lugones and Anzaldúa as theorists of “Latina feminist phenomenology.” Similarly, Jacqueline M. Martinez draws out productive convergences between Anzaldúa and phenomenologies of embodiment in *Phenomenology of Chicana Experience and Identity: Communication and Transformation in Praxis* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000). Sara Ahmed can be identified as a critical phenomenologist in addition to her being a cultural and affect theorist. Her phenomenological theories are developed in her work on embodiment, power, space, and time. See especially Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149-168; and *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

My account of dynamic disorientation reimagines the relationships between embodied subjects and colonial power, where I understand the lived body as an ambiguous site of both domination and resistance. Informed by recent work on marginalized subjectivities and radical transformation, I offer an account of dynamic disorientations as characterized by four key features: existential liminality, critical proximity to power, affective disinvestments from dominant social worlds, and resistant creativity. My aim is to illuminate how practices of becoming dynamically disoriented can enact the ways that colonial lived experiences carry the grounds for radical resistance. Thus, dynamic disorientation, as I account for it, is not an absolute break with history and culture but must be continuously enacted in what Lugones calls oppressing <- -> resisting relations, which capture the tensions experienced by subjects who are searching for possibilities for liberation from within oppressive social worlds.

*Chapter One* offers an analysis of the structural connections between contemporary racism and colonial power through Wynter's genealogical-historical account of the colonality of being human. I use her concept of autopoiesis to show that the colonial construction of race, and its eventual naturalization, has made racial hierarchy fundamental to contemporary experiences of subjectivity. *Chapter Two* further unfolds the existential experience of colonial and racialized embodiment. I use critical phenomenological resources from Ahmed, Ngo, Alia Al-Saji, Iris Marion Young, and others and extend Maurice Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the lived body and operative intentionality to show that whiteness operates as a colonial orientation device that structures our spatiotemporal inhabitation of a world. As such, I conclude that race differentially affects motility and ability in ways that reproduce whiteness as an

exclusionary norm.

*Chapter Three* begins to build my account of dynamic disorientation as a ground of decolonial resistance to the structural oppressions of colonial power. I look to Ahmed, Anzaldúa, Lugones, and Wynter for their analyses of disorienting states on the racialized and gendered colonial margins. I describe dynamic disorientations as arising from inhabiting liminal states and spaces that can open up the possibility of developing a critical proximity to dominant power. I then consider how one can learn to dwell in dynamic disorientations through affective disinvestments from racist and heterosexist styles of embodied relation. *Chapter Four* explores the particular creative and resistant possibilities opened up by dynamic disorientation. I look specifically to minority discourse in Wynter, queer invention in Ahmed, and nepantlera artistic practice in Anzaldúa as practices of resistant creativity that can facilitate breaking with the colonial status quo and thereby open space for innovation and new possibilities for living differently.

This project is my attempt to theorize oppression and resistance in the everyday. Like the members of La Escuela Popular Norteña's workshop, I believe that effective projects of resistance require both that we work to understand what is taken-for-granted as the given background of our lived experience and that we use this information to seek out and create new opportunities for radical social change. I begin, therefore, by taking the first two steps toward politicizing the everyday: *understanding the given and disrupting the given*. Turning in Chapter One to Wynter's account of the colonality of being human, I will show how she demonstrates that understanding the autopoietic reproduction of oppressive power is itself a means for disruption.

## Chapter 1

### The Coloniality of Being Human

Human beings are magical. Bios and Logos. Words made flesh,  
muscle and bone animated by hope and desire, belief  
materialized in deeds, deeds which crystallize our actualities.  
'It is man who brings society into being.' And the maps of  
spring always have to be redrawn again, in undared forms.  
Sylvia Wynter<sup>10</sup>

Sylvia Wynter's theorizing of the coloniality of being human provides a conceptual vocabulary for understanding how we are embedded within colonial power systems.<sup>11</sup> Her account thus serves as the starting point for my investigation into how embodied colonial orientations toward shared social worlds are lived and reproduced, and the histories that they carry. Wynter develops her concept of the coloniality of being human with the goal of explaining how contemporary ideas about what it means to be a human being, particularly in relation to a globalized notion of the "we" of humanity, were fundamentally shaped by European colonialism beginning in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. She presents an ontological-genealogical theory of the autopoietic becoming of humanity as *homo oeconomicus*, which is what she names the present genre of being human. In the most general terms, Wynter's notion of a genre of being refers to any form of human life that is more narrowly defined

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<sup>10</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "The Pope Must Have Been Drunk, The King of Castile a Madman: Culture as Actuality, and the Caribbean Rethinking of Modernity," in *Reordering of Culture: Latin America, the Caribbean, and Canada in the Hood*, ed. Alvina Ruprecht (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995), 35.

<sup>11</sup> A note on method: Wynter's work is expansive and interdisciplinary. In this chapter I will explain key concepts that are central to her account of the coloniality of being human including: autopoiesis, descriptive statements, symbolic codes of life and death, and origin narratives. Yet there are areas of Wynter's corpus that I do not engage including her novel, plays, and most of her literary criticism. I have chosen to focus on her ontological and genealogical essays and her interviews in *Small Axe*, *Proud Flesh*, and those published together with Katherine McKittrick.



than a species-level definition of humanity. She argues that human genres are instituted socially by groups and are reinforced through culturally specific origin narratives and myths. For Wynter, genres thus “denote the fictively constructed and performatively enacted different *kinds of being human*.”<sup>12</sup> Epistemologically, this means that different cultural groups can form genre-specific conceptual and symbolic frameworks of meaning and of self-definition.

Yet, as I will explain in detail below, Wynter claims that white, European colonialism restructured global power dynamics and introduced a single origin narrative meant to encompass all of humanity. Colonialism therefore created hegemonic genres of being human that not only defined humanity in accordance with racist logics of domination, but also were overrepresented as the only legitimate cultural form of definition. In much of her work, Wynter provides detailed genealogical accounts that carefully trace the operating logics of colonial genres of being human up to present day *homo oeconomicus*. In this chapter, I reconstruct pertinent parts of Wynter’s genealogies and pay particular attention to the central role that she ascribes to race in maintaining colonial logics of domination. In what follows, I explore the main concepts and claims of Wynter’s genealogical ontology of colonial humanity, which states that human beings are autopoietic hybrid biological-social systems. *Section One* locates Wynter’s concept of the colonality of being human in relation to decolonial theory. *Section Two* parses her use of three concepts unique to her account: autopoiesis, descriptive statement, and sociogenesis. Finally, *Section Three* reconstructs the main points of her genealogies of genres of being, and considers her conclusion that race

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<sup>12</sup> Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overtake, its Autonomy of Human Agency, and the Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition,” in *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology*, ed. Jason R. Ambrose and Sabine Broeck (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 196n20.

hierarchies are integral to the continuing reproduction and maintenance of the coloniality of being human.

### **1.1 The Coloniality of Being: Development of a Concept**

There are two major accounts of the concept of the coloniality of being human within decolonial theory, one by Wynter and the other by Nelson Maldonado-Torres. Both versions emphasize the existential aspects of the differential experience of being defined as human or sub-human in a modernity that is shaped by our recent colonial past. Both likewise view the era of European colonialism as a time where we saw the boundaries of a newly globalized humanity defined in accordance with binary logics and narratives of domination that were meant to justify the brutal extermination and expropriation of non-European populations. The exact provenance of the term coloniality of being in decolonial theory, however, is contested. In “On the Coloniality of Being,” Maldonado-Torres attributes the term to Walter Mignolo who was reportedly using the concept in conference presentations as early as 2000.<sup>13</sup> In a footnote, Maldonado-Torres specifies a further list of scholars who contributed to the term’s emergence in decolonial theory, but does not include Wynter. His omission is odd because Wynter introduces the concept in a prior article, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,” which Maldonado-Torres references in another footnote.<sup>14</sup>

Maldonado-Torres’ version of the concept uses Heideggerian ontology to undergird ideas about the links between coloniality and being that he highlights from decolonial

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<sup>13</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 240.

<sup>14</sup> See Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument.” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337.

theory. He defines the colonality of being as a sub-ontological difference between Being and what is negatively marked as below Being, that is, dispensable for the sake of Being. This sub-ontological difference specifically defines the lived experience of those inhabiting racialized bodies marked as expendable and expropriable through the ongoing normalization of conditions of war, *e.g.*, violence, rape, slavery, and incarceration.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, this accords with Wynter's claims in several texts that "'Race' was [...] the answer that the secularizing West would now give to the Heideggerian question as to the who, and the what we are."<sup>16</sup> Both Wynter and Maldonado-Torres also directly follow Aníbal Quijano in insisting that race difference is the defining feature of the colonality of being human. Quijano argued that racial division, along with class, provided the basis upon which the colonial distinction rests between those beings who are fully human and those who can be dominated and exploited for the sake of the fully human.<sup>17</sup>

Despite their common provenances in the work of Quijano and Mignolo, Wynter's account of the colonality of being human differs significantly from Maldonado-Torres'. Wynter weaves Quijano's notion of the colonality of power and Mignolo's concept of the colonality of truth/knowledge together with her own theory of the praxis of being human as an autopoietic system, which I explore in detail below. Briefly stated, for Wynter the colonality of being names the autopoietic sociogenic-ontogenic production of genres of being human in accordance with racist hierarchical logics and technologies of domination. Her concept weaves together arguments from neurobiology, anthropology, philosophy, psychiatry, and sociology to describe the active and passive mechanisms by which we all

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<sup>15</sup> Maldonado-Torres, 254–56.

<sup>16</sup> Wynter "Unsettling the Colonality of Being," 264.

<sup>17</sup> See Aníbal Quijano, "Colonality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 569-572.

come-to-be within a particular context structured by historically and socially constructed symbolic logics of life and death. Thus, rather than focusing on the political and ethical contexts for the emergence of the coloniality of being human like Maldonado-Torres, Wynter's concept highlights the role of the epistemic in shaping our existential experiences of what it means to be a human being.

## 1.2 Wynterian Autopoietic Praxis

Wynter claims that it is fundamental to a decolonial project of resistance to accept the truth of "our *being human* as 'always a doing,' of our *being human as a praxis*."<sup>18</sup> She views a human being not as an instantiation of a predetermined essence, but as a being defined by constant self-creation through conscious and unconscious practices, habits, perceptions, communications, and behaviors. In short, human beings are their autopoietic praxis. Establishing this ontological claim allows Wynter to argue that we always experience our existence as normatively meaningful and so we struggle to both act and reflect outside of the hegemonic norms defining humanity within dominant cultures. For instance, Wynter believes that all contemporary thinkers "continue to know our present order of social reality, and rigorously so, in the adaptive 'truth-for' terms needed to conserve our present descriptive statement."<sup>19</sup> She continues:

...with this a priori definition serving to orient and motivate the individual and collective behaviors by means of which our contemporary Western world-system or civilization [...] are stably produced and reproduced. This at the same time as it ensures that we, as Western and westernized intellectuals, continue to articulate, in however radically oppositional a manner, the rules of the social order and its sanctioned theories.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Wynter, "The Ceremony Found," 196.

<sup>19</sup> Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being," 270.

<sup>20</sup> Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being," 270-71.

Her account of autopoietic praxis, which I detail below, provides conceptual tools for understanding how colonial socio-cultural norms and values can so deeply shape our thinking and our embodied lived experience. On this basis, Wynter also theorizes the possibility for autopoiesis to become a praxis of decolonial resistance, and eventually, liberation. Like other social constructionist theorists, she believes that what is constructed has the potential to be reconstructed in new and different ways.

Wynter describes human autopoiesis as a hybrid process of ontogenesis and sociogenesis, where the human comes-into-being in accordance with both genetic and symbolic codes that define normative genres of being human. She defends her position with an account that explains how genetic features of human existence, like our biochemical opiate reward system, serve as the “*implementing conditions*” for the socio-cultural norms that define the boundaries of the human.<sup>21</sup> While these socio-cultural norms can take on many distinct forms, Wynter develops a genealogy of human autopoiesis that traces the emergence and reproduction of colonial symbolic logics of racial domination in our governing self-definitions, or genres of being human, since the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

In addition to her research on literature and culture, Wynter looks to the work of biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela and anthropologist Gregory Bateson to build her account of the colonality of being human. She weaves these together with Frantz Fanon’s work on sociogenesis to produce a “hybrid” understanding of the human being as irreducibly biological and sociological, ontogenic and sociogenic, material and symbolic. She also emphasizes that hybrid autopoietic processes are saturated with power as they operate to create genres of being human that draw boundaries between in-groups

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<sup>21</sup> Wynter, “The Ceremony Found,” 211.

and out-groups, thus excluding and dehumanizing some groups of people in order to establish others as paradigmatic members of the human species. Wynter imports concepts from Maturana, Varela, and Bateson into her understanding of the coloniality of being human, including autopoiesis and descriptive statement, which I describe below, because these purport to explain how human beings come to define themselves in accordance with socio-cultural norms through mechanisms that normally operate outside of our conscious awareness. Wynter, as we will see in Chapters Three and Four, is interested in pinpointing possible points of conscious critical intervention in our processes of autopoietic becoming. She believes that in order to liberate ourselves from the structural oppressions of the coloniality of being human, we must take control of the processes by which we autopoietically reproduce colonial genres of being like *homo oeconomicus*.

### **1.2a. Autopoiesis in Maturana and Varela**

Maturana, Varela, and Bateson are systems-theorists for whom life is an interconnected web of unitary systems with internally produced and maintained organizations. In their fields of expertise (biology, anthropology), they represent a novel focus on living relations both within organisms and between systems of organisms that can only be understood by closely studying their active functioning, which includes odd and chance occurrences, reactive corrections, and other internal and external interactions. Most importantly for Wynter, they are interested in revealing how we can observe and comprehend the activity of living from within this interconnected web of life. Specifically, they approach the question: how can human beings, who are themselves living systems, inhabit a perspective from which to study themselves and other forms of life? Maturana and Varela's account of autopoiesis was developed specifically with this problem in mind.

Hence, Wynter takes up their framework for comprehending life as a web of relational autopoietic systems as the ground for her genealogical study of the colonality of being.

In *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living*, Maturana and Varela describe the autopoiesis of living beings almost exclusively in terms of ontogenesis. They explain that ontogeny details “the history of the structural transformation of a unity” and the “history of maintenance of its identity through continuous autopoiesis in the physical space.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, for Maturana and Varela the term ontogenesis names the physical-material processes and interactions that can be properly called biological, that is, having to do with what is contained within the unity of a living system, which are only those phenomena that participate in the continued maintenance of the system as a unity. An autopoietic system is an individual living thing, like a human being, dog, or tree, but it can equally name any particular domain of relations, like an individual cell or organ. In fact, Maturana and Varela take the radical position that all living things are properly referred to as living because they are autopoietic systems of relations, and so, drawing hard boundaries between types or species of autopoietic systems may actually impede the study of life as it is.

Nonetheless, individual autopoietic systems can be distinguished as such when they name a particular domain of relations that aim at reproducing the system without substantial change. An individual living system is thus a kind of homeostat or a thing capable of maintaining stability in a changing environment (homeostasis). What makes a homeostat specifically autopoietic is that the “critical systemic variable” against which all changes or disturbances to its functioning (i.e. its living) must be judged and corrected, is

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<sup>22</sup> Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (London: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1980), 98.

*“the system’s own organization”* so that it exists only in that it maintains itself as a unified entity.<sup>23</sup> This latter point means that the system-organization itself, the relations between parts of a whole, is what makes the autopoietic system “one” being.<sup>24</sup> Thus the limits of any autopoietic system, such as a human being, are delineated by its sphere of relations, which for Maturana and Varela include its concrete materiality and the space required for auto-relations of production. The autopoietic system/living being defines this space according to what is needed for it to continue producing and maintaining itself (“the components that realize it”).<sup>25</sup> Thus in one sense, that is ontogenetically, the autopoietic system defines its own limits of being, but in another sense, this activity of self-definition is not performed by a self that is consciously aware. Maturana and Varela are careful to claim that their definition of autopoiesis is as general as possible and meant to apply equally for all life forms, from a single cell to a complex being like a mammal. They thereby sidestep many difficult questions about the possibility for human and animal conscious awareness of autopoietic processes or their ability to direct these processes.

They do offer some remarks on our ability to observe autopoietic systems and study their function, and in doing so briefly touch on something like human consciousness of our

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<sup>23</sup> Maturana and Varela, 66.

<sup>24</sup> In this way Maturana and Varela provide an answer to the famous Ship of Theseus paradox: it is the same ship as long as the organizing relations between its parts remains, no matter if every board, nail, and thread are replaced.

<sup>25</sup> They explain, “an autopoietic organization constitutes a closed domain of relations specified only with respect to the autopoietic organization that these relations constitute, and, thus, it defines a ‘space’ in which it can be realized as a concrete system; a space whose dimensions are the relations of production of the components that realize it” (Maturana and Varela, 88).



own autopoietic praxis.<sup>26</sup> Maturana and Varela claim that an observer must have a perspective at least partially outside of the autopoietic system they are studying in order to be able to distinguish the relations that are part of the self-maintenance of the system as a unique being from those that are only incidental to the system's achievement of homeostasis. Put differently, they believe that it is only possible to delimit the contours of an object of biological study from a perspective at least partially external to it. This perspective, however, can be very difficult to accomplish because observers are fundamentally limited by their own autopoietic organization and cognitive structure.<sup>27</sup> For example, a biologist studying a bat would be limited in her ability to accurately and completely observe the bat's autopoietic praxis because she is limited by her own perceptual apparatuses, she can only see and hear as a human can. She is also limited by her need to decide the boundaries of the bat's systems of relations in order to delimit for herself an object of study. To solve these dilemmas, the biologist must create distance by deciding in advance what forms of relation are necessary for the bat to be a bat and those that are accidental.

By pointing out these limitations as hindrances to biological study, Maturana and Varela critique a traditional notion of scientific objectivity. Indeed, their autopoietic systems-theory of life disallows the assumption of a purely objective or complete perspective on another autopoietic system. When we observe autopoiesis, it is always from a partially distinct, but nonetheless messily connected, vantage point. We run into more

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<sup>26</sup> We can see the influence of these brief remarks on Wynter's ideas about locating criticality within marginalized perspectives, or in what she names "demonic grounds." I explore Wynter's understanding of inhabiting a critical proximity to power and resistant liminal spaces in Chapters Three and Four.

<sup>27</sup> Maturana and Varela, 99-109.

complex and difficult challenges when we consider the autopoietic human being as both observer and observed. The distance required for a human being to observe its own autopoietic functioning can only be accomplished, in their estimation, via language. Maturana and Varela describe human “self-conscious behavior” as a form of self-observation where the observer interacts with “its own descriptive states which are linguistic descriptions of itself” and thereby “generates the domain of self-linguistic descriptions.”<sup>28</sup> The only access we have to our own autopoietic systems-functioning therefore rests within a discursive-linguistic sphere of understanding where the physical materiality of autopoietic living is translated into descriptive states that then generate their own domain of knowledge.

Wynter builds on Maturana and Varela’s claims about autopoiesis and self-observation in order to (1) develop her own account of the human being as an autopoietic system that is both ontogenic and sociogenic, and (2) conceive of autopoietic self-observation as a potential praxis of decolonial resistance. To accomplish both, she first turns to Bateson’s elaboration of an autopoietic “descriptive statement” and uses it as the basis for her own account of the role of self-linguistic descriptions in the establishment of culturally-specific genres of being human. Specifically, Wynter engages with Bateson to help develop her idea that human autopoiesis necessarily involves the telling and retelling of origin stories, which we can study to reveal the underlying symbolic codes that delimit the socio-cultural boundaries of a genre of being human.

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<sup>28</sup> Maturana and Varela, 121.

### 1.2b. Bateson's Human Being as a Self-Correcting System

Wynter's understanding of the human being as an autopoietic system integrates Maturana and Varela's claims with the concept of "descriptive statement" from Bateson's lecture, "Conscious Purpose versus Nature."<sup>29</sup> She uses his concept of a descriptive statement to explain the productive mechanisms driving large-scale transformations in humanity's autopoietic self-definition and self-understanding. Bateson introduces the idea of a "descriptive statement" in his efforts to track the effect of the Lamarckian revolution in biology on the kinds of self-linguistic descriptions of our own autopoietic praxis that Maturana and Varela mention. Most significantly, he argues, we can see that a post-Lamarckian humanity began to think of itself as a purely biological species, such that what was formerly described as its most divine attribute, the mind, was now thought to be explained biologically.<sup>30</sup>

Bateson explains that understanding the human being as a biological and material system, rather than as a divine creation, called for the first time for the study of its complex systems-management. Yet this study, he argues, reveals that the human being is in fact not like other natural organisms in one important respect. Its systems-organizing principle includes the claim that self-consciousness and agency, socio-cultural norms, and socio-political institutions are extra-biological. As we will see in the section below, Wynter picks up on this claim to insist on the importance of considering Fanonian sociogenesis alongside

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<sup>29</sup> Gregory Bateson, "Conscious Purpose versus Nature," in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishers Co., 1972). The same lecture is included in *The Dialects of Nature*, which Wynter cites in "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being".

<sup>30</sup> According to Bateson, Lamarck furthermore "achieved and formulated a number of very modern ideas: that you cannot attribute to any creature psychological capacities for which it has no organs; that mental process must always have physical representation; and that the complexity of the nervous system is related to the complexity of mind" (Bateson, 435).

ontogenesis in accounts of autopoietic praxis. She is especially interested in merging Bateson's and Fanon's revolutionary understandings of the hybrid biological-social development of human beings in order to form a more complete idea of how humanity has come to be structured by colonial power.

Bateson's own view, which Wynter adopts with some modification, is that the human being is a "self-corrective system," which recalls Maturana and Varela's autopoietic system in the sense that it too functions "to conserve the truth of some descriptive statement, some component of the *status quo*" that defines its homeostatic persisting as a unified living being.<sup>31</sup> In other words, a human being exists as a unified and distinct being by both maintaining itself and correcting for disturbances in relation to a descriptive norm. Unlike Maturana and Varela's expansive focus on the features of autopoietic systems that are common to all life, anthropologist Bateson is particularly concerned with how human systems autopoietically produce themselves in accordance with a particular "truth-for" or "descriptive statement" that allows them to maintain culturally-specific forms of homeostasis.<sup>32</sup> In other words, he theorizes that there must be an underlying basis upon which reorientations in an individual system's functioning are configured specifically as system-preserving activities. Bateson is interested in how and why individual human beings adapt their behaviors in order to orient themselves in relation to prior shared understandings of what it means to be a human being. Human beings act and react, he concludes, always on the basis of a "descriptive statement" that defines any particular "systemically cybernetically organized self-corrective system"<sup>33</sup> as a unified *thing*. So, a

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<sup>31</sup> Bateson, 436-37.

<sup>32</sup> Bateson, 440.

<sup>33</sup> Bateson, 440-441.

human being can be defined as an individual autopoietic “system which conserves descriptive statements about the human being, body or soul.”<sup>34</sup>

Like Bateson, Wynter claims that while descriptive statements are universally part of the autopoietic praxis of being human, they take on different and culturally distinct forms. She takes up Bateson’s framework to investigate what our current descriptive statements are, how they emerged, and what keeps them in place. For Wynter, a descriptive statement is a socially constructed cultural definition of a genre of being human that is given credibility through an origin narrative. Indeed, Wynter claims that it is a descriptive statement “in whose terms humans inscript and institute themselves/ourselves as this or that genre of being human,”<sup>35</sup> and that, over time, different formulations of origin narratives have functioned “to inscribe the specific ‘descriptive statement’ of the human that is enacting of the ontogeny/sociogeny, nature-culture mode of being human” of that cultural time and place.<sup>36</sup> She therefore believes that by tracing the emergence and disappearance of particular descriptive statements and genres from the initial era of European colonization to the present day, we can trace the role that colonial power has played in our autopoietic becoming, even as this power has been expressed in different forms over time.

Bateson also offers some insight on the problem of how to best understand the relationship between human self-consciousness and autopoiesis. Unlike Maturana and Varela, who are primarily concerned with how biologists can accurately study autopoietic life systems, Bateson is concerned with understanding the impact of self-consciousness on

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<sup>34</sup> Bateson, 437.

<sup>35</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 277.

<sup>36</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 280.

the very processes of autopoiesis by which we become what we are. Specifically, he wants to better understand individuals' conscious awareness of themselves as members of a cultural group with a shared descriptive statement that defines what it means to be a human being. He argues that human beings, to their own detriment, cannot help but define conscious purposes for ourselves as individuals. In this case consciousness operates as little more than "a shortcut device to enable you to get quickly at what you want."<sup>37</sup> Yet, in so doing, Bateson argues that we arrogantly attempt to orient our entire being, as a complex self-correcting system operating in ways that are beyond our conscious awareness, in a direction of our choosing. The "ills of conscious purpose," he warns, are acts of hubris wherein we ignore the roles of cultural and societal forces in shaping our existence.<sup>38</sup> He also worries that modernity has been marked by incessant individualism and technological innovations, which have promoted the pursuit of more and more specific and egotistical variations of governing descriptive statements.<sup>39</sup> Instead, he favors a renunciation of the self as a discrete individual that would help to "relax that arrogance in favor of a creative experience in which his conscious mind plays only a small part."<sup>40</sup>

Wynter's worries about conscious purposes are different than Bateson's. She is concerned with the dominance of western European cultural values and norms across the globe. She views modernity as an era distinguished by the colonial imposition of one hegemonic genre of being human with a single and purportedly universal descriptive

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<sup>37</sup> Bateson, 441.

<sup>38</sup> Bateson, 445.

<sup>39</sup> "But what worries me is the addition of modern technology to the old system. Today the purposes of consciousness are implemented by more and more effective machinery, transportation systems, airplanes, weaponry, medicine, pesticides, and so forth. Conscious purpose is now empowered to upset the balances of the body, of society, and of the biological world around us. A pathology – a loss of balance – is threatened" (Bateson, 441).

<sup>40</sup> Bateson, 446.

statement and origin narrative that normalizes domination, expropriation, and exclusion. So she believes that the problem with modernity is that whole populations of oppressed and marginalized peoples have been forced into conditions that deny their ability to form and act on their own conscious purposes.

Though she disagrees with his take on conscious purpose, Wynter links Bateson's anthropological work on descriptive statements with Fanon in her own articulation of human autopoiesis as a hybrid ontogenic and sociogenic praxis of being. She writes, "Gregory Bateson and Frantz Fanon [...] put forward new conceptions of the human outside the terms of our present ethnoclass conception that define it on the model of a natural organism."<sup>41</sup> In Bateson, and in Maturana and Varela, Wynter sees productive interlocutors who provide conceptual resources that she can use in her own accounts of human autopoietic praxis and the colonality of being. By combining their concepts of autopoiesis, ontogenesis, and descriptive statements with Fanon's notion of sociogeny, Wynter arrives at her own ontological-epistemological account of human existence as defined by socially constructed power systems and reinforced by culturally-specific origin narratives outlining a governing episteme. She uses this hybrid account, which I explain in the next section, to trace a genealogical history of colonial power and its influence on the autopoietic institution of hegemonic genres of being human.

### **1.2c. Wynter's Hybrid Account of Ontogenesis and Sociogenesis**

As I have established above, Wynter defines the being of being human as a culturally- and historically-situated autopoietic praxis. She claims that human beings come-to-be through an ongoing hybrid process accepting, "as Fanon says, [that] phylogeny,

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<sup>41</sup> Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being," 267.

ontogeny, and sociogeny, together, define what it is to be human.”<sup>42</sup> While Wynter sees a nascent form of sociogeny present in the works of Maturana and Varela and Bateson, she thinks this element of human autopoiesis needs to be made more explicit. Therefore, she argues that we can come to understand the hybrid ontogenic-sociogenic operation of human autopoiesis by studying our systems of knowledge-production and the fundamental symbolic codes that define truth and meaning for us. Wynter explains, “our varying ontogeny/sociogeny modes of being human, as inscribed in the terms of each culture’s descriptive statement, will necessarily give rise to their varying respective modalities of adaptive truths-for, or epistemes, up to and including our contemporary own.”<sup>43</sup> By closely studying these descriptive statements and epistemes as the outcome of culturally-specific sociogenic processes of languaging and knowing, Wynter uncovers what the study of ontogenesis usually hides, viz. the differential workings of power in autopoiesis.

In his reading of Wynter’s ontological work, Mignolo remarks that, “The sociogenic principle is not introduced as an object of knowledge but rather as a locus of enunciation that links knowledge with decolonial subjective formations.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Wynter makes it clear that her hybrid ontogenic-sociogenic account of autopoietic praxis does not only aim to provide a more complete picture of human becoming, it is directed expressly at uncovering the conditions of possibility for decolonial resistance projects. She renames Maturana and Varela’s self-linguistic description and Bateson’s descriptive statement, the “sociogenic principle”, and argues that for each colonial genre of being human this

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<sup>42</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 271. See also Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, tr. R. Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), xiv–xv.

<sup>43</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 269.

<sup>44</sup> Walter Mignolo, “Sylvia Wynter: What Does it Mean to be Human?” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 115–16



“adaptive truth-for” statement or “master code of symbolic life/death” is the primary means of cultural reproduction.<sup>45</sup> Studying sociogenic principles, she conjectures, can thus help us to delink and decode from our governing descriptive statements, stop the unthinking reproduction of colonial genres of being human, and potentially open radical decolonial possibilities for thinking, knowing, and being otherwise.<sup>46</sup>

Informed by Fanon’s work on Black lived experience and sociogeny, Wynter also sees the sociogenic principle as a means of introducing marginalized perspectives into our study of what it means to be a human being.<sup>47</sup> The sociogenic principle would mandate viewing autopoietic descriptive statements, which define the limits of homeostasis for a living system, as socio-cultural products with differential effects on socially-stratified groups of people. By making this evident, Wynter believes that Fanon helped to introduce another great heresy into human thinking – akin to the heretical claims of Lamarck or Copernicus in their times. The introduction of sociogeny, alongside onto- and phylogeny, as a mode of becoming opened a heretical rupture in the universalist descriptive statement defining contemporary humanity. Thus, Fanon’s revelation of the specificity of the lived experience of Black colonial subjects effectively worked to “dispute liberal humanism’s

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<sup>45</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 272.

<sup>46</sup> See for instance, Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 273f as well as Wynter’s main argument in “The Ceremony Found”. I explore these ideas further in Chapters Three and Four as I detail my concept of dynamic disorientation as a ground for praxes of decolonial resistance to the coloniality of being human.

<sup>47</sup> Wynter understands Fanonian sociogenesis to signify the socio-cultural production of a dehumanized (non)subject as revealed in the lived experience of the racialized Other. Her retooling of sociogenesis in the term “sociogenic principle” is meant “to both relate it to be and contrast it with, the genomic principle defining of the species-identity of purely organic life.” Cited in Wynter, “Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, of ‘Identity’ and What it’s Like to be ‘Black’,” in *National Identity and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America*, ed. M. Duran-Cogan and A. Gomez-Moriana (New York: Routledge, 2001), 30.

biocentric premise of the human as a natural organism and autonomous subject that arbitrarily regulates its own behaviors.”<sup>48</sup> The study of sociogeny reveals the social and cultural efforts needed to reproduce an exclusively white European definition of humanity.

Moreover, Wynter remarks, “Fanon noted the extent to which all *native* and colonized subjects had been conditioned to experience themselves *as if* they were, in fact, as *genetically inferior* as the hegemonic ‘learned discourse’ of contemporary scholars ostensibly represented them.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, his study of the sociogenic reproduction of a restrictive definition of humanity highlights the occlusion mechanisms built into this genre, which work on both privileged and marginalized subjects. Under the guise of the ostensible universality of genetic facts, dominant self-linguistic statements about what it meant to be a human being hid the operation of very real forces of power and domination. Fanon, on Wynter’s reading, therefore elaborated how the sociogenic principle produced self-conserving learning that necessarily socialized both the White and the “Antillean Negro [...] to be normally anti-Negro.”<sup>50</sup> The fact that this occlusion is successful only if accepted by both the privileged and the marginalized is, according to Wynter, a clue to the need to examine the lived experience of marginalized subjects as a means of upending the global reproduction of colonial genres of being human. Faced with a descriptive statement that dehumanizes them, the marginalized live lives of tense contradiction and unease.

Wynter believes that *the colonial margins are therefore the potential birthplaces of radically new and heretical thoughts*. I agree, and as I will put forth in the following three chapters, I believe that the tense and uneasy contradictions of marginalized life can be

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<sup>48</sup> Wynter, “1492: A New World View,” in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, ed. V. L. Nettleford (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 44.

<sup>49</sup> Wynter, “1492: A New World View,” 45.

<sup>50</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 268.

understood as structural forms of dynamic disorientation that have the potential to create the conditions for decolonial resistance.

### **1.3 The Autopoiesis of Colonial Humanity**

In keeping with her interdisciplinary method, Wynter develops her genealogical account of the colonality of being human alongside her research in philosophy, biology, anthropology, neuroscience, literature, myth, and history. She contends, following Quijano, that the defining feature of colonial power is the production of race as a category marking differences between human beings for the purpose of the expropriation of labor and resources. She thus works to recover the emergence of the colonial imposition of racial difference by tracing epochal transitions in humanity's self-understanding, i.e. in its governing autopoietic descriptive statements, from the Renaissance until the present. In this section, I reconstruct major moments in Wynter's genealogical account of the colonality of being human. I pay particular attention to the central role that she gives to race as a colonial construct and as a socio-cultural fiction indispensable to the emergence and continuous reproduction of colonial genres of being.

#### **1.3a. Ethnoclasses and The Overrepresentation of Man**

Wynter produces a genealogical history of the colonality of being human because she claims that it reveals possibilities for radical decolonial resistance. She believes that all of the social inequalities we suffer from today are consequences of the colonality of being human. In her own words, she states that "all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity [...] the sharply unequal distribution of the earth

resources [...] are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle.”<sup>51</sup>

The details of this struggle will be made clear below, but first I will briefly explain what she means by the phrase “ethnoclass Man vs. Human.” Wynter argues that humanity is currently defined in accordance with one hegemonic genre of being, which she names Man<sub>2</sub> or *homo oeconomicus*, i.e. the human being who is defined by his economic worth within a global white/European and patriarchal capitalist system of power. *Homo oeconomicus* is the present version of a former genre of humanity, Man<sub>1</sub> or *homo politicus*, who first emerged in the formal era of colonialism as the white, western political and rational subject ruling over an increasingly secularized living universe of things.

Wynter uses the term ethnoclass specifically to refer to these two colonial genres of being human because they are unique in their cultural imposition of race and class-based differences as fundamental to the definition of humanity. Both genres were also produced as a result of an epochal shift in self-understanding that started with colonialism, wherein European colonizers began to view themselves as representatives of humanity-itself and not just as a specific cultural population among others. Wynter thus believes that at present we are all struggling “between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves.”<sup>52</sup> In short, this is the fundamental Man vs. Human struggle. Ultimately, as I will explain in Chapter Four, Wynter argues that decolonial resistance should aim to erase the figure of Man in order to let the Human flourish.

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<sup>51</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 261.

<sup>52</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 260.

Primarily in two essays, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument” and “1492: A New Worldview”, Wynter traces *homo oeconomicus*’ role in the Man vs. Human struggle today. As Denise Ferreira da Silva explains, “Wynter outlines the potential retrieval of the human (us, all of us, the ‘human species’) from the bowels of the oversized figure of the human subject produced by modern philosophical and scientific projects, namely, Man. In doing so, she centers the colonial in the examination of the modalities of subjugation at work in the global present.”<sup>53</sup> Wynter argues that her genealogical accounts of our hybrid autopoietic becoming will help us discover how to delink from securing the well-being of *homo oeconomicus* as the standard against which all human autopoietic effort is judged, and thereby open space for something new. She thus “engages what I call the decolonial option,” Mignolo explains, by which he means that she is “practicing epistemic disobedience” and calling for “a practice of rethinking and unraveling dominant worldviews that have been opened up by Indigenous and black and Caribbean thinkers.”<sup>54</sup> To truly unsettle the coloniality of being human, and to become unsettled ourselves, Wynter thus suggests, would first require that we shift perspective to angles of vision revealing the contingency of *homo oeconomicus* as a sociogenic principle merely defining the current hegemonic ethnoclass of being human and continually maintained by our own autopoietic praxis.

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<sup>53</sup> Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Before *Man*: Sylvia Wynter’s Rewriting of the Modern Episteme,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 92.

<sup>54</sup> Mignolo, 107.

### 1.3b. The Renaissance to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century

#### *Transformations from 'True Christian Self' to 'homo politicus' and from the Christian heretic to the irrational/apolitical idolater*

In the first period Wynter traces in her genealogical history, stretching from the Renaissance to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, she reconstructs the transformation from the West's pre-colonial genre of being human – the “True Christian Self” – to the colonial and “degodded (if still hybridly religio-secular),” *homo politicus* or “the Rational Self of Man<sub>1</sub>.”<sup>55</sup> This initial sociogenic transformation from Christian Self to *homo politicus* occurred together with the transformation of the European's cultural concept of otherness, which changed from the other defined as the non-Christian or heretic to the other as irrational/apolitical. Most significantly, this transformation in sociogenic principle saw a change in the status of the claim to be *homo politicus* or Man<sub>1</sub>. Europeans no longer saw themselves as part of a specific cultural population as they did with the True Christian Self genre of being. *Homo politicus* was introduced as a universal definition of humanity. As Europeans learned to self-identify as *homo politicus* they pushed those they defined as others outside of the genus of humanity altogether. Because this new descriptive statement emerged at the same time as Europe's colonial expansion into new territories, Wynter points out that the reinvented spaces and peoples of otherness were specifically relocated “to be the peoples of the militarily expropriated New World territories (i.e., Indians), as well as the enslaved peoples of Black Africa (i.e., Negroes),” through a multi-faceted transformation in Europe's self-understanding, relationship to God, and conception of the Earth.<sup>56</sup> She explores the

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<sup>55</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 266.

<sup>56</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 266.

details of this fundamental mutational shift most clearly in her essay on Christopher Columbus titled “1492 A New Worldview.”

In this essay, Wynter explains the epochal becoming of *homo politicus* first through Columbus’ ‘discovery’ of the Americas, which ruptured the prevailing Christianized origin story of Europe. According to Wynter, his so-called discovery, and the theological, philosophical, and political debates it initiated, radically challenged Europe’s self-understanding for two reasons: (1) it proved lands previously thought to be uninhabitable were in fact inhabited, and (2) it proved the existence of peoples previously unknown to Europe, and therefore unable to have heard and then refused the Word of Christ. Both of these previously unthinkable occurrences unsettled the dichotomy true Christian/non-Christian that had previously organized Europe’s sociogenic self-understanding. The Americas literally put land and peoples outside of God’s realm of grace and redemption, and this required a complete reinterpretation of the organization and purpose of all life on what was believed to be the God-given earth.

Through a reading of Columbus’ personal writings, Wynter argues that he worked to resolve the paradigm crisis brought on by his voyage to the Americas by introducing the “poetics of the *propter nos*” into the theocentric Christianized view of humanity operative at the time. His letters attest to his claim that the encounter with new territories and peoples proved that God had created the world *for the sake of humanity* [*propter nos*].<sup>57</sup> This idea directly challenged the dominant theocentric model of divine creation, which divides the world into habitable and uninhabitable realms distinguished by the gift of God’s grace, and whose founding premise is the scholastic-Aristotelian idea that God created the

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<sup>57</sup> Wynter, “1492: A New Worldview,” 25.

universe for His own glory alone. Instead, the poetics of the *propter nos* proclaimed that God created the Earth for humanity, and as a consequence, the world and everything in it must be knowable by human rationality and meant to be under our command. This shift in the nature of God's creation and His relation to humanity entailed a seismic shift in European Man's conceptualization of himself and his relation to the creatures and lands of the Earth.

Wynter explains that in the former theocentric view, the universe and every living thing in it were products of God's grace, and as such, He could be expected to "intervene arbitrarily in the everyday functioning of nature [...] anytime He chose to do so."<sup>58</sup> Thus, there could be no regular and universal laws of nature available for human rationality to grasp, and all human-derived knowledge about the world and power over it would always be subordinated to God's power. By contrast, Columbus' paradigm shifting claim "that the Creation had indeed been made by God *on behalf of* and for *the sake of* humankind (*propter nos homines*) [for the first time made] possible human inquiry into *the organizing principles* behind the Creation."<sup>59</sup> Columbus' argued that the whole of the Earth was made by God for humanity, and therefore, must function in a rule-governed way that can be studied and comprehended by human rationality. The poetics of the *propter nos*, Wynter notes, was utilized by Columbus to legitimate his rather esoteric Christian apocalyptic viewpoint, but it was also mobilized in far more successful ways by secular humanists to assert their view that nature obeys universal and unchanging physical laws available for, because likewise formed in accordance with, human understanding. In both cases, the new Christian and the humanist-secular, the idea that that the world was now to be understood as navigable by

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<sup>58</sup> Wynter, "1492: A New Worldview," 26.

<sup>59</sup> Wynter, "1492: A New Worldview," 27.



human ingenuity, and as also possibly inhabitable and conquerable by human effort, prevailed.

Wynter explains that this enormous shift in both Christian and secular Europe's understanding had dire consequences for colonized populations. In the still partial Christian viewpoint of many colonizers like Columbus, the peoples of the world who were either known already or waiting to be discovered by Europe, now formed one "sheepfold" who always already possessed the potential for true Christian belief in their God-given rational minds.<sup>60</sup> The peoples of the world no longer needed to wait for God to bestow His grace on them and allow them to hear the Word of Christ to become believers; every human being was *by definition* a potential Christian because Christianity was discoverable by the exercise of human rationality. This new sense of the universal potential for Christian belief (which would eventually become the universal potential for a secular western rational and political life) removed the conundrum of how to classify non-Christians who could not have heard the Word of God and rejected it. It interpreted all humans, including those groups yet to be "discovered" with the same capacity for acceptance of God's Word. But, that generalizing move opened the new and horrific possibility of relegating the non-European-non-Christian colonized, called Idolaters by Columbus, outside of humanity or as sub-human, because any being unable to understand that they were creatures of God and that He created the world for them, could not be human beings at all, or at most, were thought to be in a stunted and immature state of becoming human.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Wynter, "1492: A New Worldview," 28.

<sup>61</sup> Understand, that is, only in the terms legitimated by the colonizers' western, European Christian logics.

By retracing the radical rupture that colonialism effected in European's self-understanding, Wynter makes clear the creation of a universal concept of humanity *as a colonial imposition* onto an earlier religious classificatory schema. This imposition produced colonized peoples as others in a totalizing and dehumanizing sense that was previously impossible. European Man and his Idolater other were "equally juridico-theological categorial models" for understanding who properly belonged to God-given humanity, and therefore, had a divinely-given rational capacity to rule over the Earth and all lesser beings within it.<sup>62</sup> The Idolater, as this term was used by Columbus, thus described "those pagan polytheistic peoples who had either ignored or had not as yet been preached the Word," but who are now recognized as part of one divinely-created earth, navigable and knowable by human beings, and therefore not actually outside of the realm of possible Christian believers. Therefore, the poetics of the *propter nos* allowed Columbus to classify Idolaters as enslavable and their lands "as legitimately expropriable (that is, gainable)," for the sake of a now universal Christian humanity.<sup>63</sup>

Wynter argues that this new religious classificatory schema of the *propter nos* combined with the emerging juridical schema of the modern State to provide the justification for colonial domination over colonized peoples. At the same time, it also allowed for the development of the notion of a universal humanity, of which the European, Christian, colonizer was the self-proclaimed paradigmatic instance. As Wynter explains:

Both Columbus and his fellow-Spaniards therefore behaved toward the Tainos or Arawak peoples in ways prescribed by the term *idolator*; and therefore, as to a group who were legitimately put at the service of securing the well-being of the particularistic *nos* of Christendom. At the same time, this *nos* was represented *as if* it were the *propter nos* of the human species

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<sup>62</sup> Wynter, "1492: A New Worldview," 28.

<sup>63</sup> Wynter, "1492: A New Worldview," 28.

itself, and was so believed to be within the logic of the apocalyptic dream of 'one sheepfold, one flock, one shepherd'.<sup>64</sup>

These classifications justified the egregious treatment of colonized peoples by Columbus and other European colonizers as occurring *on behalf of humanity and human progress*. Moreover, Wynter argues that the later achievement of a universal, rational, and secular definition of humanity, while purporting to allow for previously unknown political and social equality across the globe, was also initiated by the poetics of the *propter nos* and the fundamental shift colonialism caused in Europeans' sociogenic concept of humanity. Wynter argues that the full consequences of this shift can only be understood by tracing race as a marker of otherness that first emerges during colonization and that remains as an essential feature of our current ethnoclass of being human in the present day.<sup>65</sup>

The first step in the emergence of race as a key marker of difference, according to Wynter, was the transition from Idolater as the definitive category of human otherness to that of Natural Slave. This transition also marked the larger epistemological secularization of Columbus' Christian human being to Rational Man, or *homo politicus*, a transformation achieved by positing nature as the extra-human power defining the ontogenesis of all life on earth, including human life. "In the place of the category of the *idolaters*," Wynter explains, "the juntas adapted the category of *natural slaves* from Aristotle, in order to represent the indigenous peoples as ones who were *by nature different from the Spaniards*."<sup>66</sup> Most significantly, she continues, "This difference was one expressed in degrees of *rationality*, with the symbolic-cultural distance between the two groups being

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<sup>64</sup> Wynter, "1492: A New Worldview," 28.

<sup>65</sup> Wynter's argument is informed by Quijano's conception of race as one of the fundamental axes of the colonality of power. I return to the connection between Wynter and Quijano at the end of this chapter.

<sup>66</sup> Wynter, "1492: A New Worldview," 34-5.

seen as an *innately* determined difference [...] predetermined by Natural Law.”<sup>67</sup> In other words, the dehumanization of the indigenous and/or slave populations in the colonies was no longer to be legitimated by the Christian poetics of the *propter nos*; their enslavement and the expropriation of their lands and resources was now seen as a right granted to the Spanish and other European colonizers by the colonized’s own inferior nature. The Christian *propter nos* became that of Natural Law.

Yet, Wynter explains that the establishment of a completely secular symbolic code of life/death to replace the distinction Christian/Idolator, and that would ground the idea that there were by nature differences between human beings permitting their sub-human treatment, was not instituted without complications. Various, and sometimes warring, attempts at legitimating the categorization of natural slaves through a newly developed concept of racial difference occurred throughout the period of colonization.<sup>68</sup> What eventually came to be known as the triadic racial model of humanity: white Europeans, Native Americans, and black Africans, was at the center of these debates. Wynter writes, “the triadic model between free men and women [Spaniards and other white Europeans], ‘nature’s children’ [Indios], and civil slaves [Negros], was [...] legitimated on an essentially postreligious premise, that of the *nonhomogeneity of the human species* [...] and] on whose basis Western Europe was to secularize all human existence in the terms of what Foucault calls its ‘figure of Man’.”<sup>69</sup>

Secularization brought with it the idea that a universal concept of the human, now thought to be a natural species, could encompass a non-homogeneous array of life. Within

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<sup>67</sup> Wynter, “1492: A New Worldview,” 35.

<sup>68</sup> Wynter devotes a section of “Unsetting the Coloniality of Being” to the debates between Las Casas and Sepulveda, for instance.

<sup>69</sup> Wynter, “1492: A New Worldview,” 36.

this array, however, there were at least three different classes of being human that stood in a hierarchical relation to one another. Here, then, Wynter argues, we can finally see the introduction of what have become contemporary racial classifications. The colonizers, white Europeans, were “*gentes humaniores*, as the *more human* people to the *less human* of the indigenous peoples represented as a ‘native’ and secondary mode of humanity,” which both served to “make the now racially (that is, innately otherized ‘civil slave’) category [‘Black’] into a mere tool and instrument for the social realization of the *propter nos* of all peoples of Spanish descent.”<sup>70</sup> Wynter concludes that racialized inferiority was written onto the preexisting concept of a natural slave and emerged as the most successful legitimating criterion for the *natural* sub-classification of a global and unified humanity into hierarchical groups.

### 1.3c. The 18<sup>th</sup> Century to Present Day

#### ***Transformations from homo politicus to homo oeconomicus and from the natural slave to the dysselected sub- or proto-human***

With the rise of *homo politicus* and the end of the reign of the genre true Christian Man as the prevailing descriptive statement for humanity, several previously unthinkable epistemological claims became possible. I have already explained the shift from Europe’s definition of its other as heretic to idolater, and then to the naturalized inferior/slave. Wynter also calls our attention to a concurrent shift in how *homo politicus* viewed the geography and resources of the earth that helped to facilitate the most recent transformation into *homo oeconomicus*. In the previous theocentric view, it was necessary to presuppose the nonhomogeneity of the earth in order to conserve God’s omnipotence.

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<sup>70</sup> Wynter, “1492: A New Worldview,” 36.

Under this logic it was not possible that human beings could have comprehensive knowledge of the earth and it was not assumed that the inner logic of other forms of life had any resemblance to our own.<sup>71</sup> Wynter believes that the overturning of the presupposition of the nonhomogeneity of the earth contributed to the rise and dominance of the physical, and eventually the biological, sciences because it permitted secular and universally valid truth claims for the first time.<sup>72</sup>

With the embrace of a homogenous earth and universe, also came Western acceptance of a nonhomogenous human species. Given that the nonhomogeneity of humanity could no longer be explained by a “physico-spiritual notion of order” in a God-created and ruled Universe, Wynter argues that a “new notion was to be based on a *by-nature difference* between Europeans [...] and peoples of indigenous and African descent”<sup>73</sup> which, eventually post-Darwin, was thought on the basis of bioevolutionary order – that is, “one mapped onto the range of human hereditary variations, instead of, as earlier, on the physical and organic universe.”<sup>74</sup> So, we see that the colonial imposition of racial difference likewise shifted from a hybrid religio-secular notion defining civil, and eventually, natural slaves, to what W.E.B. DuBois identified as the color line, which Wynter explains is “now mapped onto the empirically differentiated physiognomic features of human hereditary variations,” and legitimated as a category of human otherness by “the origin narrative of evolution that had been made to reoccupy during the nineteenth century, the earlier slot of

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<sup>71</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 280.

<sup>72</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 264.

<sup>73</sup> Wynter, “1492: A New Worldview,” 38.

<sup>74</sup> Wynter, “1492: A New Worldview,” 39.

Genesis.”<sup>75</sup> In other words, race as a colonial category of difference, transformed right along with the secularization of the self-understanding of the colonizers.

With this shift in legitimating origin narrative, Wynter also identifies a shift from the distinction rational/irrational being used to define sub-categories of humanity to the distinction selected/dysselected. The line between fully human subject and sub-human other was now drawn in accordance with “a bioevolutionarily determined difference of genetic value substance between *one* evolutionarily selected *human hereditary variation* and therefore *eugenic* line of descent, and a series, to varying degrees, of its nonselected and therefore dysgenic Others.”<sup>76</sup> Wynter concludes that the underlying belief in the nonhomogeneity of the human species, within a homogenous physical universe, still functions as the foundation for this new order of bioevolutionary difference where “eugenicity” and natural selection provide the basis for legitimating dominance over others, and on behalf of a paradoxically universal-and-yet-also-hierarchical genre of being human.<sup>77</sup>

Wynter argues that the 18<sup>th</sup> century singling out of “Indians” and “Negroes” as natural slaves and the irrational and sub-rational others to *homo politicus*, should thus be viewed as an in-between state that prepared the way for Europe’s next phase of sociogenesis into the secularized and fully biologized, but no less racialized, terms of *homo oeconomicus*.<sup>78</sup> The colonial race hierarchy between white colonizer and non-white colonized came to ground the new descriptive statement distinction selected/dysselected, which replaced all previous statements in ostensibly biological terms. Wynter claims that

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<sup>75</sup> Wynter, “1492: A New Worldview,” 39.

<sup>76</sup> Wynter, “1492: A New Worldview,” 39.

<sup>77</sup> Wynter, “1492: A New Worldview,” 40.

<sup>78</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 266.

*homo oeconomicus*, our present ethnoclass of being human, is legitimated by a Darwinian biocosmology that operates in accordance with this binary.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, we can see the same regulatory norms that produced dehumanization during the formal period of colonial expansion—race chief among them —now operational in defining a dysselected or “unfit” global poor as unworthy of the conditions for a livable life, and thus as expendable for the sake of securing the livability of those who embody the selected or “fittest” instantiations of *homo oeconomicus*.<sup>80</sup> Hence, this binary continues to produce what McKittrick terms, “asymmetrical naturalized racial-sexual human groupings that are specific to time, place, and personhood yet signal the processes through which the empirical and experiential lives of *all* humans are increasingly subordinated to a figure that thrives on accumulation.”<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, Wynter points out that while a naturalized concept of race provided Europeans with a “no less extrahuman ground” for their understanding of humanity than God did previously, grounding racial hierarchy in a narrative of natural selection nevertheless functioned quite successfully to deny the reality that race is in fact a “purely invented construct” with no “biogenetically determined anatomical differential correlate.”<sup>82</sup> Once again, we see that the hybrid sociogenic-ontogenic mechanisms of human autopoietic praxis are hidden from view as a feature of their very function.

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<sup>79</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 316.

<sup>80</sup> See Wynter, “The Ceremony Found,” 216f. and Wynter, “Afterword: ‘Beyond Miranda’s Meanings: Un/silencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of Caliban’s ‘Woman,’” in *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. C. B. Davies and E. S. Fido (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990), 365f.

<sup>81</sup> Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to give humanness a different future: conversations,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. K. McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 10.

<sup>82</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 264.



As humanity's self-definition became increasingly biologized in a post-Darwinian world, the triad race model shifted again. The colonial white-Native-Black model morphed into a hierarchical schema of races where white western Europeans became the selected embodiment of humanity, and the sole perfect instantiation of the genus Human, and a "range of Native Others" were classified within a global schematic hierarchy or chain of Being with "the Black Other of sub-Saharan Africans (and their Diaspora descendents)" at the bottom.<sup>83</sup> Wynter highlights this change in order to argue that this classification of the Black race at the bottom of the schematic hierarchy of races, and the mythologies that legitimated it, prepared the way for anti-Black racism to play a founding role in the biological sciences of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Wynter notes that the global Black population thereby suffered "systemic stigmatization, social inferiorization, and dynamically produced material deprivation," all serving in a "lawlike manner" to legitimate and verify these binary distinctions.<sup>84</sup>

Given that anti-Blackness played a foundational role in the autopoietic institution of *homo oeconomicus*, Wynter argues that this form of race prejudice can be located in all the socio-cultural products and institutions of a post-colonial world that, as she has demonstrated, was still defined by the colonality of being human. For instance, Wynter writes of European anthropology:

In this shift, all peoples of African descent (as well as Africa itself, its culture, way of life, and so on) were now elaborated by the discourse of nineteenth-century anthropology, as well as by a related complex of discourses, into the 'stereotyped image' and ostensibly empirical referent of a represented nonevolved, and therefore, genetically inferior, human Other.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being," 266 and 267.

<sup>84</sup> Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being," 267.

<sup>85</sup> Wynter, "1492: A New Worldview," 37.

And, likewise, of the physical sciences:

Hence the logic by which, if the Copernican Revolution was to be only made possible by the West's invention of Man outside the terms of the orthodox [...] theocentric conception of the human, Christian, this was to be only fully effected by the parallel invention/instituting of the new categories that were to serve as the physical referents of Man's Human Other. With the result that the same explanatory model that legitimated the expropriation and internment of the Indians, the mass enslavement of the Negroes [...] – all ostensibly as living proof of their naturally determined enslavement to irrationality – will also underlie the cognitively emancipatory shift from the explanatory model of supernatural causation to that of natural causation, which made the natural sciences possible.<sup>86</sup>

Systemic forms of anti-Blackness are inseparable from the colonality of being human today. "Consequently," Wynter concludes, "the physiognomy, black-skin, way of life, culture, historical past of peoples of Africa and Afro-mixed descent has to be represented consistently as the liminal boundary marker between the inside and the outside of the ostensibly genetically determined and evolutionarily selected mode of 'normal being'."<sup>87</sup> So we that the shift from the rational *homo politicus* to the naturally-selected *homo oeconomicus*, also allowed for the solidification of a racial hierarchy of being within the Darwinian paradigm of evolution and that was affirmed through the culturally produced self-linguistic statements of the humanities and sciences of the time.

In sum, post-Darwin the racialized other to the white European was no longer solely defined by natural irrationality and incapacity for political life. The new organizing principle of bio-evolutionary natural selection enforced a new binary distinction, selected/dysselected, which mapped onto the old racial schematic hierarchy to draw a global color line "between the lighter and the darker peoples of the earth," justified by their respective successes and failures at life, which were "enforced at the level of social reality

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<sup>86</sup> Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being," 305.

<sup>87</sup> Wynter, "1492: A New Worldview," 43.

by the lawlikely instituted relation of socioeconomic dominance/subordination between them” – all of which was rooted in colonial exploitation that began 500 years prior.<sup>88</sup>

In the above reconstruction of Wynter’s genealogical history of the colonality of being human, we can see how she concurs with Quijano’s understanding of the colonality of power and its saturation of modern human life. Quijano’s colonality of power is organized around the categorial framework of race, which he understands as a naturalized matrix of difference that supported the subordination and dehumanization of colonized and enslaved populations across the globe. Race, Quijano adds, is “a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism.”<sup>89</sup> Race and Eurocentrism, together with global capitalism, come together to form the modern world system as defined by the colonality of power. This system’s global reach, Quijano argues, “means that there is a basic level of common social practices and a central sphere of common value orientation for the entire world.”<sup>90</sup> Thinking with Wynter, we could say that along with a globalized economic sphere of value and labour, this common social and cultural world worked to reinforce the Eurocentrist hegemony of *homo oeconomicus* and its defining binary distinction, selected/dysselected. Given Wynter’s proof that this distinction is rooted in prior racist definitions of what it means to be a human being, it is unsurprising that in our contemporary world, as Quijano remarks, “both race and the division of labor remained structurally linked and mutually reinforcing, in spite of the fact that neither of

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<sup>88</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Colonality of Being,” 310.

<sup>89</sup> Quijano, 533.

<sup>90</sup> Quijano, 545.

them were necessarily dependent on the other in order to exist or change.”<sup>91</sup> Though race and class are not necessarily linked together, Wynter and Quijano make it clear why contemporary capitalism, secular humanism, and science are intrinsically connected to racial hierarchy as a colonial logic of domination.

Thus, Wynter’s genealogies reveal how the construction of racial difference became the operative distinction sustaining the newly secularized descriptive statement of humanity and its ethnoclass, *homo oeconomicus*. The social construction of race occurred with the transformation of the category of otherness from culturally subordinated populations of non-Christian heretics, to universal non-Christian idolators, to the naturally irrational/sub-rational others of *homo politicus*, and finally to the bio-evolutionarily dysselected others of *homo oeconomicus*. These transformations, or rearticulations of the ontological status of otherness, were required in order to continue to justify the exploitation of othered populations by Europeans in a way that accorded with the West’s increasingly secularized self-understanding. The birth of western-defined secular modernity, therefore, cannot be considered separately from its relation to these understandings of the other as racially and economically inferiorized sub-classes of human being. We can conclude from Wynter’s analysis, therefore, that the emergence of *homo oeconomicus* required, and continues to require, a consolidation of the figure of the racialized other as threat to the *propter nos* of the human species.

This consolidation was initially the explicit task of colonialism, which figured the newly racialized Native and/or African as slave, subhuman, and ethically exploitable.<sup>92</sup> Yet Wynter, like other decolonial theorists, maintains that the so-called formal end of

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<sup>91</sup> Quijano, 536.

<sup>92</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 264.

colonialism did not bring about the end of coloniality, and that racialization remains one of the most obvious aspects of its continued effects.<sup>93</sup> She therefore makes the case that although the sociogenic principle defining genre-specific binaries differs over historical periods post-1492, their underlying coloniality remains unchanged.<sup>94</sup> We are still mired within the coloniality of being human.

#### 1.4 Conclusion

Wynter's genealogical study of the coloniality of being human reconstructs humanity's dominant descriptive statements, their transitional relations, and the genres or ethnoclasses produced by them. She does this in order to "adumbrate what was hidden and ignored" by dominant histories and to "deny the universal pretense of *humanitas*" that accompanies our current colonial ethnoclass of being human.<sup>95</sup> She describes the gradual secularization of the descriptive statement defining genres of being in pre-Renaissance Europe as what sets in motion the development of the coloniality of being human. Moreover, she believes that the "performative enactment" of this redescription of the human in newly secularized terms "was to be effected only on the basis of what Quijano identifies as the 'coloniality of power,' Mignolo as the 'colonial difference,' and Winant as a huge project demarcating human differences thinkable as a 'racial longue duree'," ultimately resulting in "the rise of Europe" and global secular capitalism as a result of "African enslavement, Latin American conquest, and Asian subjugation."<sup>96</sup> When I looked to the roots of Wynter's notion of ethnoclass and its relation to Eurocentrism, capitalism, and

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<sup>93</sup> See also Maldonado-Torres, 243f.

<sup>94</sup> See Wynter, "1492: A New Worldview," and Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism," *boundary 2*, vol. 12/13 (1984): 37–57.

<sup>95</sup> Mignolo, 115 and 120.

<sup>96</sup> Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being," 263.

coloniality, I remarked that for Wynter race is the central or determinant matrix through which the formation of colonial genres of being have been autopoietically reproduced. By tracing Wynter's genealogy of secularization and colonization as it proceeded in two periods and forms, from the Renaissance to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, I therefore highlighted the construction of race as a colonial imposition and its central role in her understanding of coloniality.<sup>97</sup>

Wynter's work is large in size, scope, and liberatory ambition. Her ontological theory and genealogical analyses of the coloniality of being human ultimately serve her decolonial project. She frequently argues for the idea that we, as a collective human species, can emancipate ourselves from colonial oppressions by our own autopoietic powers of self-conscious awareness. For example, in "The Ceremony Found" Wynter makes the following claims about the fulfillment of a new epistemic mode of human self-understanding:

[This] rupture will be from our hitherto subordination, normally, to our own autopoietically and, thereby, *genre*-specifically invented and cosmogonically chartered, pseudo-speciating sociogenic replicator codes of symbolic life/death. [...] It is therefore this unprecedented *Second Emergence* rupture, one re-enacting of the First Emergence in new but complementary and now *fully emancipatory* terms, that is therefore intended to be effected by means of Césaire's proposed new and hybrid science of the *Word-as-the-code*.<sup>98</sup>

Similar passages can be found throughout her essays.<sup>99</sup> Wynter can be faulted for the unyielding optimism of these claims, and yet I find in her outsized hope for our emancipation from the coloniality of being human a laudable commitment to the radical

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<sup>97</sup> Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being," 264.

<sup>98</sup> Wynter, "The Ceremony Found," 244.

<sup>99</sup> See for example Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being." Similar references abound in her corpus. Here she claims that "one cannot 'unsettle' the 'coloniality of power' without a redescription of the human outside the terms of our present descriptive statement of the human, Man, and its over-representation (outside the terms of the 'natural organism' answer that we give to the question of the who and the what we are)" (268).

efforts of decolonization. In my estimation, her work effectively balances the need to thoroughly understand who we are right now by plumbing our histories with the need to uncover possibilities for alternative ways of living creatively. She believes that humans can liberate themselves by imagining themselves as living differently, as becoming different kinds of beings – possibilities I explore in detail in Chapter Four.

I engaged with Wynter's ontological and genealogical theories to begin my exploration of how it is that we carry colonial histories with us in the ways that we live within hierarchized social spaces and institutions. Wynter's decolonial project to retrieve humanity from *homo oeconomicus* centers the role that race has played in this genre's creation and subordination of the rest of humanity. She is concerned with the unavoidability of colonial logics in our thinking about being; and she believes that resistant knowledges and perspectives can bring about critical autopoietic praxes where being human itself – the actual living and doing – becomes a site of resistance to coloniality. In the next chapter, I use a phenomenological understanding of the lived body to further explore how we live racist colonial genres of being human and to begin to distinguish sites and possibilities for being otherwise.

## Chapter 2

### Embodied Orientations and Racialization

I stand in wonder before the world and cease to be complicit with it in order to reveal the flow of motivations that carry me into it, in order to awaken my life and to make it entirely explicit.

Merleau-Ponty<sup>100</sup>

Rather than just seeing the familiar [...] I felt wonder and surprise at the regularity of its form.

Sara Ahmed<sup>101</sup>

I concluded the previous chapter with remarks about Wynter's optimism. She believes that it is possible for us to learn how to be human in ways that not only stop reproducing the hegemonic dominance of colonial genres of being, but that overthrow these genres altogether. I begin this chapter with passages from Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Sara Ahmed because they indicate the importance of finding ways to break free from the taken-for-granted familiarity of our everyday lives. I will argue that cultivating the ability to wonder at what is given can motivate projects of decolonial resistance that seek to radically dismantle the status quo. Phenomenology is especially suited to this task because it points our attention toward the foundational structures of experience that enable our conscious and intentional actions in the world. In this chapter, I take up insights from phenomenologies of embodiment to better understand the mechanisms whereby we come to inhabit worlds of meaning and action, which, as Wynter effectively argues, are worlds already saturated by racist colonial power. Informed by a Merleau-Pontian understanding of the lived body as always inhabiting a practical orientation toward a

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<sup>100</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 309.

<sup>101</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 82.



world, I interpret Wynter's genres of being human as styles of being practically oriented within shared social worlds.

As I outlined in Chapter One, our current colonial genre of being, *homo oeconomicus*, sustains its hegemony through the sociogenic reproduction of hierarchical categories of difference like race. Here, I consider how whiteness operates at the level of pre-cognitive embodiment as a colonial orientation device. I argue that whiteness acts as a force of spatiotemporal alignment for white body-subjects that smoothly generates practical orientations toward worlds structured by colonial power. At the same time, white body-subjects express the power to orient the worlds they inhabit around their own tasks and projects. In other words, white body-subjects inform social worlds that solicit practical orientations that invite racist forms of intentional action, aesthetic focus, and perceptual attention. This reciprocal relationality between white body and racist world reproduces the conditions wherein colonial forms of life thrive to the exclusion of all others.

Indeed, whiteness acts as a colonial orientation device by also thwarting the efforts of non-white subjects to be oriented within shared social worlds. I argue, racialization, and the coloniality of being human today, differentially affect white and non-white body-subjects even at the level of our pre-cognitive inhabitation of a world. Moreover, drawing on the connections Merleau-Ponty makes between embodied orientations and operative intentionality, and informed by the critical work of Ahmed, Alia Al-Saji, Helen Ngo, Iris Marion Young, and others, I conclude that racialized modalities of being oriented result in differential access to the world as a site of practical possibility. Put differently, I interpret the coloniality of being human as a social praxis of reproducing 'I can' embodied orientations exclusively for white body-subjects. I center the lived body in my approach

because it provides a way of theorizing how we are active in reproducing colonial genres of being human even through our pre-cognitive modalities of embodiment.

In what follows, I weave together insights from critical phenomenologies that are rooted in a Merleau-Pontian understanding of the lived body as a dynamic unity that has an expressive, reciprocal relationship with its world.<sup>102</sup> *Section One* briefly explains Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the practical orientation of the lived body in connection with his theory of operative intentionality. *Section Two* takes up critical insights on embodied orientation from feminist and critical race phenomenologies. Here I provide the groundwork for my reading of whiteness as a colonial orientation device by considering the roles of social location and social habituation in the formation of embodied orientations. Following feminist readings of Merleau-Ponty, I argue that one's ability to easily inhabit a practical orientation within a shared social world is contingent both on social location and the practical possibilities offered by that world. Then, thinking with Ahmed's queered concept of embodied orientation and Ngo's analysis of racism as an embodied habit, I investigate how the ability to develop a pre-cognitive familiarity with the world, as a place where one can live purposefully within a given field of action, is a form of social privilege evinced by becoming habituated to experiences of being at ease and at

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<sup>102</sup> I find Alia Al-Saji's description of the task of critical phenomenology to be illustrative: "The imbrication of the individual and the social in psychopathology presents a challenge to any phenomenological study of racialized experience, including my own; for to do justice to that experience, phenomenology must attend not only to the intersubjective and first-personal constitution of meaning, but to social structures and historical situations that may appear, at first sight, to lie beyond the scope of its description. This means that the phenomenologist will need to be both *critical* – extending the scope of the phenomenological reduction to the naturalization of social oppression in experience – and *interdisciplinary*, drawing on social theory and histories of colonial racism to contextualize the experiences at stake." Quoted in Al-Saji, "Too Late: Racialized Time and the Closure of the Past," *Insights* 6, no. 5 (2013): 2.

home. Finally, *Section Three* articulates my understanding of whiteness as a colonial orientation device. I explore white forms of life from the perspective of lived spatiality and lived temporality, that is, from a racialized modality of being practically oriented. I conclude by remarking on the distinctions between the ‘I can’ modality of the white body and the disorienting ‘I cannot’ modality of the non-white body.

## 2.1 Practical Orientation and Operative Intentionality

Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception* argues that the lived body structures our experience of the world. Indeed, one of the great phenomenological interventions of this text is his insistence that the body itself has a practical form of operative intentionality [*l'intentionnalité opérante*] that serves as the foundation for all conscious intentional acts. While Merleau-Ponty claims that there is a kind of eternal reciprocity between modes of corporeal and conscious intentionality, he also insists that bodily operative intentionality is original and foundational. Jennifer McWeeny claims that operative intentionality “is the structure through which a graspable and sensible world first emerges out of the ambiguity of experience; it is the mechanism that furnishes experience with its most original meaning.”<sup>103</sup> In this section, I will briefly explain how Merleau-Ponty uses spatiotemporal orientation to describe the lived body’s operative intentionality toward the world. In particular, I focus on how he accounts for lived spatiality and lived temporality as experiences of the ‘I can’ body, wherein one’s own body [*le corps propre*] is the primordial site of one’s power [*pouvoir*] to take up a world as an open field of possibilities.

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<sup>103</sup> Jennifer McWeeny, “Operative Intentionality,” in *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, Eds. Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 255.

## 2.1a Being is Oriented

Through a lengthy examination of how the lived body moves through space in the course of everyday life, and by comparing normal and pathological experiences of bodily motility, Merleau-Ponty concludes that being spatiotemporally oriented is a primordial modality of our being-in and toward-the-world. He first argues that body-subjects are oriented within space in the particular sense that they inhabit and possess space in taking up the tasks and projects that give meaning to their lives. Hence, he explains, “[by] projecting an aim toward which it moves, the body brings unity to and unites itself with its surroundings; [...the] body’s movement and orientation organizes the surrounding space as a continuous extension of its own being.”<sup>104</sup> The body-subject’s lived spatiality is thus fundamentally linked to its operative intentionality, which is a pre-cognitive practical directedness toward the world. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, we always inhabit space as a *lived space* that is polarized by our body’s practical orientation toward it. In short, bodily space is “oriented space.”<sup>105</sup> Importantly, his concept of lived or oriented space asks us to pay attention to the relationality that composes the world and, much like Maturana and Varela’s autopoietic systems, asserts the primacy of relations over the things and contents that instantiate them. Merleau-Ponty thereby rids us of the conceit of theorizing a pure and homogenous objective space where movement can be abstracted from the particular situation of the lived body’s intentionality.<sup>106</sup> Instead, he offers a study of oriented space as

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<sup>104</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 143.

<sup>105</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 104.

<sup>106</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 254.

an “originary experience of space” that is only comprehensible through the recognition of the body’s own primordial practical relation to its world.<sup>107</sup>

Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, orientation is a fundamental structure of embodied existence. In summarizing this view, he writes:

We must not ask why being is oriented, why existence is spatial, why (in the language used above) our body is not geared into the world in all of its positions, and why its coexistence with the world polarizes experience and makes a direction appear suddenly. The question could only be asked if these facts were accidents that befall a subject and an object that were themselves indifferent to space. Perceptual experience shows us, however, that these facts are presupposed in our primordial encounter with being, and that being is synonymous with being situated.<sup>108</sup>

Put differently, existence is being-toward-the-world, and this means that the lived body is spatiotemporally oriented by its primordial practical, operative intentionality. As Iris Marion Young explains, the Merleau-Pontian lived body takes hold of and possesses its world specifically through its power to “approach, grasp, and appropriate its surroundings in the direction of its intentions.”<sup>109</sup> The lived body is not merely in the world, it *inhabits* a world through its ability to both mediate meaning and be mediated by meaning. Therefore, the intentionality of meaningful existence is fundamentally bodily; the lived body’s practical orientation toward its world demonstrates this fact. Hence, Merleau-Ponty poetically remarks, “One’s own body is in the world just as the heart is in the organism: it continuously breathes life into the visible spectacle, animates it and nourishes it from

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<sup>107</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 259.

<sup>108</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 262-3.

<sup>109</sup> Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality,” *Human Studies* 3 (1980): 145.

within, and forms a system with it.”<sup>110</sup> To summarize, being happens as oriented toward the world because we exist in and through our practical bodily relations with a world.

In developing this account of orientation, Merleau-Ponty critically extends Edmund Husserl’s earlier understanding of the term. In *Ideas II*, Husserl uses the first-person experience of being oriented to explain the uniqueness of the experience of one’s own body as an object unlike any other. Husserl concludes that what makes my experience of my own body singular is that my body is the thing that orients me spatially and temporally within a world. He therefore refers to the body as having “the unique distinction of bearing in itself the *zero point*” of all of my perceptions, actions, and movements.<sup>111</sup> My body, then, has “the unique distinction” of always being the “here” point in relation to which everything else is “there”, and of always being in the “now” of my present experience in relation to which everything else is either co-temporaneous with me or is temporally out of step.<sup>112</sup> As I move or age, my body constantly renews its power to orient me within my spatiotemporal world, and hence, Husserl describes the body as “always, at every now, in the center, in the here.”<sup>113</sup> From his perspective, we can conclude that the embodied I is a constituting force; my own body constitutes the here and now of my experience of the world.

While there are continuities between Husserl’s account and Merleau-Ponty’s, the latter describes the body-subject not as constituting but as polarizing. It takes possession of a space through its projects and tasks in a primordial and reciprocal relationship between operative intentionality and worldly practical possibilities. In so doing, the lived body for

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<sup>110</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 209.

<sup>111</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy; Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 166.

<sup>112</sup> Husserl, 166.

<sup>113</sup> Husserl, 166-7.

Merleau-Ponty does establish itself as the zero point of my experience of the here and now, which I will explain further in the section below, but it does so only insofar as the lived body expresses my being-toward-the-world. The lived body thus generates the foundational, reciprocal relation between self and world by being the point from which my motility, expression, perception, and all manners of capability unfold unto the world.<sup>114</sup> The lived body therefore does not constitute the world through its tasks, “it *exists toward* them,” and thereby it exists as oriented toward a world.<sup>115</sup> As Merleau-Ponty states, “When the word ‘here’ is applied to my body, it [...] designates [...] the situation of the body confronted with its tasks.”<sup>116</sup> What Merleau-Ponty effectively does is argue that being spatiotemporally oriented is both bodily and intentional, and that bodily or operative intentionality generates meaning through oriented movement.

### **2.1b Motility and Operative Intentionality**

To further uncover what an embodied orientation is, it is therefore necessary to ask what being oriented does. From Merleau-Ponty, we know that the question of how we are oriented toward a world is a matter of how we inhabit space in ways that enable us to carry out our intentions. Think, for a moment, of the experience of becoming oriented to a new city when you step outside of the airport or train station. Before you can move with purpose, you must find your bearings by determining where you are in relation to where you want to go. When you do become oriented to this new milieu, it is often precisely in the moment that you find you are able to go off on your way. Suddenly, this strange world becomes a site of possibility for you. This imagined scenario presents a familiar experience

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<sup>114</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 84.

<sup>115</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 103.

<sup>116</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 103.

of being oriented as a settling into the lived body's power to mediate our intentionality toward the world. We have likely all had experiences of being oriented in this sense of being able to practically relate to, or inhabit, a world.

I chose to give an example of the experience of being oriented that involved the impossibility and then possibility of intentional movement. Indeed, according to Merleau-Ponty, we can most effectively describe how being oriented toward a world structures our existence by looking at how we move with purpose. In the section of *Phenomenology of Perception* titled, "The Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motricity," he explains that movement prevents us from ignoring the fact that we are always practically oriented within the worlds we inhabit, regardless of our attempts to theorize space as abstract or intentionality as non-corporeal. "Movement," Merleau-Ponty explains, "is not content with passively undergoing space and time, it actively assumes them, it takes them up in their original signification that is effaced in the banality of established situations."<sup>117</sup> He demonstrates this thesis primarily through an analysis of Schneider, a patient who demonstrates abnormal motility caused by brain damage.

Schneider provides a case study of pathological movement that Merleau-Ponty believes reveals the primordial orienting and intentional relationship between lived body and world in normal subjects. Schneider's unique impairments make it so that he is unable to perform abstract and formal movements with his body without context (such as pointing to his nose or performing a salute), but he is able to accomplish the same movements if they are incorporated within a practical situation and concrete task (such as, scratching his

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<sup>117</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 105.



nose or acting like a soldier).<sup>118</sup> Crucially, then, Schneider's impairment demonstrates for Merleau-Ponty the existence of the lived body's ability to inhabit a practical orientation toward the world independent of conscious intentionality. As M. C. Dillon explains, from the Schneider case "we can understand bodily motility as consisting of movements that are both immediate (in the sense that they are not mediated by thematic or reflective conscious acts of deliberation or decision) and, at the same time, purposive (hence intentional)."<sup>119</sup> Schneider is able to easily move his body with practical intent, by for example raising his finger to scratch his nose, only when those locations, the tip of his finger and his nose, are put into meaningful relation by his practical orientation toward the world, i.e. his nose is the place where it itches. Merleau-Ponty concludes that the movements we engage in as we carry out our tasks and purposes reveal that the lived body is purposive and expressive in a pre-conscious manner. It also reveals the normal body-subject's bodily ability to polarize and arrange the world in accordance with their projects. The normal lived body, then, possesses the "power of marking out borders and directions in the given world, of establishing lines of force, of arranging perspectives, of organizing the given world according to the projects of the moment, and of constructing upon the geographical surroundings a milieu of behavior and a system of significations that express, on the outside, the internal activity of the subject."<sup>120</sup> The lived body inhabits the world by moving through it meaningfully.

In sum, a Merleau-Pontian understanding of lived spatiality states that the lived body possesses space by being practically oriented toward a world. When we act in the

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<sup>118</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 106-107.

<sup>119</sup> M. C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 2nd ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 135.

<sup>120</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 115.

world at least three intrinsically linked phenomena occur: (1) we think of the action (“thought as a representation of movement”), (2) we move our body in some way (“movement as a third person process”), and (3) we have an embodied anticipatory grasp of the action as the fulfillment of an intention (“an anticipation or a grasp of the result assured by the body itself as a motor power”).<sup>121</sup> Schneider lacks the ability to maintain the links between these three phenomena. Conversely, then, we can conclude that normal motility is defined by the experience of these three phenomena as an indissoluble whole. This is another way of saying that for Merleau-Ponty embodied action or movement is a way of relating to the world enabled by or grounded in the body’s own manner of projecting itself and anticipating its projects in a world. This is the sense of his claim that the “body is the power for a certain world.”<sup>122</sup> Thus the body-subject’s practical orientation toward the world is not constituted by the activity of the mind, as it is for Husserl, and it is not given to us by being embedded in the content of the space itself. Instead, we are oriented toward the world by our body’s own operative intentionality.

### **2.1c Thinking Beyond the *Phenomenology of Perception***

Merleau-Ponty’s linking of intentionality to the lived body’s practical orientation toward a world has opened up avenues for feminist, critical race, and decolonial approaches to theorizing this fundamental structure of embodied existence. Perhaps most famously, the connection between operative intentionality and practical orientation is central to Young’s analysis of feminine bodily orientation in “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality.” Here, Young

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<sup>121</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 113.

<sup>122</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 109.

reasons that if the body-subject's possession of a world is contingent upon their capacity to become practically oriented toward that world, then it is imperative for a feminist analysis of unequal power relations to consider how a woman's ability to take hold of a world may be negatively affected by sexism and patriarchy. Similarly, in her analysis of operative intentionality as a critical phenomenological concept, McWeeny explains, it "has opened phenomenology to fields like gender, critical race, queer, trans, and disability studies because it invites a reconsideration of the traditional assumption [...] that the character and structure of intentional experience is universal across bodies."<sup>123</sup> Because operative intentionality involves the body's orientation toward a world, it fundamentally links intentional experience with the practical possibilities available in a given situation. Hence, McWeeny reasons that, "if the practical possibilities for some social groups are different than for others due to the presence of oppressions such as racism and sexism, then their experiential possibilities might likewise be different."<sup>124</sup> In other words, the practical possibilities offered up by a world structured by hierarchical power relations will likely not be made equally available to privileged and oppressed body-subjects.

Both Young and McWeeny indicate that Merleau-Ponty's concept of operative intentionality can be used to put forward a critical phenomenology of the body, one that is attentive to differences of social location, and that does not begin from the classical assumption that the structures of intentional experience are universal. Despite the fact that Merleau-Ponty appears to argue in favor of understanding practical orientation as a universal structure of experience, his arguments to link orientation with operative intentionality, and thereby intrinsically connect body and world, also point to the ways in

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<sup>123</sup> McWeeny, "Operative Intentionality," 255.

<sup>124</sup> McWeeny, "Operative Intentionality," 255.

which differences in social location and power can affect our pre-cognitive, pre-reflective lived experience. As McWeeny states, “when intentionality is thus released from the boundaries of reflective thoughts and constituting acts, the question of the relationship between sociocultural context and intentional experience becomes more salient than it could have been before.”<sup>125</sup> In this sense, a Merleau-Pontian understanding of embodied orientation and intentionality provides a fertile starting point for decolonial, critical phenomenological analyses of embodiment.

## **2.2 Practical Possibilities, Social Worlds, and Social Locations**

A Merleau-Pontian understanding of the lived body maintains that practical orientation defines its access to a world. A change in access, David Morris conjectures, therefore has the potential to affect our desires, projects, abilities, sense of self, and consciousness. Morris writes, “one’s bodily experience and one’s meaningful existential projects change in entwining ways [... for example] someone whose meaningful habits, existential projects and hopes are undermined by family may experience this as a felt bodily inability to eat or move in meaningful ways.”<sup>126</sup> Feminists like Young and McWeeny, and Simone de Beauvoir before them, have considered the question of bodily access to a world at a structural level.<sup>127</sup> For instance, as I mentioned above, Young’s celebrated critical rejoinder to Merleau-Ponty in the essay “Throwing Like a Girl”, argues that while masculine body-subjects can easily express their operative intentionality through ‘I can’

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<sup>125</sup> McWeeny, “Operative Intentionality,” 256.

<sup>126</sup> David Morris, “Body,” in *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, eds. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2014), 113.

<sup>127</sup> Young’s critique of Merleau-Ponty in “Throwing Like A Girl” is informed by Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).

orientations within sexist and patriarchal social worlds, feminine bodies display an inhibited intentionality characterized by a confluence of ‘I can’ and ‘I cannot’ motility. Behind Young’s analysis of feminine bodily comportment is the idea that group differences in ability to inhabit a practical orientation toward the world are the result of socially and historically produced unequal access to the world as a space of possibility. Given Wynter’s arguments about the coloniality of being human today, we can conclude that colonial technologies of domination like race, as well as gender, sexuality, and class, reproduce conditions of unequal access. I expand on this argument in section 2.3 below where I give an account of whiteness as a colonial orientation device. Following this line of thought, we can also think of different modalities of embodied orientation as generating privileged and disadvantaged colonial styles of being human.

In this section, I look to feminist and other critical phenomenological theorists to examine how social and historical context can affect our ability to be oriented toward a world in the manner described by Merleau-Ponty. By focusing on practical orientation as a description of the relation between the lived body’s operative intentionality and the practical possibilities offered up by a world, I consider the thesis that marginalized body-subjects may experience a “degeneration of lived worlds” in much the same way that Schneider experienced this in his inability to independently access a frame of reference that would allow him to coordinate his bodily spatiality with an abstract spatiality.<sup>128</sup> Such

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<sup>128</sup> Dillon, 139. This is not to say that disabilities like Schneider’s must be equated with oppressions. I am remarking on the connection between socially-produced conditions of marginalization and the degeneration of lived worlds experienced by marginalized body-subjects. It is likely the case that some body-subjects living with disabilities experience this kind of degeneration, or what I will later term disorientation, absent relations to socially-produced oppressions. While others will experience the degeneration of their lived worlds in relation to oppressions. I expand on these ideas in Chapter Three, where I outline my

a degeneration, or what I will term disorientation, is experienced as a lack of ease and access to an 'I can' modality of being-toward-the-world, where you are habituated to a practical orientation that allows you to inhabit and take possession of a world as a space of possibility.

## 2.2a Situating Embodied Orientations

Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex* that feminine existence is given meaning through its social and historical situation. She thus counters essentialist accounts that purport to explain observable distinctions between masculine and feminine styles of embodiment through appeals to natural essential differences between human males and females. By contrast, Beauvoir affirms the existence of biological differences, such as women's lesser muscle mass, and also argues that a specific set of social and cultural circumstances provide the context for the oppressive and alienating meanings that these gendered differences accrue. Remarking on the distinctiveness of her view, Beauvoir claims, "whenever the physiological fact (for instance, muscular inferiority) takes on meaning, this meaning is at once seen as dependent on a whole context; the 'weakness' is revealed as such only in the light of the ends man proposes, the instruments he has available, and the laws he establishes."<sup>129</sup> A woman being viewed as lesser than a man because of her relative weakness, Beauvoir contends, is a situation produced by the convergence of biological differences, such as lesser muscle mass, and a socio-cultural context of sexism and patriarchy. Thus women are understood to be weak, and *become weak*, only in relation to a world that overvalues masculine forms of strength and supports male domination over

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understanding of embodied disorientations and relate my view to accounts from feminist philosophy and critical disability studies.

<sup>129</sup> Beauvoir, 34.

women.<sup>130</sup> Ultimately, Beauvoir uses lengthy analyses of history, myth, culture, philosophy, and science, to demonstrate that the situation of women's embodiment is shaped by a culture that creates stark oppositions between men and women and thwarts women's ability to inhabit their bodies as sites of possibility and transcendence. "Woman," Beauvoir concludes, "is the victim of no mysterious fatality; the peculiarities that identify her as specifically a woman get their importance from the significance placed upon them."<sup>131</sup> Nonetheless, she maintains that it is possible to overcome this situation that has left women "shut up in immanence," through difficult efforts at socio-cultural transformation.<sup>132</sup>

Young's analysis of feminine modalities of embodiment in "Throwing Like a Girl" follows from Beauvoir's conclusion that the body-subject is historically and socially situated in an intersubjective world of unequal power, and thus, can be said to inhabit a social location defined by cultural categories of difference like gender. Young builds on Beauvoir's description of the lived situation of women by adding an account of "the status and orientation of the woman's body as relating to its surroundings in living action."<sup>133</sup> Young puts forth the thesis that girls and women inhabit practical orientations toward social worlds that are fundamentally distorted by sexist and patriarchal social norms. In her analysis, therefore, we find an example of how to critically extend a Merleau-Pontian concept of embodied orientation to describe the lived body's inhabitation of a world of possibilities that are already structured by hierarchical power relations.

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<sup>130</sup> This context for understanding bodily intentionality and power is neither natural nor universal, for example, Beauvoir notes, "wherever violence is contrary to custom, muscular force cannot be a basis for domination" (Beauvoir, 34).

<sup>131</sup> Beauvoir, 727.

<sup>132</sup> Beauvoir, 717.

<sup>133</sup> Young, 139.

Young argues that the distinctiveness of feminine modalities of bodily existence, evinced primarily by feminine styles of motility, indicate that an individual's social location in relation to a cultural and historical intersubjective context has an effect on one's ability to easily inhabit a practical embodied orientation toward a world. Following Merleau-Ponty's insistence that our being oriented is revealed in the study of intentional movement, Young bases her claims on observations of girls and women's more restricted and timid gross motor movements in comparison with boys and men's.<sup>134</sup> Girls and women, she asserts, make less use of "the body's spatial and lateral potentialities," or in other words, they fail to use the full power of their bodies' ability to take up space when engaging in activities like throwing a ball.<sup>135</sup> Even in more subtle movements, such as walking down the street, women typically constrict their bodies spatially. In general, Young observes that men swing their limbs longer, sit with their legs open wider, and gesture more generously as they speak than women. These gendered differences in bodily comportment and motility, Young concludes, demonstrate that women "lack an entire trust in our bodies to carry us to our aims."<sup>136</sup> More drastically, restricted movement and lack of trust may be caused by a fundamental inability for girls and women to experience their own bodies as "the media for the enactment of our aims."<sup>137</sup> Young argues that this modality of bodily comportment is not a natural or essential feature of female embodiment, but is explained socially by a contradiction that girls and women are habituated to experience between

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<sup>134</sup> Young, 140.

<sup>135</sup> Young, 142.

<sup>136</sup> Young, 143.

<sup>137</sup> Young, 144.



being a subject and being an object, and that manifests in a distinctly feminine embodied orientation toward the world.<sup>138</sup>

Young names three typical modalities of a feminine embodied orientation within contemporary, Western patriarchal and sexist social contexts: ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality, and discontinuous unity. The result is an inability to become habituated to inhabiting an 'I can' body. She explains, "the feminine body underuses its real capacity, both as the potentiality of its physical size and strength and as the real skills and coordination which are available to it. Feminine bodily existence [...] simultaneously reaches toward a projected end with an 'I can' and withholds its full bodily commitment to that end in a self-imposed 'I cannot.'" <sup>139</sup> While every body-subject is faced with limits to its power to enact its own intentions in a world, feminine inhibited intentionality is distinct in at least three ways. First, it is characterized by the simultaneous – "contradictory" – projection of a bodily 'I can' and 'I cannot'. Second, this contradiction is sustained because women often approach a task by projecting an 'I can' as the possibility for an embodied someone, but do not take possession of the possibility as personal to them.<sup>140</sup> Third, Young claims that feminine inhibited intentionality is not the result of universal limits on human embodied capability or on individual embodied limits, but as Beauvoir also maintains, arises based on a particular culturally-produced situation. Young believes that girls and women make up a socially located group in relation to a particular context of constructed

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<sup>138</sup> Young, 145.

<sup>139</sup> Young, 146.

<sup>140</sup> "By repressing or withholding its own motile energy, feminine bodily existence frequently projects an 'I can' and an 'I cannot' with respect to the very same end. When the woman enters a task with inhibited intentionality, she projects the possibilities of that task – thus projects an 'I can' – but projects them merely as the possibilities of 'someone,' and not truly *her* possibilities – and thus projects an 'I cannot'" (Young, 147).

feminine debility, wherein girls and women's bodies are culturally and historically understood to be less capable than boys and men's.<sup>141</sup>

Though normal experiences of bodily limitation expressed through the temporary inhabitation of an 'I cannot' body, for example, when you reach your limit of exertion while running, do not overtake your fundamental 'I can' bodily orientation toward your world, the feminine 'I cannot' is always present. Thus, feminine inhibited intentionality results in an experience of one's own body as a discontinuous unity between immanence and transcendence. Unlike in the normal operation of operative intentionality found primarily in masculine bodies, Young explains, "feminine motion severs the connection between aim and enactment, between possibility in the world and capacity in the body."<sup>142</sup> Unable to experience their bodies as the power to act in the world, feminine body-subjects often live their bodies as objects, that is, as lacking the unique characteristics of the lived body that Merleau-Ponty describes.<sup>143</sup>

The effects of feminine bodily comportment and motility on girls and women's lived spatiality are equally drastic. Young argues that, "Feminine existence lives space as *enclosed* or confining, as have [sic] a *dual* structure and the feminine existent experiences herself as *positioned* in space."<sup>144</sup> Far from the polarizing body-subject who always inhabits

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<sup>141</sup> Hence, Young states that in typical Western cultures, "The girl learns actively to hamper her movements. She is told that she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes, that the things she desires to do are dangerous for her. Thus she develops a bodily timidity which increases with age. In assuming herself as a girl, she takes herself up as fragile" (153). Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* also provides ample examples that demonstrate the felt effects of a cultural context of constructed feminine debility.

<sup>142</sup> Young, 147.

<sup>143</sup> For example, he claims: "As a system of motor powers or perceptual powers, our body is not an object for an 'I think': it is a totality of lived significations that moves toward its equilibrium" (Merleau-Ponty, 155).

<sup>144</sup> Young, 149.

space as oriented space, the feminine body-subject projects a limited bodily space that is insufficient for the full realization of her tasks and projects. Moreover, rather than situating herself as the defining term that sets the relation between 'here' and 'there' within oriented space, the feminine body-subject distinguishes between her 'here', i.e. a limited spatial sphere of possibility, from another's 'there' or "a space in which feminine existence projects possibilities in the sense of understanding that 'someone' could move within it, but not I."<sup>145</sup> Thus feminine spatiality within sexist and patriarchal social worlds is characterized not only by a limited power to inhabit space as oriented by her inhibited bodily operative intentionality, it is also a divided space, cut through by her embodied projection of relative powerlessness in relation to more socially privileged and powerful others. Young's analysis therefore reveals that there are pre-cognitive and bodily expressions of social inequalities evident in the gendered modalities of being oriented within shared social worlds.

Like Beauvoir, Young's analysis argues that processes of socialization encourage young girls to view their bodies as the objects of a subject's gaze. The young girl learns to turn this gaze toward herself as she "actively takes up her body as a mere thing" to be pruned and shaped for the pleasure of others.<sup>146</sup> Beauvoir and Young see this socially and culturally learned objectification as one of the fundamental sources of the experience of contradiction between immanence and transcendence that besets feminine existence. Young thus states that, "to the degree that she does live herself as mere body, she cannot be in unity with herself, but must take a distance from and exist in discontinuity with her

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<sup>145</sup> Young, 150.

<sup>146</sup> Young, 154. Similarly, Beauvoir compares the cultural role of a woman in French society to that of a doll, which the very young girl learns to identify with when "she dreams of being coddled and dressed up herself" (Beauvoir, 279).

body.”<sup>147</sup> She also conjectures that feminine spatiality is produced, at least in part, because of social situations that permit the objectification of feminine bodies in the sense that it is acceptable to touch, use, and take possession of feminine bodies as one would any other object in the world. Given that girls and women exist surrounded by socially sanctioned objectification and that this defines the very situation of being a woman in patriarchy, Young suggests that, “the enclosed space which has been described as a modality of feminine spatiality is in part a defense against such invasion.”<sup>148</sup> In effect, she is claiming that being socialized into the role of a woman in a sexist and patriarchal society, where objectification and sexual violence are normalized, invites a modality of bodily spatiality that reflects the limited practical possibilities offered up by the world. This connection is made clear in the following passage:

Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified. As lived bodies we are not open and unambiguous transcendences which move out to master a world that belongs to us, a world constituted by our own intentions and projections.<sup>149</sup>

Young thus concludes that the social construction of femininity within patriarchal and sexist cultures informs the worldly situation we exist within, and therefore, this situation negatively affects girls’ and women’s pre-cognitive embodied orientations toward the world.

Young’s efforts to situate a Merleau-Pontian understanding of orientation both socially and historically, provides an impactful feminist extension of his account. She effectively argues that there are distinctively feminine modalities of embodied

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<sup>147</sup> Young, 154.

<sup>148</sup> Young, 154.

<sup>149</sup> Young, 152.

comportment, motility, and spatiality that can be traced back to a socially-constructed contradiction in girls and women's experiences of their own bodies as both immanent and transcendent. However, her arguments linking feminine embodiment with sexist and patriarchal culture indicate that the social construction of femininity, as the basis of a gendered group identity, come to effect the feminine lived body's pre-conscious embodied orientation toward the world, but say nothing of socially-constructed masculinity and its effects on manhood. Other feminist readers of Merleau-Ponty have offered such an account and presented arguments that defend a strong reading of the lived body as historically constituted, and thus, as always and in every case developing pre-conscious existential structures derived from an intersubjective cultural environment. For instance, Johanna Oksala in "Female Freedom: Can the Lived Body be Emancipated?" argues that the "structures of the anonymous body come into being only as historically sedimented structures derived from our cultural environment."<sup>150</sup> This would indicate, for instance, that the normal body-subject Merleau-Ponty describes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, and which Young and Beauvoir contrast with feminine existence, is only normal insofar as normality is socially-constructed by any given society. Thus, in a gentle corrective to their analyses, Oksala claims that, "There is no inhibited female corporeality and free and normal male corporeality in societies of sexist oppression, but rather two differently gendered and historically constituted experiences and modalities of embodiment."<sup>151</sup>

Oksala's view concords more closely with the stance I put forward below about racialized bodily comportment toward shared social worlds that are structured by racist

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<sup>150</sup> Johanna Oksala, "Female Freedom: Can the Lived Body Be Emancipated?" in *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Dorothea Olkowski and Gail Weiss (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 222.

<sup>151</sup> Oksala, 222.

colonial power systems, viz. that white styles of embodiment are socially-constructed to be normal only through the co-construction of non-white bodily comportments as pathological. In other words, rather than viewing white and masculine bodily comportments as normal and non-white and feminine comportments as impeded, we should understand the former as privileged and dominant and the latter as oppressed and marginalized, both in relation to a historically and socially-situated context of unequal power. What we can infer from both Young and Oksala's accounts is that neither the white body-subject's easy and familiar orientation toward the world nor the racialized body-subject's restricted orientation are necessary or essential modalities of being-toward-the-world. I thus turn below to Helen Ngo's analysis of racism and bodily habituation in *The Habits of Racism*, for tools to think about how differently situated body-subjects come-to-be differentially oriented toward shared social worlds.<sup>152</sup>

## **2.2b Habituation**

Merleau-Ponty argues that existence involves the interplay of sedimentation and innovation; we live from the accumulation of our acquisitions of ways of being in the world and toward the possibility of new ones. He therefore attempts to philosophize outside of a strict binary between contingent subjectivism and objective necessity, and to instead think about freedom and history as having an ambiguous and reciprocal relationship where the weight of the past is given existential import, but it does not overwhelm the inventive power of our freedom to create possible futures. This conception of freedom's relationship to history renders habit especially relevant to our consideration of embodied orientations

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<sup>152</sup> Helen Ngo, *The Habits of Racism: A Phenomenology of Racism and Racialized Embodiment* (New York: Lexington Books, 2012).

and shared social worlds. “Habit,” Merleau-Ponty explains, “resides neither in thought nor in the objective body, but rather in the body as the mediator of the world.”<sup>153</sup> Habits are not mere mechanistic repetitive movements, they are complex bodily instantiations of our oriented being. So the formation of bodily habits like playing an instrument requires that one is practically oriented toward the world. In other words, just as an experienced organ player “settles into the organ as one settles into a house,” so too does the ‘I can’ body-subject settle into, or in-habit, the world.<sup>154</sup>

Ngo, in *The Habits of Racism*, writes about the connections Merleau-Ponty draws between inhabitation and habituation.<sup>155</sup> She argues that a Merleau-Pontian understanding of habit and practical orientation should inform our analysis of racism and anti-racist praxis. Like the feminist accounts I highlighted above, Ngo turns to Merleau-Ponty because of the link he makes between embodied orientation and operative intentionality.

Referencing Merleau-Ponty’s insights about the habits of the organ player, Ngo writes:

“This kind of bodily orientation engenders not just a familiarity that is present in habitual (repetitive, routinized) activities, but trades also on the twin notions of power and possibility.”<sup>156</sup> Drawing links between processes of racialization and racist social norms and embodied habituation, power, and possibility, Ngo argues that inhabiting a world structured by white western culture means also becoming habituated to racist ways of

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<sup>153</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 146.

<sup>154</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 146.

<sup>155</sup> Ngo notes that Ed Casey makes a distinction between habitual and habituated in his essay, “Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty”. Casey uses habituated to refer “specifically to situations of being oriented in a general situation by having become familiar with its particular structure” and habitual to refer to “routinized” and “repetitive” actions (Ngo, *The Habits of Racism*, 213). We become habituated to particular tasks, actions, or skills usually only after a period of habitual repetition and training. I follow this use of habituated and habitual here.

<sup>156</sup> Ngo, *The Habits of Racism*, 6-7.

moving, perceiving, and in general, of being oriented toward the world. In short, we can conceive of racism as a bodily habit that affects how differently racialized body-subjects experience shared social worlds as sites of possibility.

We all become habituated into maintaining particular practical orientations within shared social worlds. By conceiving of bodily orientations as habituated, Ngo provides a framework for her claim that racism is not just present in conscious acts, but can also be witnessed in one's pre-conscious movements, perceptions, gestures, or behaviors. Studying racist bodily habits, such as when a white woman clutches her purse as she walks past a black man,<sup>157</sup> Ngo argues, reveals how bodily capabilities in the present are always oriented in relation to a cultural past and future. She writes, "These kinds of responses are habits insofar as they reflect a comportment or mode of responding that has 'sedimented' in and been taken up by the body, supported by deeply embedded discourses and histories of racist praxis."<sup>158</sup> Thus as habits, racist bodily responses are not merely mechanistic repetitions, they "sit in the grey region of acquired orientation – and in this case, they reflect an orientation that is shaped by and enacts racist stereotypes and projections."<sup>159</sup> The racist habit body, just like the restricted feminine body, therefore reveals the effects of cultural histories on our acquisition of a practical embodied orientation toward shared social worlds.

Bodily habits are habituated praxes that have both active and passive components, and that are usually characterized by a mode of moving in the world with ease and

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<sup>157</sup> For examples and a critical analysis of gestural habits of anti-Black racism see George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: the continuing significance of race in America* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

<sup>158</sup> Ngo, *The Habits of Racism*, 25.

<sup>159</sup> Ngo, *The Habits of Racism*, 25.



familiarity. While we often experience our habits as passive or unthinking, Ngo follows Merleau-Ponty in claiming that they are actually an expression of our active ability to take hold of a world, such that we might say that our lived bodies have a habitual awareness of the worlds we inhabit.<sup>160</sup> Ngo emphasizes that the racist habit body is “actively modulating” the present and future by “beholding *and* foreclosing possibilities” for the moments to come.<sup>161</sup> The idea that our bodies, as the site of our present capabilities to be and act within worlds, have an active and dual temporal relation to past and possible futures also informs Ahmed’s and Alia Al-Saji’s critical race phenomenologies, which I explore below. Moreover, it provides a phenomenological description of how we might understand the lived body to inhabit a Wynterian genre of being human as a particular style of being practically oriented toward a world. Most importantly, this temporal structure connects the lived body to the weight of past and present structural oppressions, while leaving open the possibility for a future existence that resists, and perhaps even becomes liberated from, these same oppressions.

Instead of thinking about racist habits as unconscious behaviors, Ngo therefore focuses her attention on how white body-subjects become habituated to inhabiting racist

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<sup>160</sup> “Oftentimes I pass through the door without even giving any thought to the fact of my doing so, much less whether I can do so. In this way, habit shares with the everyday examples of nail-biting and pen-clicking, a sense of absentmindedness – and yet Merleau-Ponty’s account of habit is also more than this. For it is not just the case that we *have* habits and accumulate them in and through our bodies, for Merleau-Ponty habit represents a fundamental and primordial feature of embodied being; it forms an integral part of what it means to exist as a lived body in a world” (Ngo, *The Habits of Racism*, 2-3). For example, Merleau-Ponty explains, “To habituate oneself to a hat, an automobile, or a cane is to take up residence in them, or inversely, to make them participate within the voluminosity of one’s own body. Habit expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world, or of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments” (Merleau-Ponty, 144-145).

<sup>161</sup> Ngo, *The Habits of Racism*, 5.

orientations toward the world.<sup>162</sup> She argues that forms of supposedly “relaxed or unreflective” racist habits, such as microaggressions or jokes, “are held together by a certain underlying and overarching bodily orientation toward racialized ‘others.’”<sup>163</sup> So, even if we understand racist habits like these to be habitual, in the sense that they are sedimented bodily reflexes developed over time, we must also insist that the acquisition of particular racist habits depends on one’s historical and cultural habituation to racism as a form of “one’s own bodily receptivity and compatibility” to a given social world.<sup>164</sup> In other words, racist habits form on the basis of one’s foundational practical orientation toward the world. Ngo’s framing of racism as habituated, and not just habitual, therefore allows us to consider the fact that white body-subjects are oriented within shared social worlds in such a way that they are habituated to bodily expressions of racism. Whiteness can be thought of as a habituated racist modality of being practically oriented toward social worlds that, as Wynter argues, are already structured by colonial power.

### **2.2c Being at Ease; Being at Home**

“Habit,” Ngo concludes, “describes a mode of moving in and responding to the world that is marked with ease, familiarity, and confidence.”<sup>165</sup> This is no less true of racism as a bodily habit, which can produce feelings of ease and familiarity for white body-subjects who inhabit racist colonial social worlds. This not only means that those who inhabit whiteness as a social location can expect to commonly experience being at ease and at home in the world, it also indicates that experiences of being at ease and at home are

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<sup>162</sup> Ngo, *The Habits of Racism*, 23-24.

<sup>163</sup> Ngo, *The Habits of Racism*, 24.

<sup>164</sup> Ngo, *The Habits of Racism*, 39.

<sup>165</sup> Ngo, *The Habits of Racism*, 2.

invisible privileges conferred on socially dominant groups at the expense of marginalized ones. For instance, Ahmed's treatment of embodied orientation in *Queer Phenomenology* and "Mixed Orientations" puts forth the idea that whiteness can act as a form of "public comfort *by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape.*"<sup>166</sup>

While white body-subjects frequently enjoy smooth 'I can' orientations within shared social worlds that are already structured to welcome whiteness, racially marginalized subjects experience structural blockages and barriers in their involvements with the same worlds. Non-white racialization therefore manifests in frequent experiences of being rendered unfamiliar and not at home in the very places that one resides.

Conversely, Ahmed points out, for whites the reciprocal and practical relationship between self and world operates so smoothly that it almost always recedes into the given background of experience. White subjects thus do not routinely recognize their bodies as the pivot of their being-in-the-world – they just *are* their bodies. Indeed, this concurs with Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of a normal body-subject's everyday experience of being-toward-the-world and explains the need for rigorous phenomenological investigation into these taken for granted or background existential structures of being. While Ahmed's concept of orientation is informed by Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Martin Heidegger, like other critical phenomenologists, she mines their philosophies for tools to use in her own articulation of embodied orientation that centers analyses of power and structural privileges and oppressions. Her account, therefore, brings to light the differential experiences of being oriented within shared social worlds that are structured to reproduce

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<sup>166</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 135.

the coloniality of being human, i.e. to exclusively support white, heteronormative, and western ways of life.

One way to understand the lived experience of the structural oppressions of racism, I therefore suggest, is to consider the differential access body-subjects have to bodily experiences of being at ease and at home. Ahmed claims, “[to] be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins.”<sup>167</sup> This is an apt description of Merleau-Ponty’s oriented body-subject who experiences being firmly set within a world that also takes a hold of him.<sup>168</sup> Yet, as the above analyses have shown, modes of bodily comfort and ease are only available when there is a prior compatibility between lived body and social world. In particular, a social world must be structured to support one’s bodily intentionality if one is to inhabit it as a site of practical possibilities. If we follow Wynter in claiming that the social worlds we inhabit are structured by racist colonial power, and that we carry colonial histories with us in the ways that we live within hierarchized social spaces and institutions, then it is unsurprising that non-white body-subjects rarely experience being at ease and at home in

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<sup>167</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 134.

<sup>168</sup> Merleau-Ponty likewise connects feelings of comfort or ease with being settled into a shared social space. Consider the distinction he draws between the experience of being happily present in a holiday town and becoming homesick. He writes, “I arrive in a village for the holidays, happy to leave behind my work and my ordinary surroundings. I settle into the village. It becomes the center of my life. The low level of water in the river, or the corn or walnut harvest, are events for me. But if a friend comes to see me and brings news from Paris, or if the radio and newspapers inform me that there are threats of war, then I feel exiled in this village, excluded from real life, and imprisoned far away from everything” (Merleau-Ponty, 299). With this example, Merleau-Ponty illustrates homesickness as an example of a “decentered life,” characterized by being made to feel ill-at-ease in a world that nonetheless solicits your involvement (299). He does not, however, consider that social worlds may be structured to solicit involvement from some body-subjects rather than others. He does not take up the question of socially produced differential access to being at home or feeling centered within a world.

these spaces. This is a problem that cuts far deeper than mere discomfort. As humanist geographer Kristen Simonsen explains, “Inhabiting space is both about ‘finding our way’ and how we come to ‘feel at home’,” and so there is an intrinsic link between capability and being at home, we are most at home in the spaces that we are most enabled within.<sup>169</sup> Put differently, the question of feeling at home in the world is a matter of being made powerful by the world. This linkage is what an analysis of racialized embodied orientations helps to reveal.

I believe that whiteness thus operates as a particular form of an ‘I can’ orientation toward the world that produces experiences of being at ease and at home while hiding embodied habits of racist domination and exclusion. Ahmed, for example, argues that white body-subjects make hegemonic claims over shared social spaces “*by the accumulation of gestures of ‘sinking’ into that space.*”<sup>170</sup> In other words, there may be a reciprocal relationship between white experiences of being at home, wherein whiteness becomes what “allows bodies to move with comfort through space, and to inhabit the world as if it were home,” and what characterizes those spaces in advance as shaped by what Wynter shows to be a sedimented colonial history of efforts to generate and protect white comfort and home.<sup>171</sup> The problem that this dynamic creates, as Mariana Ortega notes, is that it means “belonging is a matter of satisfying particular conditions of identity, which in turn become homogenizing conditions.”<sup>172</sup> Without an expansive understanding of home and belonging that can accommodate diverse and heterogeneous ways of life, feeling at home in

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<sup>169</sup> Kirsten Simonsen, “In Quest of a New Humanism: embodiment, experience and phenomenology as critical geography” *Progress in Human Geography* 37, no. 1 (2012): 16.

<sup>170</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 136.

<sup>171</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 136.

<sup>172</sup> Ortega, *In-Between*, 195.

shared social spaces will remain a privilege for the few, rather than a universal condition of being-toward-the-world for all body-subjects. I read this state of affairs as the result of what Wynter diagnoses to be the overrepresentation of *homo economicus*, and its governing symbolic code selected/dysselected, as the universal definition of what it means to be a human being. Moreover, when whiteness operates as a colonial orientation device, I suggest, it blocks any attempts to reshape what it means to be at home in shared social worlds, and to reciprocally recreate those worlds themselves, in more inclusive and heterogeneous directions.

Bringing together the accounts above, we can conclude that a body-subject's historically and socially constructed situation within shared social worlds affects their ability to inhabit 'I can' practical orientations within those worlds. From Beauvoir and Young we know that the bodily situation for girls and women within sexist and patriarchal social worlds is characterized by inhibited intentionality and restrictive motility and spatiality. Likewise, Ngo's notion of racist habituation provides a conceptual frame that helps to bring Wynter's conclusions about the role of race in structuring contemporary social worlds and epistemes to bear on the lived body. Below, I continue to develop this line of thought by examining how racialization differentially affects how one can become practically oriented toward a world as a site of possibility and power.

### **2.3 Whiteness as a Colonial Orientation Device**

I suggested above that one way of understanding how colonial logics of domination structure our lives, is to consider the claim that being practically oriented within shared social worlds is an invisible privilege afforded to white body-subjects. Race is not the only operative matrix of colonial power to consider in this line of investigation, but following

Wynter, I conceive of race as fundamental to coloniality and so I read race as a key colonial orientation device which can reveal part of the normally unthematized ways that we inhabit a colonial genre of being human. In this section, I argue that racialization operates at the level of embodied orientation to differentially affect one's lived experience of space and time as well as one's ability to inhabit one's own body as a site of power to act in the world. I will also argue that white modes of bodily comportment involve being oriented toward the world in ways that exclude and diminish, and otherwise produce states of bodily disorientation for non-white others.

Wynter demonstrates that the colonial imposition of race difference affixes whiteness as universal and naturalizes whiteness by erasing this operation. Both activities work in concert to marginalize and oppress non-white subjects. As Wynter makes clear, the colonial construct of racial hierarchy structures the dominant sociogenic principle defining what it means to be human today. Though she believes that sociogenesis can be disrupted and transformed through radical epistemic change,<sup>173</sup> the phenomenological analysis of the lived body that I present here is meant to augment her account. My aim is to demonstrate that autopoietic praxes of genre-coherence are operative in the lived body at the level of our habituated practical orientations toward the world. Phenomenologically, thinking of whiteness as a colonial orientation device thus helps to reveal how and why the racialized lived body struggles to become practically oriented within white social worlds. Thus, as I will argue in Chapter Four, to resist the coloniality of being it is not enough to rethink the unquestioned assumptions that structure the dominant colonial episteme and regime of

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<sup>173</sup> I explore this element of Wynter's work in Chapter Four: Creativity and Decolonial Resistance.

truth. We must also shift our very manner and modality of being-toward-the-world to truly decolonize the praxis of being human.

In this section, I explain how whiteness functions as a technology of alignment, that is, as an orientation device that promotes the colonality of being human. With this focus, I am asking white body-subjects to consider how we invest in racial difference and racialized hierarchies at the level of our habitual, pre-reflective, operative intentionality. As I will illustrate, the easy inhabitation of practical orientations by white body-subjects maintains invisibilized privileges in shared social spaces, such as the experience of being welcomed into public space or expecting to feel at home and at ease in the world. These privileges are maintained at the same time as the white body fades into the unthought and enabling background of everyday life. I will then look at the effects of whiteness as a colonial orientation device on non-white body-subjects who must inhabit racist social worlds. I turn to Ahmed and Al-Saji to outline alternate understandings of lived spatiality and lived temporality that demonstrate how colonial oppressions are experienced as *disorientations* for the racially marginalized.

### **2.3a White Ontological Expansiveness**

To explain how whiteness functions as a colonial orientation device, I turn first to Shannon Sullivan's concept of white ontological expansiveness. Ontological expansiveness describes how white bodies inhabit shared space by taking hold of the space as theirs and as for the purpose of enabling their intentions and projects exclusively. This privileged manner of inhabiting space is characterized by the habituated assumption that one has the right to take up space and that one ought to feel at ease in doing so. "Ontological expansiveness," Sullivan explains, "is a person's unconscious habit of assuming that all



spaces are rightfully available for the person to enter comfortably.”<sup>174</sup> White ontological expansiveness is therefore the habituated assumption that whiteness is acceptable everywhere and that a white person should not be made to feel uncomfortable entering, inhabiting, or dominating a space on the basis of their whiteness. Put simply, it is the unquestioned assumption that whiteness is always welcome and always at home. This experience is reinforced by racist social worlds that promote the idea that white people have the right to enter any space they wish unobstructed by their racialized bodies. For example, Sullivan argues that if white people are made to feel uncomfortable in a space because of their whiteness, this “tends to be seen as a violation of the ‘natural’ order of things, as an ‘unjust’ limitation.”<sup>175</sup> Because white body-subjects are oriented toward the world in such a way that they are habituated to move through space “proprietary and dynamically,” it is only when they experience stoppages or blockages that their ontological expansiveness may be brought into view.<sup>176</sup> Yet, non-white subjects who co-inhabit social worlds that are shaped by the expansive constitution of whiteness are often acutely aware of whiteness as a particular mode of embodied being.

Like a practical orientation, Sullivan describes white ontological expansiveness as a particular kind of co-constitutive relationship between self and world. This relationship is characterized not just by ease and ability, but also by mastery. “As ontologically expansive, white people tend to act and think as if all spaces – whether geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily, or otherwise – are or should be available for them to

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<sup>174</sup> Shannon Sullivan, “Ontological Expansiveness,” in *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, ed. Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020): 249.

<sup>175</sup> Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: the Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 149.

<sup>176</sup> Ngo, *The Habits of Racism*, 80.

move in and out of as they wish.”<sup>177</sup> The bodily habits of whiteness are therefore appropriative habits in the sense that they are the embodied manifestations of white privilege as the right to take hold of the world and everything in it for one’s own intentions and purposes.<sup>178</sup> Thus Sullivan explains, “ontological expansiveness not only is a habit of socially privileged people that directly insulates them from discomfort and dis-ease. It also is a habit that indirectly has harmful effects on the bodies, lives, and relationships of subordinated people.”<sup>179</sup> Hence in its habituated mastery and appropriation, we might also think of whiteness as colonial, which should come as no surprise given the role that colonialism and the establishment of Black and Native others had, as Wynter and Quijano make clear, in shoring up the self-image of white, western peoples as the paradigmatic human subjects.

Moreover, white body-subjects are habituated to incorporate non-white others as the means for their purposes. To exist within a white body is to be solicited to be oriented toward the world in such a way that facilitates the adoption of colonial habits of domination and objectification. At the same time, this adoption is often forgotten and erased because the dominating habits of the white body align with the contours of the spaces we inhabit in a world shaped by colonality. As Ahmed explains, “By not having to encounter being white as an obstacle, given that whiteness is ‘in line’ with what is already given, bodies that pass as white move easily, and this motility is extended by what they move toward. The white body in this way expands; objects, tools, instruments, and even

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<sup>177</sup> Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 10.

<sup>178</sup> Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 122.

<sup>179</sup> Sullivan, “Ontological Expansiveness,” 253.

‘others’ allow that body to inhabit space by extending that body and what it can reach.”<sup>180</sup>

Ahmed thus suggests that being white involves linking bodily motility with habits of bodily appropriation. She understands what Sullivan terms white ontological expansiveness to be expressed through the white body-subject’s appropriative style of inhabiting a practical orientation toward the world. Both Ahmed and Sullivan connect this bodily style with a history of slavery and colonialism where, as Wynter argues, whiteness came to be defined by the West’s relationship of appropriation, mastery, and ownership over the spaces, peoples, and objects of the Earth. I explore the relationship between white ontological expansiveness and racist colonial notions of lived spatiality further below.

### **2.3b Racialized Spatiality**

The above analyses of the colonial bodily habits of white subjects, that is, expansiveness, appropriation, and mastery, provide an entry point for an understanding of how lived spatiality is shaped by whiteness. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s contention that lived space is not a neutral and empty container, but is informed by personal and social histories, culture, and subjective intentionality, we can understand lived spaces as formed by, in Ahmed’s terms, normative investments in racialized and gendered projects and actions. In fact, Sullivan points out that the conceit of white color blindness is formally similar to the claim that social space is neutral and empty and not reciprocally generated by socially situated body-subjects and histories of racialization. She writes, “being oblivious to the lived spatiality of racial situations and treating space as if it is merely a neutral container are ways for color blindness to operate in and through white people’s racial habits. They allow white people to ontologically expand with impunity into any space they

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<sup>180</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 132.

like, no matter the racial orientation of the space.”<sup>181</sup> Yet the racialization of space is well documented in the United States. There is a long history of the blatant and violent racialization of public and private spaces with the goals of preserving white supremacy and the exclusivity and wealth of white-only spaces.<sup>182</sup> An analysis of the racialization of lived space should therefore account for the ways in which “race exists by means of a transactional relationship between bodies and world in which neither can be considered wholly primary or foundational.”<sup>183</sup> The common insistence by those in positions of privilege that space is racially neutral, works in service of white supremacy by concealing the ontologically expansive modalities of white lived spatiality.

In this section, I expand on this point with Ahmed’s rethinking of lived spatiality in relation to a historical and social context of white, western racism. I believe that Ahmed’s phenomenological approach reveals whiteness as a colonial orientation device, both adding to Wynter’s work on the coloniality of being human and revealing additional paths to resistance, especially in the contrast she presents between racialized orientation and disorientation. Ahmed’s reading of lived spatiality makes two primary modifications to the Merleau-Pontian account: (1) she claims that whiteness overdetermines the experience of one’s own body as being “here” such that proximity to whiteness comes to determine what is “here” and distance from whiteness what is “there”; and (2) she argues that white

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<sup>181</sup> Sullivan, “Ontological Expansiveness,” 251.

<sup>182</sup> See Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Inequality in the United States* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1983); Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014); Peter Jackson, ed., *Race and Racism: Essays in Social Geography* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987); and Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009).

<sup>183</sup> Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 146.

practical orientations within social worlds produce enabling spatial relations of reachability and alignment for white bodies, while simultaneously producing discomfort and stoppages for non-white bodies. With both claims, Ahmed demonstrates that shared social spaces are hospitable to the practical orientations of white body-subjects and inhospitable to those of people of color. I read a similar conclusion in Al-Saji's rethinking of lived temporality in the next section below. Hence, informed by both accounts, I then conclude that whiteness operates as a colonial orientation device by producing practical possibilities for white body-subjects while simultaneously producing oppressive – in the sense of disabling the possibility for intentional action – states of disorientation for people of color.

In several texts, Ahmed makes the claim that, “whiteness describes the very ‘what’ that coheres as a world.”<sup>184</sup> She argues that whiteness is centered in both white and non-white experiences of lived spatiality as the result of sedimented histories of white western colonialism that have shaped our shared social spaces today.<sup>185</sup> She defends these claims by using spatial orientation as a lens through which to understand the othering of orientalism and the coherence of western identity through the relation to a colonized and racialized ‘Other’ who is spatially ‘over there’. In short, Ahmed argues that racialization and racism are ongoing processes that inform how bodies are oriented within shared social spaces. She defends this argument by employing a distinction between what body-subjects are oriented around, that is, what becomes the enabling background of their intentional

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<sup>184</sup> Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 150. See also *Queer Phenomenology*, 115-130; *The Promise of Happiness*, 82f; and *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 41f.

<sup>185</sup> “Colonialism makes the world ‘white’, which is of course a world ‘ready’ for certain kinds of bodies” Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 153-4.

action, and what body-subjects are oriented toward, that is, what they are directed at in terms of “the desire to possess, and to occupy” what can be incorporated into a horizon of possibility.<sup>186</sup> Ahmed concludes that Western citizens and nations construct a sense of identity through a racist and colonial style of inhabiting space where one is oriented around whiteness and oriented toward the racialized other.

Ahmed claims that being oriented around whiteness is a colonial modality of inhabiting space defined by racialized notions of proximity and distance. For instance, she argues that the East or Orient signifies perpetual distance from the perspective of the West or Occident, which views itself as the zero point of spatial orientation for humanity. In other words, the West comes to spatially represent what is always “here” as the place where “we” live in contradistinction to what is “there,” a distant and foreign space.<sup>187</sup> By associating proximity and familiarity with the West, both in terms of geographical location and cultural identity, Ahmed explains, “‘the world’ comes to be seen as oriented ‘around’ the Occident, through the very orientation of the gaze toward the Orient, the East, as the exotic other that can just be seen on the horizon.”<sup>188</sup> The East is therefore defined by its being not-West, which signifies its role as a constitutive outside. Ahmed argues that by being constructed as both outside and lack, the Orient also becomes a “supply point” for the

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<sup>186</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 115.

<sup>187</sup> “Everyone, one might say, has an east; it is on the horizon, a visible line that marks the beginning of a new day. There are multiple horizons depending on one’s point of view. There might be what is east of you, but also the east side of the city where you live, or the eastern side of the country. But somebody’s ‘east’ becomes ‘the East,’ as one side of the globe. [...] ‘What is east (of me/us) becomes ‘the East’ by taking some points of view as given. In other words, it is drawing the line (the prime meridian) in one location, through Greenwich, that ‘east’ becomes ‘the East,’ as if the East were a property of certain places and people” (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 113).

<sup>188</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 116.

West, both literally and symbolically.<sup>189</sup> Not only does this colonial spatial relation toward the Orient serve to coalesce a collective sense of the Occidental as residing in one place, i.e. here or the West, it also renders the Orient paradoxically both reachable and distant. This has the effect of cohering a stronger sense of familiarity and community in the West, which are informed by this shared spatial orientation. Hence, Ahmed argues, “Orientalism, in other words, would involve not just making imaginary distinctions between the West and the Orient, but would also shape how bodies cohere, by facing the same direction.”<sup>190</sup> Orientalism in the West, or a continued discriminatory and reductive colonial relation to non-western places and peoples, therefore involves both a collective orientation toward the Orient and an orientation around the Occident that reinforces the othering, domestication, and exoticization of “distant” peoples and places.

This analysis explains how racism reinforces colonial spatiality through its disorienting effects on the lived experience of non-white subjects. Ahmed argues that non-white subjects who reside in the West nonetheless “come to *embody distance*” for white subjects and institutions, even within their own places of birth or home nations.<sup>191</sup> By contrast, regardless of actual origin or geographical location, “whiteness becomes what is ‘here,’ a line from which the world unfolds.”<sup>192</sup> For example, we might consider how white Australians are incorporated into the cultural realm of “the West” when they are

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<sup>189</sup> “If the Orient is desired, it is both far away and also that which the Occident wishes to bring closer, as a wish that points to the future or even *to a future occupation*. The directness toward this other reminds us that desire involves a political economy in the sense that it is distributed: the desire to possess, and to occupy, constitutes others not only as objects of desire, but also as resources for world making” (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 114-115).

<sup>190</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 120.

<sup>191</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 121.

<sup>192</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 121. Ahmed repeats this line in “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 151 and “Mixed Orientations,” *Subjectivity* 7 (2014): 98.

geographically in “the East”. Sullivan offers a similar revelation in *Revealing Whiteness* when she discusses the case of European Roma who are treated as perpetual strangers in the very territories that they inhabit. Sullivan argues that the social understanding of the Roma as strangers is directly related to their phenotypical characteristics and their habituated relation to space, that is, their nomadic style of lived spatiality, which is distinctly in contrast with a possessive and appropriative white, western, colonial lived spatiality.<sup>193</sup> It is not difficult to think of further examples that demonstrate how whiteness, as that which the West is oriented around, comes to embody proximity and familiarity, which means that non-white body-subjects come to embody distance and strangeness.

In fact, Ahmed analyzes her mixed-race, British/Pakistani, upbringing through this framework. She claims that whiteness benefits from the passing down of racialized proximities and distances. Racial likeness, Ahmed argues, “is an *effect* of proximity or contact, which is then ‘taken up’ as a sign of inheritance,” and likeness as proximity become familial orientations, which are necessary for a sense of belonging and comfort in the space of the family, and in the wider “familial” space of racialized belonging.<sup>194</sup> Ahmed thus suggests that her inheritance of brown skin from her Pakistani father rendered her unable to claim a proximity to whiteness even though she is half-white and inhabited a family home with her white mother. She notes that her familial proximity to whiteness was frequently rendered suspect by her brown skin. Ahmed reflects on how the presumed illegitimacy of her claim to whiteness is thus expressed through her lived spatiality. Her Pakistani side and her brown skin create distance from her white family and neighbors.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 154f.

<sup>194</sup> Ahmed, “Mixed Orientations,” 98.

<sup>195</sup> Ahmed, “Mixed Orientations,” 98.



Ahmed claims that because we inherit racialized proximities and distances, her being mixed race produced a mixed spatial orientation where she embodies a confused mess of here and there, West and East, domestic and foreign. She notices that in particular times of struggle or strife her mixed orientation is called upon by her white family members as a cause and explanation for the hard times, as if her discomfort was due to her not really being at home in the worlds she inhabits. By not being at home in whiteness, Ahmed is therefore spatially disoriented.

Ahmed's analysis of the racialization of lived spatiality offers a phenomenological account of the embodied mechanisms by which colonial styles or genres of being human are reproduced in the very praxis of being. As I argued in sections 2.1 and 2.2 above, being oriented in space means being capable of moving through that space purposively and in fulfillment of one's practical intentions. Being oriented also brings with it feelings of being at ease and at home in the world. Ahmed argues that we can rethink whiteness in terms of producing enabling spatial orientations within shared social worlds. She suggests that we consider whiteness as a matter of "reachability" and so a white embodied orientation within space is one that places "physical objects [...], styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, habits" within the horizons of the white body-subject's possibilities in the world.<sup>196</sup> White spaces and institutions likewise are characterized by their providing supports for white experiences of familiarity and reachability, and these supports function

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<sup>196</sup> Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," 154.

precisely through their ability to fade into the background of experience and to become invisible for those who receive their benefits.<sup>197</sup>

Thus, Ahmed argues that the spatiality of whiteness and the ways in which shared spaces are oriented around whiteness, are frequently only apparent to non-white body-subjects, like herself, who experience feeling “uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different when they take up this space.”<sup>198</sup> Ahmed introduces a useful distinction between white and non-white lived spatiality that helps reveal the workings of racialized privileges and oppressions. On her account, white spatiality is a style of embodiment that claims and takes hold of space through bodily gestures of sinking into that space. It produces spatial relations of familiarity and reachability and allows the spaces white body-subjects inhabit to unfold for them as sites of possibility. In so doing, whiteness also produces disabling experiences of non-white spatiality as a style of embodiment characterized by discomfort and the inability to take possession of shared spaces. Hence, Ahmed concludes, “If to be human is to be white, then to be not white is to inhabit the negative: it is to be ‘not’. The pressure of this ‘not’ is another way of describing the social and existential realities of racism.”<sup>199</sup> Her analysis of racialized lived spatiality therefore demonstrates that whiteness can be understood as a style of being practically oriented toward social worlds structured by coloniality, and it can also contribute to producing disorientations in non-white subjects. In this context, I suggest, being disoriented should be understood as a bodily form of racist oppression and marginalization.

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<sup>197</sup> “White bodies are comfortable *as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape*. The bodies and spaces ‘point’ towards each other, as a ‘point’ that is not seen as it is also ‘the point’ from which we see” (Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 158.)

<sup>198</sup> Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 157.

<sup>199</sup> Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 161.

Ahmed describes bodily disorientation within shared social worlds to be an experience of the bodily 'I cannot'. Like Young's analysis of restricted feminine motility in sexist social spaces, Ahmed claims that non-white subjects are not able to be comfortable in social spaces defined by whiteness, which are structured to support white reachability, and this is evident in the restrictiveness of non-white bodily motility.<sup>200</sup> Unlike many of the examples Young uses to illustrate the restricted motility of girls and women where she focuses on learned timidity or weakness, Ahmed points to the central role of external force in the production of a racialized form of restricted motility. She highlights the role of force through the phenomenon of "being stopped."<sup>201</sup> People of color, who as we saw above come to embody distance within white, western social worlds, will therefore frequently be made "to stop" within these spaces.<sup>202</sup> Being stopped can mean "to cease, to end, and also to cut off, to arrest, to check, to prevent, to block, to obstruct or to close."<sup>203</sup> Frequent experiences of being stopped make it clear that some spaces are inhabitable for some bodies and not others. Put differently, we could say that white ontological expansiveness and white habits of appropriation depend on stopping non-white bodies from being oriented within shared social spaces. Analyzing these differential experiences of bodily motility is another way of understanding that spatial orientations are contextualized to specific historical and social situations of unequal power and possibility.

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<sup>200</sup> "To feel negated is to feel pressure upon your bodily surface; your body feels the pressure point, as a restriction in what it can do" (Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," 161).

<sup>201</sup> Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," 161.

<sup>202</sup> "In other words, the 'unrecruitable' body must still be 'recruited' into this place, in part through the very repetition of the action of 'being stopped' as a mode of address. The 'stop and search' is a technology of racism, as we know too well" (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 140).

<sup>203</sup> Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," 161.

Ahmed's analysis of lived spatiality demonstrates that the primordial purposive relationship between bodies and spaces described by Merleau-Ponty is fundamentally altered by a consideration of colonial relations of racialized proximity and distance. Her critical move is to examine the social and historical conditions of our involvement in a world, and to argue that racism is an ongoing process by which people of color are made disoriented within the very spaces that they live through a collective orientation around whiteness. Given that spatial orientations organize "the ways in which the world is available as a space for action," being disoriented directly affects on one's ability to inhabit the world as a site of possibility.<sup>204</sup> Put differently, when whiteness operates as a colonial orientation device it helps produce and sustain enabling practical orientations for white-body subject and at the same time creates disabling conditions for people of color. Thus, through Ahmed's analysis of racialized spatiality, we can see how colonial technologies of domination, like race, reproduce conditions of unequal access to the world.

### **2.3c Racialized Temporality**

A similar analysis can be advanced regarding the colonality of being human, race, and lived temporality. Alia Al-Saji's concept of "*racialized time*" introduced in "Too Late: Racialized Time and the Closure of the Past," uncovers the temporal mode of our embodied orientation to a world structured by colonial logics of domination.<sup>205</sup> Informed by Fanon, and taking up the idea of the colonality of time from Quijano, Al-Saji makes the case that Merleau-Ponty's understanding of present possibilities being in relation to an open past

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<sup>204</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 110.

<sup>205</sup> Al-Saji, 3. "Moreover, racialization not only structures the ways in which bodies are represented and perceived, it describes the ways in which colonialism and white supremacy divide bodies politically, economically, spatially and socially in order to exploit and dominate them" (4).

does not describe experiences of temporality for those who live under the oppression of colonial racializations. Al-Saji explains that her notion of racialized time is a reading of Fanon's descriptions of the historico-racial schema taking the place of the body schema.<sup>206</sup> She claims that in experiences of racialization, like Fanon describes, the non-white or racialized body-subject experiences being "too late" to meet the present moment and to coexist in a "now" that is exclusively defined by and for white, western body-subjects. Racialized time is produced through the "retrospective colonization of the past," where "the past itself – our shared past which weighs on and informs the present" becomes appropriated by whiteness and the West.<sup>207</sup> The result is that the racialized subject inhabits a present defined by what Al-Saji terms a "closed past," while white or racializing subjects inhabit a present in relation to an "open past."<sup>208</sup> From Al-Saji's account, we can conclude that the difference between a closed and open past marks the operative distinction between white and non-white temporal orientations within social worlds structured by colonial racism.

The racialization and colonization of the past creates a "closed past" for racialized subjects defined by racist stereotypes, fictive constructions, and occlusions. The closed past substitutes for and covers over other possible relations to the past, both in the sense of foreclosing a relation to precolonial pasts that are elided and denied, and in the sense of barring a dynamic relation to the past as an open well of possibility. Al-Saji, informed by Fanon, maintains that the closed past was formed explicitly through colonization which is when the "dominant frame" of the colonizer's "white 'civilizational' history" imposed a

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<sup>206</sup> Al-Saji, 5.

<sup>207</sup> Al-Saji, 3 and 6.

<sup>208</sup> Al-Saji uses the terms racialized and racializing to refer to non-white and white subjects, respectively.

distinction that created a “second frame” which positioned “colonized and racialized peoples as foils to this history, as swept up in it without contributing to it.”<sup>209</sup> Both the dominant and the second frames present colonized and racialized temporalities that are still with us today.<sup>210</sup> Al-Saji clarifies that the colonization and racialization of temporality through the imposition of two, clashing, frames of reference, affects lived temporality and is not just a psychological process. She writes, “the closed past, with which colonized and racialized peoples are identified, is *instituted* and inhabited; it is a lifeworld of habitualities and not merely a representation.”<sup>211</sup> White body-subjects thus come to embody the present and future at the same time as they relegate non-white peoples and places to the role of constitutive outside, which in this case is expressed by being seen as embodying a perpetual past.

Racialized temporality therefore negatively affects the lived experience of racialized body-subjects. Al-Saji describes experiences of racialized time as temporal fragmentations caused by being positioned within the second, colonized frame of reference, that links you with “a kind of ahistorical or prehistorical time, irrelevant to the present.”<sup>212</sup> This temporal fragmentation, which is characterized by existing in a present oriented around whiteness, but yet in relation to a racialized closed past, results in states of oppressive disorientation.

Recalling a passage from *Black Skin, White Masks* where Fanon describes being too late to

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<sup>209</sup> Al-Saji, 6.

<sup>210</sup> Al-Saji also relies on Quijano’s descriptions of the colonality of time in “Coloniality of Power” to defend this point. She summarizes his position thusly: “He discerns three processes [...] (1) The expropriation of the cultural discoveries of colonized peoples as positive acquisitions of colonialism; (2) the elision and repression of precolonial pasts [...]; and (3) the reinscription of a linear timeline in which colonized peoples are relocated as perpetually past to European cultures that are seen as modern and futurally open” (Al-Saji, 6).

<sup>211</sup> Al-Saji, 7.

<sup>212</sup> Al-Saji, 5 and 7.

arrive in a world already defined by whiteness, Al-Saji remarks that this experience is quite different from the enabling experience of inhabiting a world as already given. As I have argued above, the ability to become oriented toward a world as a site of possibility requires that the body-subject take up the world as the enabling background of their operative intentionality. By contrast, Al-Saji describes a paralyzing and disabling experience of the world being already given in advance.<sup>213</sup> Rather than being able to take up the past as “a resource for agency,” Al-Saji explains, “when it is the racialized and closed past that mediates our relation to the world, this dimensionality is distorted – *amputating* agency (to use Fanon’s word).”<sup>214</sup> Without an open relation to the past, that is, without being able to experience an orienting modality of lived temporality, one’s ability and motility is likewise closed and restricted. As a result, Al-Saji concludes, one is left with the experience of being “anachronistic,” too late, left behind, and unable to co-exist in a lived present with others.<sup>215</sup>

## 2.4 Conclusion: Racialized Disorientations

Al-Saji’s interpretation of Fanon on the disorienting experience of racialized time mirrors Ahmed’s descriptions of spatial disorientations. Spatially, colonial racialization affects how we all live proximity and distance as modes of naturalizing the socio-cultural othering of non-white bodies that Wynter describes. Ahmed argues that as members of a

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<sup>213</sup> Ngo provides a similar description of the lived experience of racialized and colonized temporality in *The Habits of Racism*, where she writes: “not only are they [non-white body-subjects] ‘over-determined,’ but they are also *pre-determined*; determined *ahead* of themselves, ahead of what any genuine encounter with them may reveal, and ahead of how they may wish to present themselves” (67). She expands on this line of thought in “Get Over It? Racialized Temporalities and Bodily Orientations in Time.”

<sup>214</sup> Al-Saji, 8.

<sup>215</sup> Al-Saji, 9.

colonial modernity, “we inherit the proximities that allow white bodies to extend their reach.”<sup>216</sup> Temporally, racialization adheres the racialized other to the closed past, while whiteness appropriates an open past as its exclusive ground for present and future possibilities. The operation of whiteness as a colonial orientation device thus produces practical spatiotemporal orientations for white body-subject while also producing disorientations for their non-white others. Given that a practical orientation to the world enables action, it also follows that disorientations are disabling and oppressive. Through the above analyses, it is clear that being negatively racialized affects one’s embodied relation to possibility, that is, it affects one’s ability to inhabit an ‘I can’ practical orientation within shared social worlds. In other words, as Ahmed argues, being disoriented “diminishes capacities for action.”<sup>217</sup> Therefore, being disoriented can produce feelings of being ill-at-ease, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable in one’s inhabitation of the world, and as Ngo states, the racialized body frequently experiences being “disturbed, destabilized, [and] unsettled.”<sup>218</sup> Rather than the smooth and familiar relation between body and world described by Merleau-Ponty, the racialization of lived spatiality and temporality reveal a disoriented embodied relation toward the world. One that is defined by being decentered, delayed, and disabled.

In sum, racialization produces a disoriented relation to the world as given. As a result, the given ceases to be the ground for future possibilities and becomes, instead, a prison of closed past and forced distance. A world structured by colonality renders the non-white body-subject “too late” and “too strange” for white humanity. Using Wynter’s

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<sup>216</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 112.

<sup>217</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 111.

<sup>218</sup> Ngo, *The Habits of Racism*, 61.



terminology, we can conclude that whiteness operates as a colonial orientation device by appropriating collective experiences of space and time in the exclusive service of securing the present and future wellbeing of *homo oeconomicus*. This is at the same time as it relegates its genre-defined others to a fractured and discontinuous experience of lived temporality and spatiality, while working to eradicate alternative genres of being, or styles of embodiment, that are considered irrelevant to *homo oeconomicus*' singular and dominant narrative of what it means to be a human being. Thus, understanding the differential effects of racialization at the level of the spatiotemporal structures of lived experience, which determine our ability to move intentionally toward the fulfillment of our projects and desires in a world, helps demonstrate how we can embody colonial histories of domination in the present. A phenomenological account of lived experience under the racist logic of the colonality of being human illuminates the contours of the everyday oppressions and privileges of embodied racializations.

Wynter believes that decolonial resistance requires learning to consciously interject in humanity's autopoietic reproduction of the colonality of being human. She hopes that humanity can introduce a new descriptive statement that would institute a modality of being human beyond all restrictions of normative genre. Further, she imagines this new statement as the result of a marginal, poetic, and plural method of producing self-knowledge, or in other words, as the actual fulfillment of Aime Césaire's call for a new human science of the word. While I believe that Wynter's epistemic method for a decolonial praxis of being human can be crucial to such a project, and I discuss its promise in Chapters Three and Four, I also contend that it must be augmented by an understanding of how we experience the colonality of being human everyday. In this chapter, I have argued that a

Merleau-Pontian understanding of being oriented within a spatiotemporal world opens for consideration the embodied modes of how we live in relation to a hegemonic colonial genre of being human. To continue the project of not only theorizing but also activating the possibility of decolonial resistance, I have turned to critical phenomenological descriptions of our normative orientation to a world structured by racist colonial logics of domination. While these accounts have identified the many ways that non-white and other marginalized bodies are systematically disoriented, in the next two chapters I will argue that the disorientations of marginalized life can be reframed as both dynamic and resistant. I believe that dynamic disorientation can provide one basis for envisioning decolonial praxes of being human.

## Chapter 3

### Dynamic Disorientation and Marginalized Life

Moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground.

Sara Ahmed<sup>219</sup>

In the previous chapter, I showed that whiteness operates like a colonial orientation device, generating normative practical orientations within shared social worlds that help maintain white supremacist racial hierarchies. I also described how whiteness produces oppressive states of spatiotemporal disorientation for non-white body-subjects. In this chapter and the next, I develop my account of the disorientations of marginalized life as dynamic, arguing that they open possibilities for decolonial and anti-racist praxes of resistance. I derive four key features of dynamic disorientation from decolonial accounts of marginalized lived experience in Ahmed, Anzaldúa, Lugones, and Wynter. Each of these thinkers locates possibilities for critical self and world re-making in the unsettling of dominant ways of life. One commonality between their accounts is their insistence on the ambiguity of marginalized life. While they all carefully describe the oppressive effects of structural oppressions, they also connect social marginalization to criticality and resistance. By weaving together insights from these decolonial thinkers, I demonstrate that states of dynamic disorientation are integral to the becoming of a resisting subject.

On my account, dynamic disorientation has four distinctive features: (1) liminality, (2) critical proximity to power, (3) affective disinvestment, and (4) creativity. It also shares another feature, (5) destabilization, with other forms of disorientation that are not

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<sup>219</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 157.

necessarily connected to marginalization and oppression or to criticality and resistance. In fact, destabilization is the most ubiquitous feature of disorientation in existing philosophical accounts and in our everyday understandings of the term. Destabilization is an experience of feeling unfamiliar, of not knowing how to get one's spatial bearings, or most severely, of not knowing how to go on with one's life. Most often, we understand the disorienting experiences of destabilization to be temporary. You may get out at the wrong subway stop and suddenly feel destabilized as you try to find your bearings on an unfamiliar street corner or you might feel utterly disoriented after the loss of a job. In these and similar cases, disorientation has a clear cause, and frequently, an extant solution or remedy. It is also reasonable to assume that experiences of destabilization will subside or lessen with time. While destabilization plays a role in the descriptions of oppressive disorientations and dynamic disorientations that I read in decolonial, feminist, queer, and critical race theories, the latter form of disorientation, due to its interconnections with the other four features listed above, differs in significant ways from more commonplace experiences. My aim in developing this account of dynamic disorientation is thus to develop a different kind of philosophical description of disorientation that underscores its ability to be a structural feature of marginalized life.

In what follows, I build my account of dynamic disorientation by describing each of the features listed above. In *Section One*, I briefly examine two existing philosophical treatments of disorientation as destabilization from Ami Harbin and Ryan C. Parrey. Next, I trace the ways that Ahmed, Anzaldúa, Lugones, and Wynter expand our understanding of disorientation beyond destabilization. I look in *Section Two* to Lugones and Anzaldúa to think about the first feature of dynamic disorientation, namely, as an experience of

existential liminality, and then in *Section Three* use Anzaldúa, Lugones, and Wynter to relate these experiences to the second feature, the development of a critical proximity to power. Finally, in *Section Four* I use Ahmed's theory of affective economies to describe how dwelling within destabilization and liminality and having a critical proximity to power, can encourage the third element of dynamic disorientation, affective disinvestments from dominant social worlds. Drawing out these features sets the stage for my contribution of the fourth feature of dynamic disorientation in Chapter Four, resistant creativity.

### 3.1 Destabilization

In recent years, feminist philosophers have given some attention to disorientation as an experience of destabilization. For instance, we can read vivid accounts of disorientations caused by experiences of violence, trauma, and oppression in Sandra Bartky's *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, Susan Brison's *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, and Kristin Zeiler and Lisa Folkmarson Käll's *Feminist Phenomenology and Medicine*. Others have explicitly emphasized the ambiguity of experiences of destabilization, like Nicole Garrett Brown's "Disorientation and Emergent Subjectivity: the political potentiality of embodied encounter," Ami Harbin's *Disorientation and Moral Life*, and Clare Woodford's *Disorienting Democracy: Politics of Emancipation*. Yet, most sustained philosophical attention to disorientation comes not from feminist theory but from critical disability studies, where there is a growing literature on non-normative embodiments and disoriented ways of life. For example, Havi Carel's *Illness: the Cry of the Flesh* uses Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger to put forward a phenomenological account of living in an uncertain and unpredictable body; Lisa Diedrich's "Breaking Down: A Phenomenology of Disability", argues that disability

defamiliarizes and denaturalizes the experience of one's own body as being within a world; Nikki Sullivan's "BIID'?: Queer (Dis)orientations and the Phenomenology of 'Home'", reframes Body Integrity Identity Disorder in terms of an abjected orientation to the disordered body that emerges through intercorporeal encounters with naturalized forms of oriented embodiment; and finally, Ryan C. Parrey's article, "Being Disoriented: Uncertain Encounters with Disability," outlines an ontological argument for disabled disorientation that I turn to in more detail below. Critical disability theorists have argued that disorientations arise when the worlds we inhabit are structurally unfit for our manners of embodiment. Together with feminist accounts, both bodies of work have shown that these destabilizations are often met by social worlds that exasperate and silence those who experience them. Below, I look to Harbin and Parrey as two illustrative examples of existent philosophical accounts of disorientation as destabilization in order to draw out the similarities and differences between these types of account and my own.

### **3.1a. Temporary Destabilization: Ami Harbin's *Disorientation and Moral Life***

When Adorno tells us that only by becoming inhuman can we attain the possibility of becoming human, he underscores the disorientation at the heart of the moral deliberation, the fact that the 'I' who seeks to chart its course has not made the map it reads, does not have all the language it needs to read the map, and sometimes cannot find the map itself.

Judith Butler<sup>220</sup>

Judith Butler writes in this passage from *Giving an Account of Oneself* about the moral potential contained within experiences of disorientation because they underscore the universal contingency and fragility of our being in a world not of our own making. This

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<sup>220</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 110.

claim is also the starting point of Harbin's feminist philosophical treatment of disorientation in *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Harbin approaches disorientation from the perspective of feminist moral psychology, with the goal of critiquing the predominant view of moral agency as significantly tied to the ability to make clear decisions when faced with moral dilemmas. She defines disorientation as feeling "out of place, uncomfortable, uneasy, and unsettled" where one loses "one's bearings in relation to others, environments, and life projects," and her main argument is that these destabilizing experiences "can teach us about how to live responsibly in unpredictable circumstances."<sup>221</sup> Following Butler, Harbin believes that the unpredictability of life is a result of our thoroughly interconnected and relational way of being in the world.<sup>222</sup> Thus, she argues, experiences of disorientation have the advantage of reminding us that our sense of self and our ability to fulfill our intentions and desires rely on interdependent relations with others, objects, and environments. Disorientations can thus have "tenderizing effects" on our "deeply rooted habits of *not* responding to vulnerabilities."<sup>223</sup> They can encourage us to develop what Harbin names "tenderized expectations" for ourselves and the world, such as "coming to be able to live unprepared, sense vulnerabilities, experience in-this-togetherness, and live partly against the grain of norms."<sup>224</sup> She therefore stresses the importance of disorientating experiences for feminist ethics because, as she concludes, they can weaken our individualistic habits by encouraging tenderness toward interconnected webs of others, which would mean coming "to relate to others and a moral landscape in more tentative, dynamic ways."<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Ami Harbin, *Disorientation and Moral Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), xi.

<sup>222</sup> Harbin, xii.

<sup>223</sup> Harbin, 121.

<sup>224</sup> Harbin, 121.

<sup>225</sup> Harbin, 122.

Harbin and I agree that disorientation can open possibilities for living a more ethical life. We understand this potential, however, in quite different ways. Harbin's book is useful for thinking about the positive and negative effects of particular destabilizing experiences, such as losing a family member, moving to another country, falling ill, or falling in love. She thinks that these types of disorientations cause temporary experiences of destabilization that can positively intervene in the habituated workings of ethical decision-making. For example, Harbin claims that for some who experience illness or trauma, "confronting one's mortality for the first time [...] prompted a different capacity for living unprepared."<sup>226</sup> Harbin identifies as among the positive effects that these interventions can bring about are a greater awareness of shared conditions of vulnerability and a more sensitive understanding of the operations of power in our everyday lives, which echo some of the insights from Ahmed, Anzaldúa, Lugones, and Wynter that I highlight below. Yet, I suggest, Harbin and these decolonial theorists differ in their characterization of what disorientations fundamentally are and, consequently, in what disorientations can do for us. Harbin thinks of disorientations as discrete destabilizing experiences, undergone by an individual, and lasting for a measurable period of time. While these experiences may be frequent – she calls them "ubiquitous" – they are identifiable as having a beginning and an end and they have a clear causal chain even if we can only identify it after the fact. In other words, for Harbin, disorientations are temporary and often arbitrary disturbances from our habituated modes of being-in-the-world, and so she stresses that, "life would be easier without them."<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Harbin, 105.

<sup>227</sup> Harbin, 19.



Only when she briefly considers the implications of her account of disorientation for our understanding of experiences of structural oppressions, does Harbin come close to the sense of disorienting life that I believe decolonial theorists distinguish as a definitive feature of marginalization. When explaining the frequency and duration of disorienting experiences, Harbin clarifies, "What counts as 'sustained' might be indexed to the particular context of disorientation. Disorientations brought about by having some kind of marginalized identity in an oppressive social world (e.g., by being nonwhite in a racist social context or queer in a context of heteronormativity) may last longer than disorientations brought about by a diagnosis of a curable illness, but both count as *sustained*, relative to their context."<sup>228</sup> We can see that Harbin understands the disorienting experiences of marginalization as frequently occurring discrete moments and periods in a life that come into relief against background structuring conditions. This stance aligns her with many of the other feminist philosophical accounts of disorientation I mentioned above. In general, though feminist philosophers like Harbin and Brison recognize that some disorientations are both destabilizing and frequent particularly because they occur in contexts with already existing structural inequities, they do not share decolonial theorists' stance regarding disorientation as an existential or ontological state of marginalized being.

Harbin's argument that disorienting experiences can be considered sustained relative to particular contexts also differs from decolonial accounts in that it occludes the asymmetrical power differences defining experiences of disorientation for marginalized subjects and those that might befall privileged subjects. This blind spot for power in her account may result from Harbin's inattention to the ways in which practical orientations

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<sup>228</sup> Harbin, 18. See also Harbin, 33 and 76f.

within shared social worlds are themselves produced by structural power dynamics, as feminists Beauvoir, Sullivan, and Oksala argue convincingly. Disorientations, I therefore contend, are likewise produced within structural power systems, and as I argue below, circulate in ways that can both reproduce as well as challenge existing power dynamics. Thus, a fundamental incompatibility between Harbin's account and my own is that she does not allow for the claim that the disorientations of marginalized life are necessarily produced by the processes that maintain normative orientations as exclusionary.

By contrast, if we consider disorientation as a background or structuring condition of marginalization, we can claim, for example, that the nonwhite, feminine, and/or queer body-subject's destabilizing experiences of not being able to move comfortably or be at ease within white heteropatriarchal spaces while perhaps not different in intensity or duration from the disorientation of being diagnosed with an incurable disease, are nonetheless different in kind. In fact, while Harbin does index disorientations that are unconcerned with structural power relations, such as certain forms of illness or grief, as well as disorientations that arise in relation to power, such as "disorientations of ill fit" like being queer, she does not make a clear enough distinction in the latter category between the kinds of disorientation experienced by the structurally privileged and those experienced by the structurally marginalized. I find it necessary to closely consider the particular features of disorientations produced by structural power relations, and to examine how these disorientations substantially differ depending on whether one inhabits a privileged or disadvantaged social location. While analyses like Harbin's emphasize our general vulnerability to destabilization, disorientations caused by structural power inequalities can be significantly different than those that are not. A key difference, as I have

argued in the previous chapter, is that the former arise from socially and historically constructed systems of oppression and domination that impose destabilizing experiences on specific marginalized groups while simultaneously benefiting privileged groups.

Everyone is vulnerable to disorienting experiences that can befall human body-subjects regardless of social location and power. For instance, developing a severe chemical sensitivity is a destabilizing life event that can make it difficult to be at ease in the world. But, when socially privileged subjects experience disorientations in relation to social power, for example, by becoming aware of previously invisible advantages that stem from their race or gender identities, these experiences are different in kind not only from general destabilizing events, but also from those disorientations felt by marginalized subjects in relation to social power. For example, Sullivan writes about the disorientation she experienced with a relative when they walked into a Latinx grocery store and were the only white people in the building. Sullivan carefully notes the asymmetrical power dynamics present in their experiences of being disoriented specifically as racially privileged subjects. She notes that her relative's discomfort, and their shared lack of ease, were not caused by overt hostility from the Latinx occupants of the store, or from any particular interaction at all, but in fact were caused by her relative's habituated orientation toward the world as a white man.<sup>229</sup> In other words, the disorientations Sullivan and her relative felt occurred against a background of white ontological expansiveness, which as I explained in Chapter Two, is a term coined by Sullivan to describe "a person's unconscious habit of assuming that all spaces are rightfully available for the person to enter comfortably."<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 164-165.

<sup>230</sup> Sullivan, "Ontological Expansiveness," 249.

Yet, it would be incorrect to describe the disorientations felt by the Latinx inhabitants when Sullivan and her relative entered the grocery store, and in general, the kinds of destabilizations that can occur when whiteness is inserted into the spaces of people of color, as the same kind of experience as having one's habitual ontological expansiveness brought into view or questioned, even though both disorientations occur in relation to structural power. This example from Sullivan helps to illustrate the problem I locate in descriptions of disorientation as discrete experiences of destabilization, indexed to particular contexts, but sharing in their ubiquity, and often, in their sense of being sustained features of everyday life. Even if we consider those disorientations that emerge in direct relation to contexts of structural oppressions and privileges, the sense of disorientation that may arise for white subjects who suddenly become aware of their structural privileges or who have those privileges challenged, is of a different kind from the one experienced by the structurally oppressed. It is not just the severity or character of the destabilizations that differ in these cases; *it is one's ontological relationship to power*.

As I argued in Chapter Two, a decolonial and antiracist phenomenological analysis of practical orientation demonstrates that power systems can be maintained through our embodied spatial and temporal relationships within shared social worlds, so that oppressed subjects are made to experience themselves as out of step and out of time with privileged subjects. From this perspective, marginalized subjects do not have the opportunity to take up normative orientations and experience the ease, comfort, and possibilities that they can provide. These possibilities for inhabiting a purposive orientation are foreclosed from oppressed subjects as the very condition of their structural marginalizations within shared social worlds. Informed by decolonial thinkers like Ahmed,

Anzaldúa, Lugones, and Wynter, it is my contention that without the possibility of becoming reoriented within privileged forms of life, those who experience marginalized disorientations inhabit tense, ambiguous, and creative states that contain the potential for radical social change. While Harbin is interested in how destabilizations can push us to become better moral subjects; I am interested in how experiences of destabilization point to the utter insufficiency of the options and paths available before us and catalyze the creative activity needed to create new paths.<sup>231</sup> Harbin rightfully acknowledges the challenge that disorientations can put to the habituated conceits of individualistic moral decision-making. But, a sustained engagement with the work of decolonial and feminist theorists like Ahmed, Anzaldúa, Lugones, and Wynter, compels us to consider the far more radical challenge that the disorientations of marginalized life put to the status quo. This more radical perspective is present in Parrey's critical disability studies approach to theorizing disorientation. He focuses precisely on distinguishing between disorienting experiences and ontological disorientation, which I explore below.

### **3.1b. Ontological Destabilization: Ryan C. Parrey's "Being Disoriented: Uncertain Encounters with Disability"**

The nature of disabled embodiment seems to demand that we shift our focus from a discussion of disorientations as discrete destabilizing periods or moments to disorientation as an existential manner of relating to the world. Indeed, Parrey's article "Being Disoriented: Uncertain Encounters with Disability" draws a distinction between what he calls "ontic disruption" and "ontological disorientation," where the latter describes a

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<sup>231</sup> Harbin recognizes the potential for disorientations to point toward resistant ways of life. See for example Harbin, 116-117. But this idea is undertheorized in her work.

disabled-being-toward, or existing in relation to, able-bodied social worlds.<sup>232</sup> Parrey explains that while ontic disruptions are “surprising or unexpected” experiences of destabilization, they can usually be rather easily resolved or ignored in favor of a return to normal everyday life. By contrast, ontological disorientation “entails life – and perspective – changing experiences.”<sup>233</sup> Using Parrey’s distinction between ontic and ontological destabilizations, we could say that Harbin believes it is morally beneficial to view ubiquitous ontic disruptions as forms of ontological disorientation, that is, as experiences with the potential to fundamentally shift our perspectives on life. Harbin thus sees ontic disruption as having the potential to cause ontological disorientations.

Parrey, however, separates these two forms of disorientation, arguing that experiences of disorientation are either ontic or ontological, but that there is no necessary or teleological link between them. The distinctiveness of ontological disorientation is important to Parrey precisely because he uses it to call attention to the fundamental lack of fit between the disabled body-subject and the social worlds they are meant to inhabit. He explores experiences of ontological disorientation caused by encounters with disability, especially the self-encounters with disability we might call experiences of disablement. In so doing, his main argument is that ontological disorientation describes an on-going manner of relating to the world that has the potential to reveal and generate the meaning of disabled experience in ways that are occluded by normative, able-bodied orientations. Parrey concludes that an awareness of “ontological disorientation occurs when one realizes that an encounter has led to a different sense of being in the world or, more accurately, the

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<sup>232</sup> Ryan C. Parrey, “Being Disoriented: Uncertain Encounters with Disability,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2016): <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4555/4299>.

<sup>233</sup> Parrey, np.

realization that they are already in the world differently.”<sup>234</sup> Yet, they are not limited to these discrete moments of awareness or realization; ontological disorientation “is ongoing, always shaping how we go on.”<sup>235</sup> Ontological disorientations therefore have the potential to be utterly transformative for the one who experiences them. They can generate a critical awareness of social norms of embodiment that is available to those who reside on the margins of normative life. From within ontological disorientation, wherein one experiences the distance between the norm and one’s own body, the disabled body-subject also becomes open to the possibility of experiencing their embodiment in terms other than those inscribed by ableist social norms. To further emphasize the distinctiveness of the kinds of ontological disorientations experienced by people with disabilities, Parrey calls these specific experiences “dysorientation,” which he defines both as an ambiguous state of feeling lost and not-yet home, and as a being open to new possibilities in one’s specific embodied relation to the world.

Dysorientation is Parrey’s critical correction of Drew Leder’s concept of “dys-appearance,” which “entails the self-presencing of the [disabled] body *as* a body gone wrong.”<sup>236</sup> In Leder’s view, the social dys-appearance of the disabled body, in everyday encounters with disability, draws attention to the normally disappeared able body, which is the unthought background of regular life. The relational effects of the dys-appearance of the disabled body, and the appearance of the normally disappeared able body, can be disorienting for all subjects involved. Leder thus argues that for disabled people, “the dys-appearing body effectively cuts us off from the rest of the world such that the body takes on

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<sup>234</sup> Parrey np.

<sup>235</sup> Parrey np.

<sup>236</sup> Parrey np.

an ‘alien presence.’”<sup>237</sup> But, Parrey takes issue with Leder’s formulation. He argues that Leder naturalizes an able-bodied ontology and, most worryingly, “immediately negates the possibility of valuing impairment or cultivating a positive sense of disabled embodiment.”<sup>238</sup> In other words, Leder’s understanding disability as persistent experiences of destabilization caused in part by the dys-appearance of the disabled body in able-bodied social worlds leaves little room for viewing disabled destabilizations as potentially positive and transformative states of being undone. Hence, Parrey suggests “dysorientation” as a corrective term that describes, in more neutral terms, “the lived experience of being (or having been) turned around” because one is unable to take up and sustain a normative orientation toward the world.<sup>239</sup> Dysorientation is an expansive, ambiguous, and unpredictable state of embodiment that can be *both* oppressing and liberating.

With dysorientation, then, Parrey questions the assumed boundaries of *le corps propre* by reveling in the inconsistencies, surprises, and uncertainties that inform disabled embodied existence. For him, a person living with disabilities, embodiment just is fundamentally dysorienting because it always involves being in relation to ambiguity and strangeness, and this has the destabilizing effect of not allowing the body to sink comfortably into the background of his everyday life. Parrey’s body, therefore, cannot inhabit a practical orientation toward a social world that is defined by ableist norms. Yet his dysorientation can also be critically revelatory because it can foreground the work involved in reproducing normative orientations in others. Parrey writes, “encounters with disability are disorienting precisely because we remain in-relation with body and world

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<sup>237</sup> Parrey np.

<sup>238</sup> Parrey np.

<sup>239</sup> Parrey np.



rather than temporarily feeling cut off (as in disappearance and ontic disruption).”<sup>240</sup>

Parrey’s dysorientation, then, calls attention to the presencing work that destabilizations perform. The dysorientation of disabled embodiment reveals our ontological condition of relationality more than it represents a stalling of the smooth workings of those relations. The key critical conclusion Parrey draws in the context of disability studies is that ontological disorientations are not solely oppressive. By reading disabled lived experience as dysorienting, he wants to leave open the possibility for theorizing the positive aspects of ongoing ontological disorientation. However, he does not explore these possibilities in any detail in his own work.

Harbin’s and Parrey’s accounts of disorientation focus on embodied experiences of destabilization as the feeling of being lost, of losing one’s spatial and temporal bearings, or of the inability to inhabit a world predictably and with ease. Parrey focuses on destabilization as an ontological condition for disabled subjects, whereas Harbin sees destabilization as a discrete disturbance in the course of normal life. Yet, there are important similarities between their accounts. Both attend to the potential negative and positive valences of their respective readings of disorientation. Underlying both discussions is the question of structural oppressions and privileges and their role in forming us as embodied subjects who are made capable through our power to be practically oriented within shared social worlds.

Yet, Harbin’s arguments about disorientation’s positive effects on moral decision-making do not pay enough attention to structural differences in the relative social power and material comforts of differently situated subjects. Though she recognizes the different

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<sup>240</sup> Parrey np.

circumstances and stakes of coming to critical and moral awareness through disorientations that concern social power, she does not consider the thesis that the disorientations of marginalized life may be of a different kind, and may have more to offer than moral amelioration through the temporary experiences of destabilization of privileged subjects.

Parrey, like other authors working in critical disability studies, approaches the topic of disorientation from a perspective that acknowledges the differential effects of structural power dynamics on embodied lived experience. His differentiation between ontic disruption and ontological disorientation is helpful because it emphasizes the difference between disorienting experiences of destabilization and the states of disorientation that help define non-normative lives as marginalized. Furthermore, his concept of dysorientation captures the ambiguity of ontological disorientation as well as its fundamental connection to the ongoing maintenance of normative orientations. But in recognizing both the oppressive and resistant valences of ontological disorientations, Parrey does not actually explore the critical and resistant possibilities that dysorientations may contain. He hints at the potential for the dysorientations of disabled embodiment to effect alternate methods of knowing the world, yet does not consider the possibility that they, along with other disorientations caused by structural marginalizations, may have the potential to open up radical praxes of resistance to normative ways of life. Using Harbin and Parrey as my starting point, I thus turn below to exploring the critical and resistant possibilities of ongoing experiences of marginalized disorientations. In short, I develop an account of ontological disorientations as dynamic.

### 3.2 Liminality

In the remainder of this chapter I expand on the idea that disorientation is an ontological state of marginalized life that can become dynamic and resistant when it is characterized by four features: liminality, critical proximity to power, affective disinvestment, and creativity. I start with Lugones' and Anzaldúa's accounts of existential liminality as they provide ways of envisioning how dynamic disorientations can be understood as experiences of being in liminal places and states in relation to complex and intersecting colonial power systems. Both Lugones and Anzaldúa describe marginalized subjects as those who are both liminal and multiplicitous because they move inbetween different, and often clashing, social worlds.<sup>241</sup> Taking lessons from their work, I argue that dynamic disorientations arise from being within and between shared social worlds and intersecting power systems.

#### 3.2a. World-Travelling, Antistructure, and the Limen

Lugones' essays on world-traveling, antistructure, and the limen reveal her pluralist theory of lived spatiality.<sup>242</sup> She conceives of space as a heterogeneous, overlapping, relational web of material-psychic worlds of sense that differentially enable those who inhabit them. Lugones' use of the term "worlds of sense," Paula Moya explains, "reminds us

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<sup>241</sup> I am following Ortega's use of the term "multiplicitous selfhood" to describe the accounts of embodied subjectivity given by Latina feminists like Anzaldúa and Lugones. Ortega defines multiplicitous selfhood as "a self in process or in the making. This self is situated in specific material circumstances that include particular histories, occupies multiple positionalities or social identities, and, like the new *mestiza*, is an in-between self" (Ortega, 63).

<sup>242</sup> See especially "Structure/Anti-structure and Agency under Oppression," "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception," and "Purity, Impurity, and Separation" in María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003).

that consciousness presupposes a sociality – a set of values, characteristic ways of interacting, particular persons who actively inhabit a specific geographical and psychic space.”<sup>243</sup> Different worlds of sense can be contemporaneous, but we often experience them in ways that create tensions and contradictions in our intersubjective lives. For instance, some worlds are dominant and hegemonic because they are supported by institutional structures and cultural norms that give them the power to define what it means to be a subject, to be intelligible, and to be moral. Those of us who do not fit easily into dominant worlds must constantly world-travel in and out of different social worlds as we live our lives. Lugones explains that world-travelling can lead to destabilizing experiences like being ill-at-ease and unsure of oneself, as well as to positive experiences derived from feeling capable of forming liberatory and resistant intentions and goals.<sup>244</sup> Her theorization of social-spatial liminality works to bring both of these aspects of marginalized existence into focus.

Lugones connects liminality and marginalization because she theorizes from the lived experience of mestizas like herself who are “victims of ethnocentric racism in a society that has one of those cultures as subordinate and the other as dominant.”<sup>245</sup> Mestizas, who are of mixed heritage and culture, are always moving within and between at least two shared social worlds structured by contradictory norms and values. Hence, Lugones writes of the experiences of mestiza subjects like herself:

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<sup>243</sup> Paula M. L. Moya, review of *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions*, by María Lugones, *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006): 199-200.

<sup>244</sup> Lugones argues that “the ontological possibility of liberation depend[s] on embracing ontological pluralism. [...] Ontological pluralism is suggested vividly by theories of racial oppression presented by men and women of color: think of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Gloria Anzaldua’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* as examples” (Lugones, “Structure/Antistructure,” 502).

<sup>245</sup> Lugones, “Structure/Antistructure,” 503.

These cases provide me with examples of people who are very familiar with experiencing themselves as more than one: having desires, character, and personality traits that are different in one reality than in the other, and acting, enacting, animating their bodies, having thoughts, feeling the emotions, etc., in ways that are different in one reality than in the other. [...] And if one can remember the intentions of the person one is in the other world and now tries to enact them, one can see that many times one cannot do so because the action does not have any meaning or a very different sort of meaning than the one it has in the other reality.<sup>246</sup>

Mestizas' experiences of moving between worlds point to the incongruity of the self across different realities over time. In particular, because of the need to travel to dominant white/Anglo worlds of sense that are not structured to support them, mestizas frequently experience themselves, and experience themselves being seen by others, in vastly different and contradictory ways.

For example, Lugones remarks that she is viewed as funny and playful within worlds that are structured to shelter Latinx subjects, but is seen as serious in dominant white/Anglo worlds.<sup>247</sup> The question of whether she *is* playful *or* serious brings her to the claim that *she is both*, because the social worlds that she inhabits at any given time ground different capabilities that all make up who is she is. Put differently, Lugones is capable of being playful in one world, but incapable of it in another, and the difference relies on how her subjectivity is being co-constructed by the particularities of any given intersubjective and material situation. The question of which aspects of Lugones' self are truly her is therefore the wrong one to ask. Through an analysis of her experiences of world-travelling, Lugones concludes that she is many selves all at once. Moreover, these selves cannot be added together or synthesized into one underlying subject because they often exist simultaneously and in contradiction with one another. Yet, she also maintains that it is

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<sup>246</sup> Lugones, "Structure/Antistructure," 503-504.

<sup>247</sup> Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," 86-87.

possible to gain a critical awareness of the self as multiple, even if this awareness will never be totalizing. For Lugones, the possibility of this awareness arises from learning to inhabit liminal spaces and states between worlds of sense.

Repeated experiences of world-travelling can reveal the ability to inhabit in-between spaces or what Lugones terms, “limens,” i.e. gaps between different worlds of sense. Importantly, a limen is “where one can most clearly stand critically toward different structures,” because it is “the place where one becomes most fully aware of one’s multiplicity.”<sup>248</sup> Through her account of limens, Lugones thus links ontological marginalization (“victims of ethnocentric racism”), existential multiplicity (“ontological pluralism”), and criticality (“stand critically toward different structures”). From a limen, one is able to take up a perspective on the structuring processes of shared social worlds, which are usually occluded from view. Lugones borrows the term structure from Victor Turner who uses it to describe “systematic, complete, coherent, closed socio-political-economic organizations or normative systems that construe persons [...] not just in the sense of giving them a façade, but also in the sense of giving them emotions, beliefs, norms, intentions.”<sup>249</sup> As her example of being seen as serious in white/Anglo worlds illustrates, Lugones is serious in those worlds because they are structured by racist and sexist logics and norms that are incapable of constructing her as a joyful subject. Rather than view her seriousness as a role or persona that she plays for the dominant white/Anglo world, Lugones argues that within those worlds she is, and perhaps must be, serious, just as she also is other selves constructed by the different social structures she inhabits at any given time and place.

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<sup>248</sup> Lugones, “Structure/Antistructure,” 505.

<sup>249</sup> Lugones, “Structure/Antistructure,” 505-506.

The liminal interstitial space between structures is therefore an antistructure. It is a lived space and a liminal “social state” of in-betweenness revealed by the world-travelling of multiplicitous subjects. By naming limens antistructures, and by claiming that one can inhabit them, Lugones insists that it is possible to experience oneself in excess of “structural construction.”<sup>250</sup> Crucially, this excess is not transcendental. On the contrary, we should understand limens themselves as specific, social spaces and states that marginalized beings inhabit. “The social,” Lugones thus writes, “transcends the structural without metaphysical transcendence.”<sup>251</sup> Likewise, limens are in excess of structures in the sense that they are “structurally invisible,” because they defy the logics of purity that structure dominant worlds where unresolved ambiguity, multiplicity, and difference are erased. The limen as an antistructural social space and state is not an underlying unity, however, and it is not a ground for overlapping worlds of sense. A limen is neither wholly apart nor wholly within particular worlds of sense.

With the limen, Lugones describes a sense of separation that remains messy, and which informs my understanding of the impure separation characteristic of states of being dynamically disoriented within dominant social worlds. In the essay “Purity, Impurity, and Separation,” she explains that “the fundamental assumption” defining colonial logics of purity “is that there is unity underlying multiplicity.”<sup>252</sup> By naming the limen a space and social state of in-betweenness, ambiguity, and criticality, Lugones describes a notion of antistructure that is separate and yet not purely distinct from dominant structures. She uses mayonnaise as a metaphor to help illustrate this point. With the slightest change in the

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<sup>250</sup> Lugones, “Structure/Antistructure,” 507.

<sup>251</sup> Lugones, “Structure/Antistructure,” 507.

<sup>252</sup> Lugones, “Purity, Impurity, and Separation,” 126.

balance between yolk and oil, mayonnaise will curdle and separate, but the result is that “you are left with yolky oil and oily yolk.”<sup>253</sup> With this familiar image, Lugones draws our attention to a notion of separation as curdling that is markedly different from separation “as splitting,” which would be “an exercise in purity.”<sup>254</sup> She therefore warns against reading the limen as a state and space purely split from dominant worlds of sense. The limen is in-between and separate from existing social structures, but it refuses the purity of distinct boundaries. The limen, I suggest, is therefore an inherently disorienting lived space because it is defined by impurity, multiplicity, ambiguity, and contradiction. To inhabit the limen is to become disoriented within dominant shared social worlds that demand that one take up a normative orientation in order to find one’s way.

A liminal subject therefore also “defies control through simultaneously asserting the impure, curdled multiple state and rejecting fragmentation into pure parts. In this play of assertion and rejection, the mestiza is unclassifiable, unmanageable. She has no pure parts to be ‘had,’ controlled.”<sup>255</sup> The issue of control is significant both for Lugones’ understanding of marginalized space and subjectivities and my understanding of dynamic disorientation as a necessary condition for the possibility of decolonial praxes of resistance. The liminal mestiza defies categorization into the binary figures and normative roles necessary for the easy reproduction of oppressive social states and worlds. Therefore, I suggest, Lugones gives us a way of understanding how the ontological liminality of marginalized subjects renders them incapable of inhabiting normative orientations with dominant social worlds. Being liminal and impure, and co-constructed by dominant

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<sup>253</sup> Lugones, “Purity, Impurity, and Separation,” 122.

<sup>254</sup> Lugones, “Purity, Impurity, and Separation,” 123.

<sup>255</sup> Lugones, “Purity, Impurity, and Separation,” 123.



structures and logics as unmanageable, means that one does not fit into a world that demands the strict categorization of difference. If, as we heard from Merleau-Ponty in the previous chapter, practical orientations require taking hold of a world that also takes hold of you, then liminal selves, according to Lugones, cannot enter into this kind of existential relationship with dominant worlds defined by colonial power. Instead, I suggest, we should read Lugones' claims as descriptions of ontological disorientation as an existential modality of a marginalized-being-within-the-world(s).<sup>256</sup> From her work on liminality, we can conclude that the ontological disorientations of marginalized life are characterized by multiplicity and impurity, and as such, that they open possibilities for critique of dominant social worlds. Indeed, my understanding of disorientation as *dynamic* requires linking liminality and criticality within a creative praxis of resistance. I will develop the conception of criticality below through Lugones' and Wynter's accounts of critical proximity to power, but first, I turn to Anzaldúa to further elaborate an existential concept of liminality as it connects to dynamic disorientation.

### **3.2b. La Frontera, Los Intersticios, Nepantla**

Lugones' theorizing of liminal experiences and subjectivities are partially inspired by Anzaldúa's descriptions of marginalized life on la frontera, the borderland between

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<sup>256</sup> Ortega's concept of being-between-worlds attempts to correct some of the ontological impossibilities in Lugones' claims about liminal subjectivity and world-travelling in *In-Between*, 49-84. Similarly, McWeeny takes up this issue in her article "Liberating Anger, Embodying Knowledge: A Comparative Study of María Lugones and Zen Master Hakuin," *Hypatia* 25, no. 2 (Spring, 2010): 295-315. I agree with Ortega, McWeeny, and others that Lugones' work does not produce a coherent ontological theory. However, I think there are other important uses and implications of her work that are not diminished by her ontological difficulties, for example, as a theory of radical resistance to structural oppressions. This is especially true when you consider the lived experience of liminal being as a necessary condition for becoming resistant.

Mexico and the United States of America. The borderlands are spaces caught between clashing worlds, languages, histories, epistemologies, and values. In her groundbreaking 1987 book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa reflects on the kinds of subjects produced by the Mexico-US border, “my home / this thin edge of barbwire” that “was Mexican once, was Indian always / and is. And / will be again.”<sup>257</sup> In the oft-cited opening passage of the book, Anzaldúa remarks that this border “*es una herida abierta* [is an open wound]” where we find “the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture.”<sup>258</sup> Those who inhabit this borderland are in-between subjects born from the violent merging of these two incongruous worlds. Caught within this nexus of colonial history, they become “*los atravesados*” or those who cross over boundaries of normal and accepted ways of life finding it difficult to become oriented within dominant, U.S. white/Anglo and Mexican social worlds.

While Anzaldúa describes la frontera as a historically specific liminal space, i.e. the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, she also understands la frontera to have birthed embodied, symbolic, imaginal, and aesthetic borderland spaces and beings. Historically, she describes how the liminal state of being mestizaje [mixed] and living in la frontera originated with the violent rupture of U.S. imperialism. Those who inhabited the borderlands were first “jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboweled, dispossessed, and separated from our identity and our history.”<sup>259</sup> Anzaldúa underscores the very real histories of violence that resulted in the existence of borderland peoples. Her work thus reminds us that marginalization and liminality are not abstract concepts, but must always be understood in

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<sup>257</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York, Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 25.

<sup>258</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 25.

<sup>259</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 30.

the historically situated, concrete particularities of actual lives lived in these spaces.

Lugones' world-traveller is, for Anzaldúa, paradigmatically the undocumented Mexican migrant, who is rendered "faceless, nameless, invisible" and yet also vilified in her efforts to cross over in the hopes of a better life.<sup>260</sup> The borderlands are lived sites of clashing worlds of sense and those who inhabit them are ambiguous beings caught between oppression and liberation.

Being mestiza for Anzaldúa means a lifetime and a history of the ontological disorientations that attend liminal existence. She writes:

Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision.<sup>261</sup>

While the shock of being mestiza can be debilitating, which is something Anzaldúa writes about at length, she also believes the mestiza's existential liminality and plurality can facilitate an opening onto new and resistant ways of life. Having to inhabit multiple and contradictory worlds of sense, and living in the borderlands between them, means that the mestiza is pressed to develop a tolerance for ambiguity.<sup>262</sup> Anzaldúa's mestiza "constantly has to shift out of habitual formations" and lives in a way "characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather excludes. [...] Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence

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<sup>260</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 33-35.

<sup>261</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 100.

<sup>262</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 104.

into something else.”<sup>263</sup> Like we see in Lugones’ account, Anzaldúa describes the mestiza as inhabiting an antistructural and liminal space, which she names los intersticios, or “the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits” where the mestiza “surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar.”<sup>264</sup>

Anzaldúa alternately describes the experience of inhabiting los intersticios as petrifying and as one that awakens a rebellious self who refuses to be contained. Despite the risks of liminal existence, dwelling in ambiguities also allows for the possibility of birthing a mestiza consciousness, which Anzaldúa describes in this early work as a collective way of being beyond subject-object duality and categorial hierarchy.<sup>265</sup> In her own interpretive readings of Anzaldúa’s early work, Lugones notes that mestiza consciousness is characterized “by the transgression of rigid conceptual boundaries,” and thus rather than trying to orient herself in one world or another, the newly conscious mestiza “decides to stake herself in the border between the two, where she can take a critical stance and take stock of her plural personality.”<sup>266</sup> There are many fruitful resonances between Lugones and Anzaldúa and their respective accounts of existential liminality and multiplicity from the perspective of mestiza lived experience. Yet I believe, at base, their fundamental ontological claims differ.

Unlike Lugones’ insistence that the limen or antistructure points toward a fundamental and unresolvable ontological impurity and plurality, Anzaldúa argues that the plurality of la frontera and los intersticios can birth new mestizas who become aware of the

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<sup>263</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 101.

<sup>264</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 42 and 104.

<sup>265</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 102f.

<sup>266</sup> Lugones, “On Borderlands/La Frontera: An Interpretive Essay,” *Hypatia* 7, no. 4 (Autumn, 1992): 34.

ways that their multiplicitous existence is capable of creating a healing wholeness. Anzaldúa describes the new mestiza as “*un amasamiento*” or literally as “an act of kneading, of uniting and joining.”<sup>267</sup> Her tolerance for ambiguity and her dwelling in liminal disorientations are steps toward a new, and better, manner of being whole and unified. This teleological element of Anzaldúa’s ontology is even more pronounced in her later work. For instance, in the posthumously published *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, Anzaldúa turns increasingly to the Náhuatl words *nepantla* and *nepantleras* to describe las fronteras and the fractured and tense mestiza subjects that inhabit them. As Anzaldúan scholar and collaborator, AnaLouise Keating explains:

Nepantla represents both an elaboration of and an expansion beyond Anzaldúa’s well-known theories of the Borderlands and the Coatlicue state (introduced in *Borderlands/La Frontera*). Like the former, *nepantla* indicates liminal space where transformation can occur; and like the latter, *nepantla* indicates space/times of chaos, anxiety, pain, and loss of control. But with *nepantla*, Anzaldúa underscores and expands the ontological (spiritual, psychic) dimensions.<sup>268</sup>

Being in *nepantla*, that in-between space/state, allows the marginalized subject to become a *nepantlera*, one who can tap into imaginal, unconscious, affective resources that she habitually hides away.<sup>269</sup> This spiritual and imaginative process is goal-oriented. Anzaldúa explains, “Nepantlas are places of constant tensions, where the missing or absent pieces can be summoned back, where transformation and healing may be possible, where wholeness is just out of reach but seems attainable.”<sup>270</sup> She claims that dwelling in

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<sup>267</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 103.

<sup>268</sup> AnaLouise Keating, “Editor’s Introduction: Re-envisioning Coyolxauhqui, Decolonizing Reality,” in *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, by Gloria Anzaldúa, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), xxxiv.

<sup>269</sup> I explore the resistant and creative power of *nepantleras* in Chapter Four.

<sup>270</sup> Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 2.

liminality thus produces a strong yearning for wholeness and for a way beyond the pain and oppression of disoriented, mestiza existence. This thread in her thinking stands in contrast to Lugones' refusal to affirm any form of ontological unity underlying mestiza existence. Yet, though Lugones emphasizes the creative and resistant power of plurality while Anzaldúa highlights the healing force of unity and wholeness, both theorize liminality as a dynamically disorienting and transformative state of being intimately connected with lived experiences of structural marginalizations and oppressions.

### **3.3 Critical Proximity to Power**

Lugones and Anzaldúa provide us with vivid accounts of existential liminality. They describe liminal selves as those who inhabit in-between states and spaces as they move within and beyond dominant social worlds of sense. Both theorists also draw direct links between liminality and criticality, and this is one important connection between their thinking and Wynter's. For Lugones liminal, borderlands spaces are the places "where critique, rupture, and hybridization take place."<sup>271</sup> For Anzaldúa, the rupturing effects of multiple, intermeshed forms of structural oppression and marginalization can facilitate the development of a critical awareness of power she calls *la facultad*. Similarly, Wynter writes about the ability for women of color, and in particular Black women living in the geographic and cultural margins created by European colonialism, to produce critical accounts of power. Thinking with these three decolonial theorists, I explore how the dynamic disorientations of liminal existence can open alternate perspectives on power that are indispensable for resistance movements. When we consider the hegemony of colonial power dynamics and technologies of domination, such as race, on contemporary subjects,

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<sup>271</sup> Lugones, "On Borderlands/La Frontera," 35.

institutions, and relationships, it becomes imperative to look to those forced to the colonial margins for praxes of decolonial resistance. Lugones, Anzaldúa, and Wynter give us conceptual tools for understanding the direct connections between liminal social spaces and states and the development of a critical proximity to power that is crucial for resistance.

### **3.3a. Liminal Social Critique**

In describing the *mestiza's* lived experience of liminality, Lugones thinks through the possibility of her forming resistant intentions and actions that can dismantle and transform existing worlds. She concedes that it is impossible to think that these conditions will arise when one is practically oriented by dominant logics and social structures. But, in positing that it is possible to inhabit antistructural spaces, Lugones conjectures that dwelling in liminal states allows one to think and perceive in ways that are normally foreclosed by dominant and oppressive social worlds. She writes of experiences of being in these spaces and states and claims that “the oppressed know themselves in realities in which they are able to form intentions that are not among the alternatives that are possible in the world in which they are brutalized and oppressed.”<sup>272</sup> This ability of the marginalized to form alternate and liberatory intentions, and to not be fatally limited by oppressive structures, is the crux of Lugones’ vision for liberatory possibilities. The limen, as both space and social state, provides critical perspectives on the structures and experiences of one’s own multiplicity that ground the possibility for resistance. The limen is therefore the answer Lugones gives to how to imagine spaces of resistance to seemingly

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<sup>272</sup> Lugones, “Structure/Antistructure,” 505.

inescapable oppressions. It is in negotiating this terrain, especially collectively with others, that a resisting subject can arise. Indeed, Lugones writes:

The experience of victims of ethnocentric racism of moving across realities, of being different in each, and of reasoning practically differently in each can be understood as liminal. To do so is to understand its liberatory potential because, when the limen is understood as a social state, it contains both the multiplicity of the self and the possibility of social critique. Both are important components of the subjective possibility of liberation.<sup>273</sup>

Thus for Lugones radical social critique becomes possible within antistructural perspectives, or in my terms, from within states of dynamic disorientation, that allow one to perceive workings of power that are normally occluded from view.

For instance, white privilege is both denied and protected – and is in fact protected by being denied – in the regular functioning of our social and cultural institutions. As I argued in Chapter Two, this demonstrates whiteness' ability to function as a colonial orientation device that allows white body-subjects to seamlessly inhabit practical orientations within shared social worlds that are already structured to support them. Though it is the case, as stated in section 3.1 above, that white subjects can have disorienting experiences in relation to unequal power relations, like those that arise specifically from their being made aware of their white privilege, these destabilizing experiences concern power but do not relate to states of ontological marginalization, like existential liminality, as is the case for racially marginalized subjects. Lugones and Anzaldúa make it clear that the ability for non-white subjects, who must travel in and out of white spaces and are forced to the margins by racist institutions, to inhabit liminal states of being-within-worlds allows them to more easily develop a deep critical awareness of white privilege and its institutional structures. Indeed, Lugones and Anzaldúa argue that the

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<sup>273</sup> Lugones, "Structure/Antistructure," 505.



racially marginalized can produce alternate forms of practical knowledge about the world that are largely inaccessible to those privileged subjects who sink comfortably within the world. Wynter makes a similar argument, which I discuss in the section below. In all three theorists, the possibility for critical awareness and resistant knowledge-making arises because marginalized subjects can inhabit liminal states and spaces, and thereby, can develop a critical proximity to power.

Lugones maintains that existential multiplicity is a necessary condition for liberation. She, like Parrey above, is interested in exploring “the open-endedness of oppressed persons’ acting [which...] is possible because the self is not unified but plural.”<sup>274</sup> Lugones thus proposes that resistant and liberatory theorizing can occur in the concrete, embodied, navigation of life under multiple, intermeshed oppressions by multiplicitous subjects.<sup>275</sup> For example, I understand her account of the practice of hanging out, or the transgressive taking over of public space by the marginalized, to be a description of a collective practice of inhabiting a limen and critically negotiating oppressive terrains in ways that can inform praxes of resistance. Hangouts are liminal in that they are permeable, fluid spaces that defy structural logics, and are thus spaces where resisting intentions can be formed.<sup>276</sup> Lugones explains that hangouts give place to alternate sense-making practices that undercut pretensions to a disembodied, theoretical, and critical engagement with power, as well as to an experience of the self as simply individual and unified. Within hangouts, intersubjective collectivities can fulfill “the need of an alternative sociality for

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<sup>274</sup> Lugones, “Structure/Antistructure,” 503.

<sup>275</sup> Lugones, “Tactical Strategies of the Streetwalker/*Estrategias Tácticas de la Callejera*” in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 208.

<sup>276</sup> Lugones, “Tactical Strategies of the Streetwalker,” 209.

resistant intentionality,” one that cannot easily form in the atomized spaces of social fragmentation common to our institutionalized public, and increasingly to our private, attempts at gathering together.<sup>277</sup> Crucially, the resistant sense making and communicating that occurs within hangouts cannot be read as productive by the terms of dominant and oppressing social worlds. Alternative socialities exist only in transgressing the logics defining the proper inhabitation of shared space, and so the praxis of hanging out can only be read by those logics as “inactivity, disengagement, or [as] nonsensical.”<sup>278</sup>

By promoting hanging out as a critical strategy of collective resistance, and one that cannot receive uptake from dominant worlds of sense, Lugones emphasizes her opposition to reformist resistance strategies. Instead she, like Wynter, calls for a radical delinking from oppressive worlds of sense, which amounts to refusing dominant notions of institutionality, individuality, and intelligibility. Lugones argues that possibilities for radical social critique form through everyday acts of collectively negotiating oppressive social worlds where liminal selves can gather together in defiance of the norms of social fragmentation. The critical practices of tactical strategizing that collective spaces like hangouts can birth, therefore, emerge from transgressive moments of intersubjective closeness and lingering face-to-face interactions between marginalized subjects. This is therefore one understanding of the critical proximity to power that can emerge when one learns to navigate dominant and oppressive social worlds from within liminal states of dynamic disorientation.

Similarly, Anzaldúa argues that existential liminality opens the possibility of developing a critical knowledge about dominant power systems that she names, *la facultad*.

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<sup>277</sup> Lugones, “Tactical Strategies of the Streetwalker,” 216.

<sup>278</sup> Lugones, “Tactical Strategies of the Streetwalker,” 218.

La facultad is “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface” and it develops in the oppressed as “a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate.”<sup>279</sup>

Anzaldúa’s concept thus shares with Lugones’ this sense of survival and the ability to understand power in ways that allow the marginalized to navigate through daily oppressions. But, unlike Lugones, Anzaldúa emphasizes the negative effects of proximity to power as disorienting. For her, la facultad names both a way of knowing the world in relation to oppression and an effect of the existential fear created by marginalized existence. Hence she writes, “we are forced to develop this faculty so that we’ll know when the next person is going to slap us or lock us away.”<sup>280</sup> Yet, like Lugones, Anzaldúa believes that this disorientated sense of fearful knowing has the potential to develop into something more dynamic, collective, and liberatory. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, she already hints that la facultad can perhaps also name “anything that takes one from one’s habitual grounding, causes the depths to open up, causes a shift in perception [...] makes us pay attention to the soul, and we are thus carried into awareness.”<sup>281</sup> She develops this idea further in her later work.

In *Light in the Darkness/Luz en lo Oscuro*, Anzaldúa moves on from describing la facultad, which emerges within those who are forced to inhabit los intersticios, to her concept of conocimiento, which is a critical and liberatory awareness that develops for those who learn to inhabit liminal nepantla spaces and states. Here she writes, “Living in nepantla, the overlapping space between different perceptions and belief systems, you are

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<sup>279</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 60 and 61.

<sup>280</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 61.

<sup>281</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 61.

aware of the changeability of racial, gender, sexual, and other categories rendering the conventional labelings obsolete [...] *conocimiento* questions conventional knowledge's current categories, classifications, and contents."<sup>282</sup> *Conocimiento* names both a critical awareness, linked to liminality, of the arbitrary and oppressive operation of colonial categories of difference, and also a liberatory mode of thinking that can imagine new and radical ways of living. I believe therefore that *conocimiento* differs from *la facultad* because it names the achievement of a state of awareness that develops out of the critical faculties that generally attend marginalized existence. *Conocimiento* is no longer the result of fear; it is rather the ability to pursue the creation of a new and more holistic identity from the disorientations of being undone by oppression. As AnaLouise Keating explains, it therefore names a "fully embodied process that gathers information from context, [...] is profoundly relational and enables those who enact it to make connections among apparently disparate events, people, experiences, and realities."<sup>283</sup> Thus, while *la facultad* refers to a critical and practical knowing about oppressive power, *lo conocimiento* is Anzaldúa's attempt to link criticality with liberation through the creative imagining of healing, relational, and "subversive" forms of life.<sup>284</sup> I will return to Anzaldúa's concept of *conocimiento* in Chapter Four where I elaborate the fourth feature of my concept of dynamic disorientation, creativity.

In the next section, I explore the similarities and differences between Lugones' and Anzaldúa's accounts of liminal social critique and that of Wynter in order to continue

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<sup>282</sup> Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 119.

<sup>283</sup> Keating, "Editor's Introduction," *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, xxvii.

<sup>284</sup> Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 120.

developing my understanding of critical proximity to power as the second feature of embodied states of dynamic disorientation.

### **3.3b. Demonic Grounds**

Like Lugones and Anzaldúa, I suggest that Wynter argues that it is possible to gain a critical proximity to power when one is dynamically disoriented within dominant social worlds. Wynter understands radical critique as a part of the ethico-onto-epistemological transformation of the on-going autopoietic reproduction of colonial genres of being human. She thus theorizes critique at different levels of systematicity: on the level of cosmogony, genealogies of genre mutations (descriptive statements and symbolic codes of life/death), and autopoietic institution and narration (the stories we tell ourselves, how we come to know who and what we are). In this section, I will focus only on Wynter's concept of the "demonic ground" as a liminal space and state from which women of color can take up critical perspectives on colonial structures and logics, and thereby, creatively intervene in autopoietic praxes to produce new ways of thinking and living.<sup>285</sup> Conceiving of a demonic ground, like Lugones' hangouts or Anzaldúa's *nepantlas*, as a space that affords a critical proximity to power, continues to flesh out my understanding of dynamic disorientation as a particular kind of ontological disorientation linked to marginalized experiences of liminality and that opens possibilities for decolonial resistance to the colonality of being human.

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<sup>285</sup> Wynter introduces the term "demonic ground" in "Afterword: 'Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman,'" in *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. C. B. Davies and E. S. Fido (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990).

Wynter's strategy for theorizing critical resistance to the colonality of being human is to look to where so-called symbolic death paradoxically lives. As we saw in Chapter One, those spaces and subjects on the margins of dominant colonial genres of being are constructed to symbolically represent death from within hegemonic logics. Therefore, their marginalized perspectives and forms of knowledge are considered nonsensical and/or dangerous from the dominant perspective of white, western, heteropatriarchal social worlds. Yet, despite these attempts at minimization and erasure, as Katherine McKittrick notes, the limits of a hegemonic genre of being are in fact "palpitating with life,"<sup>286</sup> and are, in the words of Édouard Glissant, "the 'real but long unnoticed' places of interhuman exchanges: cultural sharings, new poetics, new ways of being, 'a new world view,' human struggle."<sup>287</sup> According to Wynter's analysis, subjects living on the colonial margins can co-construct critical spaces called demonic grounds. She borrows the term demonic from physicists' demonic models, which are fabricated observers of mundane processes from a perspective outside of space/time as we understand it. A demonic ground, which is beyond dominant fields of knowledge or systems of meaning, names "the possibility of an observer/site of observation that is non-analogically oriented, that is, one outside the present discursive formations and meaning 'fields' of our present order and its related episteme."<sup>288</sup> Wynter considers where a demonic perspective on the autopoietic reproduction of a dominant genre of being human could arise, and concludes that this

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<sup>286</sup> Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 133.

<sup>287</sup> Édouard Glissant, "Creolization and the Making of the Americas," in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, ed. V. L. Hyatt and R. Nettleford (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 268.

<sup>288</sup> Wynter, "On Disenchanted Discourse: 'Minority' Literary Criticism," in *The Nature and Contexts of Minority Discourse*, eds. Abdul R. Janmohamed and David Lloyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 207n3.

stance could only be achieved from the manufactured *terra nullius* of the colonial Other or sub-Being. So, as Alexander Weheliye explains, “*Demonic ground* is Sylvia Wynter’s term for perspectives that reside in the liminal precincts of the current governing configurations of the human as Man in order to abolish this figuration and create other forms of life.”<sup>289</sup>

These marginalized spaces, from the perspective of the hegemon, are empty and expropriable. Yet they are full of life and histories, and thus, Wynter argues that narrating the genres of being human endemic to demonic grounds will help to delink and disrupt—and to de-code—the well-functioning systems of life/death that secure the well-being of colonial genres of humanity. Moreover, like Lugones’ world-travellers and Anzaldúa’s *nepantleras*, subjects that inhabit demonic grounds can learn to take up a critical perspective on dominant structures that is unavailable to those who are situated comfortably within them.

Wynter first introduces the term demonic ground to specifically describe the perspective of Caribbean women writers and critics who inhabit a crossroads between sex/gender, class, and race that separates them from white-Euro/American women writers in “Afterword: Beyond Miranda’s Meanings.” She argues that it is the intersection of race with these other two categories of difference that constitutes their perspective as emerging from a demonic ground “outside of our present governing system of meaning” because western understandings of class and sex/gender difference center whiteness.<sup>290</sup> In fact, Wynter argues that the contradictions inserted into contemporary western understandings of class identity and sex/gender identity by racialized subjects who exist in the “cross-

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<sup>289</sup> Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 22.

<sup>290</sup> Wynter, “Afterword,” 356.

roads situation” of being members of a Black women intelligentsia, like herself, are untenable and cannot be resolved or consolidated to these current understandings.<sup>291</sup> In other words, she claims that race and racialized subjects insert contradictions into western pretensions to universal categories of identity and difference and universal claims about what it is like to be a human being. While there is a designated place for “race” within western system of knowledge, as I explored through Wynter in Chapter One, by claiming that she herself occupies a demonic ground outside of this system as the ground from which she can provide a heretical and radical perspective on life, Wynter points to a racialized gap and excess both beyond and between governing definitions of humanity.

Taking up a demonic perspective on power, therefore, opens possibilities to critique the double-silencing of women of color. For instance, Wynter argues that it is only from her demonic perspective that she was able to see how the erasure of Black women through symbolic death was necessary to sustain the legitimacy of the secular-evolutionary narrative schema defining *homo oeconomicus* today. She develops this argument through a reading of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Wynter writes, “the absence of Caliban’s woman as Caliban’s sexual reproductive mate functions to ontologically negate their progeny/population group, forcing this group to serve as the allegorical incarnation of ‘pure’ sensory nature.”<sup>292</sup> By denying the ontological weight of Black women’s lives as sources of meaning, the current secular-evolutionary western system of meaning denies the existence and existential interest of non-whites as parallel population groups sharing in human evolutionary history and co-existing together in the present. Wynter carries this analysis into her critiques of western feminism and concludes that by viewing womanhood

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<sup>291</sup> Wynter, “Afterword,” 357.

<sup>292</sup> Wynter, “Afterword,” 362.



solely as the purview of white women, one also gives the role of human genetrix only to white women. This state of affairs, therefore, provides the white woman with “a mode of privilege unique to her, that of being the metaphysically invested and ‘idealized’ object of desire for all classes and all population-groups.”<sup>293</sup> The marginalized perspective of white womanhood on structural oppressions, therefore, cannot be universalized for all women as the variable of race causes distinct relationships to power and privilege for women of color. It is insufficient, Wynter thus concludes, to have a model for womanhood and feminism that reads race as an “intra-feminist marker of difference” rather than as a ground for human experience that fundamentally challenges the universalizing claims of womanhood as, implicitly, white.<sup>294</sup>

She also insists that we need multiple and intersecting demonic perspectives on dominant power systems and logics to effect radical transformations of the current world order. Much like Lugones and Anzaldúa, Wynter sees the possibility for radical social change arising from the collective development of liminal critical awareness. She calls this an “epistemological mutation – based on the new metaphysical imperative of the now conscious alterability of our governing codes, their modes of ontological difference and their rule-governedly generated behaviour-regulatory meanings, together with their always non-arbitrary ‘designs’ of interpretative readings.”<sup>295</sup> In a way that recalls Anzaldúa’s arguments about the need to develop *conocimiento*, Wynter remarks on the critical and creative powers of becoming aware of the arbitrary and incomplete operation of oppressive social norms, an awareness she insists can only be fully developed from

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<sup>293</sup> Wynter, “Afterword,” 363.

<sup>294</sup> Wynter, “Afterword,” 364.

<sup>295</sup> Wynter, “Afterword,” 365.

multiple perspectives on “the multiple modes of coercion and of exploitation” that construct our current genre of being human.<sup>296</sup>

Speaking from the critical proximity to power enabled by her doubly erased and marginalized vantage point of being a Black woman, I read Wynter as emphasizing the ways in which her ontological disorientation from dominant social worlds is fundamentally dynamic and resistant. In claiming her liminal state as a ground from which to think, feel, know, and be, that is, as a ground for self-assertion, she states that she is able to take on a critical position that not only reveals but also intervenes in dominant structures’ autopoietic operation. To return to the discussion of Caliban’s woman above, from Wynter’s critical perspective, “rather than only voicing the ‘native’ woman’s hitherto silenced voice we shall ask: What is the systemic function of her own silencing, both as women and, more totally, as ‘native’ women? Of what mode of speech is that absence of speech both as women (masculinist discourse) and as ‘native’ women (feminist discourse) an imperative function?”<sup>297</sup> Wynter’s critical questions work to “disenchant” dominant discourses defining what it means to be a human being by interrogating their fundamental symbolic logics and governing descriptive statements.<sup>298</sup> Her ability to ask such critical questions is generated by her existential liminality, which provides her with the disorienting “experience [of] a structural contradiction between lived experience and the grammar of representation which generate the mode of reality.”<sup>299</sup> Because, as we saw in

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<sup>296</sup> Wynter, “Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception: The Counterdoctrine of the Jamesian Poiesis,” in *C. L. R. James’s Caribbean*, ed. P. Henry and P. Buhle (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 69.

<sup>297</sup> Wynter, “Afterword,” 365.

<sup>298</sup> See Wynter, “On Disenchanting Discourse”. I explore this idea further in Chapter Four.

<sup>299</sup> Wynter, “The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism,” *boundary 2*, vol. 12/13 (1984): 39.

Chapter One, she believes that genres or styles of being-in-the-world are modes of autopoietic institution, her notion of a critical and dynamic response to this disorientation from the governing colonial genre of being is primarily expressed through what Mignolo calls “choosing the decolonial option” or “practicing epistemic disobedience,” that is, by critically interrogating the terms of the dominant descriptive statement.<sup>300</sup> I will return to Wynter’s ideas about resistant epistemic praxis and its connections to dynamic disorientation in Chapter Four.

While Wynter’s account of the critical proximity to power enabled by inhabiting demonic grounds shares many features with Lugones’ and Anzaldúa’s, it does not exactly accord with their understanding of liminality as multiplicitous. For Wynter, liminal spaces are gaps and excesses that are neither wholly within nor wholly outside of dominant worlds. Instead, they are liminal in the sense of being paradoxical because their absence is a necessary construction of dominant logics. For Wynter, Elisabeth Paquette explains, “liminal refers to a subject position that exists outside of or at the limits of what can be thought from a dominant subject position.”<sup>301</sup> Therefore, as we saw above, the demonic ground of Black womanhood allows for criticality because it has the potential to generate heretical perspectives on colonial genres of being human. By dwelling in spaces that are constructed as empty and doing so in order to speak and think from perspectives that are invisibilized, Wynter’s demonic inhabitants rupture the descriptive statement defining our current dominant and colonial genre of being human. They also have the potential to produce a heretical, counter-discourse defining what it means to be a human being.

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<sup>300</sup> Mignolo, “Sylvia Wynter: What Does it Mean to be Human?” 107.

<sup>301</sup> Elisabeth Paquette, “Wynter and Decolonization,” in *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*, ed. M.A. Peters (Springer, 2016), 4.

Dwelling in critical awareness and claiming liminal spaces as grounds for knowing the world, effects an unsilencing of Black women, and as I will explore in Chapter Four, this unsilencing is radically creative.

### **3.4 Affective Disinvestment from Dominant Social Worlds**

The third feature of dynamic disorientation I highlight in this chapter is affective disinvestment from dominant social worlds. The potential for ontological disorientations to happen as critical and creative states is heightened by the ability to dwell in that disorientation. This is made clear in all three accounts of critical proximity to power above where we saw that it is necessary to dwell in liminality as a space/state from which one can work to develop critical awareness. I believe that affective disinvestments interrupt the pull of reorientation and open the space and distance needed for one to so dwell in dynamic disorientation. In this section, I use Ahmed's work on queer life to help describe the relationship I read between affect, reorientation, and disorientation.

In brief, informed by Ahmed's concept of affective economies, I show that the circulation of affects participates in the production of reorientations and disorientations through affect's ability to intensify or disrupt attachments to particular forms of life. I explain how affective economies of hate, fear, and love can encourage investments in normative orientations toward the world that maintain white heterosexism. Then, I look to Ahmed's claims about queer affective failure as the impetus to disinvest from established ways of constructing a livable life. I read her descriptions of discomfort and excitement as dynamic and disorienting affects that open possibilities for resistance. I give further details about these resistant possibilities when I explore the creative aspects of dynamic disorientation in the next chapter.

### 3.4a. Affective Economies

Ahmed argues that affects strongly influence our attachments to social groups and cultural ways of life. While this claim is not unique to Ahmed, her understanding of affect as “economic” presents a challenge to affect theories that make this claim in conjunction with a view of emotions as private, psychic attributes of individuals.<sup>302</sup> By contrast, Ahmed sees emotions as forces of connection and distinction that animate subjects and accrue into objects by circulating through figures and signifiers in our shared social worlds. She thus explains, “I am interested in the way emotions *involve* subjects and objects, but without residing positively within them.”<sup>303</sup> Ahmed describes affective economies where emotion “circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement,” and in doing so it operates as a form of capital, in the Marxian sense of surplus value, which increases and decreases through emotion’s continuous circulation within social fields.<sup>304</sup> In short, affective values accumulate over time as effects of social circulation.

Using an economic model to understand affect allows Ahmed to highlight the ways in which our present emotional attachments have social and material histories of production. “Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions,” she writes, “we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the

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<sup>302</sup> See Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 79, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 117-139 and Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014) for more on her theory of affect as economic. Contrast Ahmed’s approach with Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners*, trans. E. Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978); Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can Matter More Than IQ* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995); and Peter Marris, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Attachments in private and public life* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>303</sup> Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 119.

<sup>304</sup> Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 119.

collective. [...] My economic model of emotions suggests that while emotions do not positively reside in a subject or figure, they still work to bind subjects together.”<sup>305</sup> Using Ahmed’s model, I suggest that affective economies can produce investments and disinvestments in particular modalities of being practically oriented toward social worlds.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, white practical orientations toward the world have affective dimensions; they create feelings of comfort, familiarity, and ease for those who are habituated to them. Here, I turn to Ahmed’s analysis of affective economies of hate, fear, and love, which she argues help to generate strong attachments to white supremacist social groups and cultural ideals. In particular, I am interested in how her analysis reveals the ways that these “emotions work by sticking figures together (adherence), a sticking that creates the very effect of a collective (coherence).”<sup>306</sup> Informed by Ahmed, I understand that affects can act as normative forces of orientation that adhere white subjects to racist embodied habits, and that make it difficult for those in privileged social locations to sustain experiences of disorientation related to power. Simultaneously, these same affects also work to intensify the disorienting effects of social marginalization for racially oppressed subjects.

In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Ahmed analyzes Audre Lorde’s narrative in *Sister Outsider* of being a little girl and taking an empty seat next to a white woman on the New York City subway. When Lorde sat down, the white woman reacted to the proximity of Lorde’s body by angrily abandoning her seat. The young Lorde wonders what disgusting thing had crawled up between them to make this woman so angry; while the adult Lorde recalls coming to the realization that it was her own black

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<sup>305</sup> Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 119.

<sup>306</sup> Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 119.

body that the woman feared and hated. "Through such strange encounters," Ahmed writes, "bodies are both de-formed and re-formed, they take form through and against other bodily forms."<sup>307</sup> Lorde's body is de-formed by the white woman as a body out of place, as invader and contamination, and when the woman flees, she does so to re-form the purity of her white body, which is made possible by a racist rejection of proximity to Blackness.

Likewise, as Lorde afterwards holds the open seat for her mother, she too participates in bodily re-formation by finding proximity to comfort through the physical closeness of her mother's body. These movements of de-formation and re-formation are also instances of disorientation and reorientation; the embodied encounter between Lorde and the white woman causes them both to temporarily lose their hold on the world. Orientation and order is restored only when the encounter ends and bodily distance is reintroduced, yet their respective experiences of disorientation and reorientation are far from similar.

Through this vignette from Lorde, we see that marginalized bodies, like the bodies of people of color within white social worlds, or the bodies of people with disabilities in Parrey's analysis within able-bodied social worlds, are rendered both disoriented and disorienting. As I have already suggested above, experiences of disorientation are vastly different for those inhabiting marginalized and dominant social positions. Here we see that Lorde's disorienting effect on the white woman is of a different kind than the disorientation Lorde experienced in return. The affects hate, fear, and comfort only intensify these differing effects. Lorde must constantly live with the oppressive ontological disorientation of being racially marginalized, which is intensified when her Blackness is constructed as an object of hate for white subjects, whereas the white woman is able to return to normalcy by

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<sup>307</sup> Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 40.

simply getting up, just as Sullivan and her relative do by leaving the Latinx grocery store. Both white experiences of disorientation are mere ontic disruptions as the women are easily welcomed back into the comfort of the white supremacist spaces that are already all around them. Sullivan's efforts to analyze her experience in the context of "revealing" the normal everyday operation of white privilege serve to further demonstrate the irregularity of white discomfort acting as a cause of sustained disorientation for white subjects. While Sullivan works to extend her state of disorientation in order to critically interrogate her unconscious habits of white privilege, Ahmed's affective analysis reveals that when whiteness produces uncomfortable affects for white subjects, this discomfort typically circulates in ways that generate further investments in racist practical orientations toward the world. In short, white affective discomfort is often reorienting. Moreover, the white subway rider's racist hatred and fear block her from coming to the awareness that her white ontological expansiveness is the source of her disorientation, as Sullivan does. Instead, these affects accrue in Lorde as she is made into an object of hate and fear and scapegoated as the cause of the white woman's discomfort.

For Ahmed, Lorde's story reveals that our necessary condition of inter-embodiment, or living-with-others, is often felt as a condition of exclusion for marginalized subjects. Moreover, these exclusions arise in part through bodily economies of exchange and relation that produce strong affective attachments and detachments. Hence Ahmed states, "I want to consider inter-embodiment as a site of differentiation rather than inclusion: in such an approach 'my body' and 'the other's body' would not be structurally equivalent, but



in a relation of asymmetry and potential violence.”<sup>308</sup> Thinking about affect in this context, she claims that fear and hate can intensify the production of the borders that mark out exclusionary social worlds. The white woman’s feelings of racist fear and hatred, which accumulate value in relation to colonial histories of the circulation of anti-Black signs and figures, utterly defined the meaning of her encounter with Lorde by constructing Lorde’s body as an object of fear and source of hate. Affective value, then, “shapes the surface of bodies and worlds” by intensifying social differentiation.<sup>309</sup>

Likewise, affects can create commonalities and attachments that take on psychic, material, and social concreteness. In particular, Ahmed points out the foundational role that love plays in conjunction with fear and hate in our collective investments in particular ways of life. For example, a social group can form through its collective imbuing of love onto an imaginary figure or sign, such as “an American” or “the flag”, which often occurs through the simultaneous association of fear and hate with other signs and figures that are seen as threats to the group. The circulation of communal affects and the surfacing of values are necessary for the cohesion of family and social groupings, and thus, are a factor in the reproduction of marginalized and non-normative subjects as those “others” who produce fear, pain, and hate in “us.” Affects therefore help create attachments to dominant social worlds, or in other words, encourage us to invest in the maintenance of normative embodied orientations toward the world.

In the article, “Affective Economies,” Ahmed illustrates these claims further through analyses of white nationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric. In particular, she examines the

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<sup>308</sup> Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 48.

<sup>309</sup> Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 121. See also 117.

role that affects play in reproducing hierarchical power relations between whites and people of color who live in physical and material proximity but do not inhabit what Lugones would call worlds of sense in the same ways. In Ahmed's analysis of white nationalist writings, she identifies negative affective attachments to the non-white other as what generate the contours of the white body and of white supremacist communities. By contrast, white supremacists themselves explain their negative affective attachments as produced first by a communal love of (white) self, (white) family, and (white) country. So, Ahmed reasons, white supremacists and white-serving institutions come to read the proximity of non-white bodies "as the origin of bad feeling" and "a crime against person as well as place."<sup>310</sup> The white subject who wants to maintain the racist status quo fantasizes that his positive affective attachments – his love of tradition, family, and country – justifiably explain his hate, fear, and anger at non-white others. Ahmed reveals that these negative affective attachments are in fact what have conditioned and maintained the boundaries of the "white citizen" and "white nation" in the first place. Hence, she writes, "The passion of these negative attachments to others is redefined simultaneously as a positive attachment to the imagined subjects brought together through the repetition of the signifier, 'white'."<sup>311</sup> Thus, the whiteness of white bodies and spaces is produced as pure and under threat in part through economies of love, hate, and fear that help to produce shared social worlds structured by white supremacy.

These affects also work to justify white supremacist rhetoric against immigration, for example, as responses to threats to national security and bodily integrity. They do so by working to construct and align different figures as objects of hate – for example, the

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<sup>310</sup> Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 118.

<sup>311</sup> Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 118.

immigrant and the rapist – which then has the effect of constructing alignments against these figures in the form of communities bonded together by shared positive affective attachments to home and country. In all cases, Ahmed writes, “emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments.”<sup>312</sup> In the case of white nationalists, we see that affective economies intensify attachments to white-only spaces through the hateful and fearful repudiation of non-white bodies and cultures. Looking to the similarities between Sullivan’s, Lorde’s, and Ahmed’s examples, we can see that the circulation of these racist affects and attachments reaches far beyond explicitly white supremacist social groups. The alignments that the circulation of hate, fear, and love can produce between whiteness and experiences of home, safety, and comfort are what help generate widespread investments in white ontological expansiveness and other racist embodied habits.

### **3.4b. Affective Failures and Queer Attachments**

While Ahmed’s analysis of affective economies of hate, fear, and love emphasizes the reorienting force of these affects to generate attachments to exclusionary cultural ideals and communities, I suggest that affects also have the potential to be dynamically disorienting. Certainly, if we accept Ahmed’s arguments that affects generate values and attachments, we can likewise consider how they contribute to sustaining dynamic and resistant disorientations through the creation of non-normative and/or resistant values and attachments. Put differently, given that affective values have the power to intensify our investments in particular ways of life, shared affects can be means of disinvestment and refusal to participate in the continued maintenance of worlds structured by colonial power

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<sup>312</sup> Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 119.

systems. Indeed, I read Ahmed's work connecting queer life and normative affective failures as describing the circulation of disorienting affects like discomfort and excitement as the impetus to disinvest from white, heterosexist values and communities.

Both Ahmed and Anzaldúa give us reason to claim that the ontological disorientations of marginalized life involve affects that resist reorientation and reattachment to the status quo. Through their accounts connecting queer lives with affects like discomfort and excitement, Ahmed and Anzaldúa describe embodied modalities of existence defined by ontological disorientations that are both oppressive and dynamic, resistant and creative. To better understand their accounts, it is important to first know what they mean by queer. Ahmed uses queer to refer to both "a way of describing what is 'oblique' or 'off line' [as well as...] those who practice nonnormative sexualities," and so she uses the term to refer to both LGBTQ and/or mixed race subjects.<sup>313</sup> She writes: "Heterosexuality as a compulsory orientation reproduces more than 'itself': it is a mechanism for the reproduction of culture, or even of the 'attributes' that are assumed to pass along a family line, such as whiteness. It is for this reason that queer as a sexual orientation 'queers' more than sex, just as other kinds of queer effects can in turn end up 'queering' sex."<sup>314</sup> Ahmed believes that queer affective attachments are always disorienting within white heterosexist social worlds because queerness necessarily involves the failure to affectively invest in dominant forms of community and collectivity.

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<sup>313</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 161.

<sup>314</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 161-2.

Similarly, Anzaldúa writes about being queer as a response to “an absolutely despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other.”<sup>315</sup> She names her queerness “a way of balancing, of mitigating duality,” and as such, it is also a “path of knowledge – one of knowing (and of learning) the history of oppression of our *raza* [race].”<sup>316</sup> Like Ahmed, Anzaldúa views her queerness as a marginalized way of life that has the potential to serve as the basis for a critical perspective on the reproduction of racialized sexual and gender oppressions. Anzaldúa and Ahmed write about the difficulty of feeling familial love or comfort as a result of their sexual and racial queerness, and how this affective disinheritance precipitated their gaining a critical perspective on the role of heterosexist ideals in perpetuating investments in whiteness and the desire to inherit proximity to whiteness through the family line.

Using the conceptual vocabulary I have developed in this chapter, we can see that being queer within white heterosexist social worlds means living with ontological disorientation while also producing ontic disruptions in others. Queer embodied habits and gestures, like gender nonconforming styles of walking or non-heterosexual displays of affection, can circulate affective discomfort for non-queer people as what Ahmed calls “an effect of bodies inhabiting spaces that do not take or ‘extend’ their shape.”<sup>317</sup> Discomfort in proximity to queerness felt as ontic disruption by non-queer subjects most often has the effect of promoting reinvestments in heterosexist values and communities. By contrast, the affective discomforts that attend queer ontological disorientation can become incentives to radically disinvest from and resist dominant social worlds. Ahmed explains that as

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<sup>315</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 41.

<sup>316</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 41.

<sup>317</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 152.

ontologically disoriented, the queer subject frequently feels sensations of alienation as she moves through the world. She does not fit in the spaces she tries to inhabit, she is misattuned to objects of normative desire, and she experiences what is “in tune as violence.”<sup>318</sup> While queer disorientation thus describes an oppressed state, Ahmed challenges us in her manifesto-like text, *Living a Feminist Life*, to think of experiences of persistent social discomfort “as the very points we might aim to reach,” and she speaks of them becoming moments of “feminist snap.”<sup>319</sup> Her reappropriation of the figure of the Feminist Killjoy – she who snaps at the world – as a figure of resistance captures this challenge directly.<sup>320</sup> Ahmed sees the potential for disoriented subjects to “become the point from which things cannot be reassembled,” in part I suggest, because they are imbued with disorienting affects like discomfort, sadness, anger, and inappropriate happiness.<sup>321</sup> Thus the queer subject can learn to resist through her affective comportment to the world; she can get in the way of normative expressions of comfort and happiness for herself and for others.

If we understand comfort and happiness to result from structural investments made in normative futures – heterosexual, white, patriarchal futures – where a queer, non-white, female, and/or trans\* will-to-be has no proper place, then refusing to desire such futures is a resistant act. It is one, however, that Ahmed claims will be read as failure by dominant social worlds and will be “narrated as the loss of the possibility of becoming happy.”<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 41.

<sup>319</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 187-188.

<sup>320</sup> Feministkilljoys.com is the title of Ahmed’s very popular blog. This figure is also discussed at length in *Living a Feminist Life* and *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>321</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 171 and 62.

<sup>322</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 49.

Nonetheless, it may be possible to operationalize this unbecoming and disinvestment as a form of resistance. Ahmed believes that affects like queer discomfort or sadness “represent a collective failure to be accommodated to a system as the condition of possibility for living another way.”<sup>323</sup> In other words, queer affective failure can help keep open the necessary space for critical resistance by disturbing the reorienting pull of white, heterosexist social worlds.

As we saw above, the ability to dwell in liminal and disorienting spaces as dynamic can allow for marginalized subjects to develop a critical proximity to power and form resisting intentions. This dwelling, I suggest, can also be a crucial reprieve from oppressive social worlds. Unlike socially privileged subjects who easily inhabit practical orientations toward the world, the pull of normative reorientation for queer and other marginalized subjects is objectifying and dehumanizing because it asks them to perform impossible tasks of assimilation. Instead, therefore, we might find that we can begin to build alternative forms of community and happiness by embracing Ahmed’s vision of the resistant potential of the failed assimilation into whiteness and/or heterosexuality. She writes, “[q]ueer feelings may embrace a sense of discomfort, a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving, along with an excitement in the face of the uncertainty of where the discomfort may take us.”<sup>324</sup> The connection between discomfort and excitement points to an understanding of ontological disorientation as dynamic and generative and not merely oppressive. I explore this line of Ahmed’s thought further in Chapter Four.

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<sup>323</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 62.

<sup>324</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 155.

### 3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I developed my account of dynamic disorientation, arguing that it can open possibilities for decolonial and anti-racist praxes of resistance. I discussed three key features of dynamic disorientation, as I understand it, derived from decolonial accounts of marginalized lived experience: (1) liminality, (2) critical proximity to power, and (3) affective disinvestment from dominant social worlds. I will discuss the fourth main feature, (4) creativity, in the next chapter. I also introduced distinctions between different kinds of disorientation informed by Harbin's and Parrey's accounts of disorientation as destabilization. I argued that some disorientations are destabilizing and are general features of existence, such as getting lost or losing a job, while other disorientations are destabilizing because they are concerned with structural power relations. The latter are indexed to particular contexts and differ vastly depending on one's social location and ontological relationship to power.

Disorientations concerned with power can either be ontic disruptions, that is, what Parrey describes as temporary disturbances often experienced by privileged subjects, or they can be ontological disorientations, which are persistent and transformative. Building on Parrey's and Harbin's work, I argued that ontological disorientations differ for differently situated subjects. Because already privileged subjects easily inhabit practical orientations toward shared social worlds, ontological disorientations are not only rare experiences, they are difficult to sustain when they do occur. By contrast, structurally marginalized subjects inhabit states of disorientation as an existential condition of their non-normative embodiment. The ontological disorientations of marginalized life are not only persistent they are also fundamentally oppressive. Yet, I sought to distinguish a



particular account of these disorientations that also reads them as dynamic in the sense of opening up possibilities of being critically resistant to the imposition of exclusionary ways of life.

Thus, I traced how Ahmed, Anzaldúa, Lugones, and Wynter expand our understanding of ontological disorientation to include possibilities for critical self and world re-making. I put forward a notion of ontological disorientations as dynamic in their ability to unsettle oppressive modalities of being in relation to the world. I began with Lugones', Anzaldúa's, and Wynter's understandings of existential liminality and its fundamental connections to criticality. All three thinkers give us reasons to believe that claiming liminal spaces as grounds for knowing the world obliquely can allow the oppressed to develop a critical awareness of power that is integral for resistance projects. I therefore suggested that it is imperative to dwell in dynamic disorientations, and used Ahmed's theory of affective economies to describe the difficulties and possibilities for doing so. I concluded that disorienting affects could motivate disinvestments from dominant social worlds inspired by Ahmed's linking of queer discomfort and excitement.

Yet this account of dynamic disorientation is not meant to be redemptive. Just because states of ontological disorientation can become critical and resistant does not redeem the oppressive social worlds that caused them. My intention in developing an account of dynamic disorientation is to provide a way to understand how the lived experience of colonial oppressions can itself be a ground for decolonial resistance. Through the above account of three of the main features of dynamic disorientation, I have demonstrated that marginalized lived experiences are characterized by disorienting states that are both oppressing and resisting. I believe that resistance requires becoming

dynamically disoriented within dominant social worlds in ways that allow for the creation of new values, new selves, new communities, and ways of life that are no longer defined by racist, heterosexist logics of domination. Thus, in Chapter Four, I look again to Ahmed, Anzaldúa, Lugones, and Wynter to describe the fourth feature of dynamic disorientation, creativity.

## Chapter 4

### Creativity and Decolonial Resistance

Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere and, when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home... Some people have asked me what is the use of increasing possibilities for gender. I tend to answer: Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread.

Judith Butler<sup>325</sup>

The fact that multiplicity leads to liminality, ambiguity, and contradiction is crucial in terms of its ability to lead us to possibilities not only of creativity but also of resistance to various forms of oppression.

Mariana Ortega<sup>326</sup>

In this final chapter I explore the fourth salient feature of dynamic disorientation, *viz.*, creativity. I do so to demonstrate that in order to resist reproducing the coloniality of being human, we must create methods for inhabiting the world as an open site of possibilities. In previous chapters, I explored embodied lived experience within colonial power systems by setting up a contrast between white practical orientations toward the world and racialized experiences of spatiotemporal disorientation that thwart ability, motility, and bodily intentionality. I then argued that the oppressive effects of these disorientations point to the insufficiency of possibilities for living available in the present. In Chapter Three, I presented a rethought notion of disorientation and described three key features defining disorientations as dynamic and arising in relation to structural power. I highlighted the resistant potential of disorienting experiences of *liminality* that can open up the possibility of developing a *critical proximity to power*, which can ground alternative and

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<sup>325</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>326</sup> Ortega, *In-Between*, 189.

radical ways of sensing, perceiving, and knowing the colonial worlds we inhabit. Moreover, I argued that by dwelling in affects like discomfort and excitement, marginalized subjects could learn to sustain dynamic disorientations as resistant through *affective disinvestments* in racist and heterosexist styles of embodiment.

In this chapter, I argue that dynamic disorientations have the potential to catalyze the creation of new possibilities for living beyond those produced within colonial power systems. Through states of dynamic disorientation, marginalized subjects can come to relate to shared social worlds as incompletely given realities, that is, as sites of possibility that are no longer overdetermined in advance by racist colonial logics. To pursue these claims, I return to the decolonial theories of Ahmed, Anzaldúa, Lugones, and Wynter and read their diverse practices of disoriented creativity as forms of decolonial resistance that expressly aim to innovate new possibilities for living. Though each of these theorists do not understand creativity in identical ways, this is to the benefit of my analysis. Dynamic disorientations are not homogenous and the thinkers I engage here are not meant to be exhaustive. Likewise, creativity as a praxis of resistance takes on many forms as it proliferates possibilities for alternate modalities of being-toward and within social worlds, as well as creating new and resisting worlds to inhabit.

This chapter is structured primarily around Wynter, Ahmed, and Anzaldúa. I look to notions of resistant creativity in each theorist's work – minority discourse in Wynter, queer invention in Ahmed, and nepantlera writing in Anzaldúa – and read them as suggesting methods for transforming the purposive relationships between marginalized body-subjects and worlds. I begin, however, in *Section One* with Lugones' concept of "oppressing/being

oppressed < -- > resisting” power relations.<sup>327</sup> I use her conceptual framing of impure relations with power to emphasize that resistant creativity emerges from out of the lived experiences of oppression. *Section Two* focuses on Wynter’s notion of minority discourse, which has the power to rupture the hegemonic hold that colonial orders of knowledge have on our lived experience and open decolonial possibilities for transforming the praxis of being human. *Section Three* explores the resistant effects of queer invention in Ahmed’s work. Ahmed argues that the disorientations of queer life can motivate the creation of new ways of inhabiting one’s body and of gathering together with others in refusing to reproduce dominant social worlds. Finally, in *Section Four*, I look to Anzaldúa’s notion of artistic productivity through the figure of the nepantlera as artist and writer. Nepantleras resist by inventively recreating the self who has been fractured by colonial marginalization. Weaving together resources, I conclude that diverse experiences of dynamic disorientations can ground praxes of decolonial resistance. Dynamic disorientations facilitate breaking with colonial modalities of embodied relation to the world and thus open the space for creating new possibilities for living.

#### **4.1 Oppressing/Being Oppressed < -- > Resisting Relations of Power**

To be in a state of dynamic disorientation means that one exists simultaneously within oppressing and resisting relations to power. Moreover, while other kinds of disorientation diminish capacities for action, dynamic disorientations are active states of

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<sup>327</sup> Lugones discusses this concept in several places. See “Introduction,” “Streetwalker Theorizing,” and “Purity, Impurity, Separation” in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003). See also Lugones, “From Within Germinative Stasis: Creating Active Subjectivity, Resistant Agency,” in *EntreMundos/Among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa*, 85-99, ed. AnaLouise Keating (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), and Lugones, “On Complex Communication,” *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 75-85.

existing within this nexus of power. I make these claims by following Lugones' understanding of what she terms, "oppressing/being oppressed < -- > resisting" relations of power within disorienting spaces like *limens*.<sup>328</sup> Taking up Lugones' understanding of power allows me to assert that dynamic disorientations are neither pure escapes from oppressive structures nor states from which one can solely engage in practices that resist oppressions. In this chapter's focus on creativity I emphasize the resistant power of dynamic disorientations, but do so without erasing their connections with experiences of being oppressed and oppressing others and by discussing the implications of the lack of such purity.

Lugones' understanding of power as a nexus of "being oppressed/oppressing < -- > resisting" references the push and pull of oppression and resistance that particularly characterizes the ambiguous lived experience of *mestiza* subjects, though all relations with power are defined within these tensions. Her concept provides another way of understanding the multiple and contradictory senses of lived space and lived embodiment in her pluralist theory of existential liminality. Just as the *mestiza* is between white/Anglo and Latinx social worlds, she is also a nexus of oppressing/being oppressed and resisting, and is thus co-constructed by histories and socialities of these relations with power. For example, a *mestiza* subject's sense of self might be formed by dominant white/Anglo stereotypes of Latinas, Latina feminist critiques of those stereotypes, memories of people in her life that reinforced stereotypes and those that resisted them, personal experiences with cultural phenomena like films and music that both reinforce and contradict stereotypes, and so on. Lugones draws our attention to the idea that the worlds of sense we inhabit are

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<sup>328</sup> Lugones, "Introduction," 12.

comprised of histories of oppressions and resistances, both large-scale and everyday. She therefore maintains that these complex relations with power inform and co-construct mestizas and other subjects.

Yet, most of us are unaware of the detailed operation of power in our everyday lives. Uncovering and critically examining these power relations as they are lived therefore helps reveal the complex contours of marginalized and privileged forms of life. Furthermore, working to connect the lived experience of existential liminality with a critical proximity to power can also, as Lugones asserts, serve an explicitly liberatory agenda. She states in the introduction to *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes* that she aims to conduct “an emancipatory investigation of this tense oppressing/being oppressed < -- > resisting of beings both fragmented and multiple.”<sup>329</sup> For her, there is no need to separate the practices of coming to better understand oppressive power and the practices of moving against it, as these are both parts of a greater project of decolonial liberation. In fact, Lugones specifies that in order to become aware of resistance to structural oppressions as a possibility, we must first learn to stop viewing oppression as totalizing or static. She explains,

oppression is not to be understood as an accomplished fact. To understand it as accomplished renders resistance impossible. Rather, the relation is oppressing < -- > being oppressed, both in gerund, both ongoing. Resisting meets oppressing enduringly. It is the active subject resisting < -- > oppressing that is the protagonist of our own creations.<sup>330</sup>

For Lugones, moving onto a path of liberation means becoming critically aware of power as both oppressing and resisting, as well as one’s role within these dynamics. She believes that in developing a critical awareness of power one can become an active subject who is thus capable of creating practices for knowing oppression, particularly as an oppositional and

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<sup>329</sup> Lugones, “Introduction,” 12.

<sup>330</sup> Lugones, “From Within Germinative Stasis,” 90.

resistant response to structural oppressions rendered invisible by dominant worldviews. She thus explains that a critical awareness of power as oppressing/being oppressed < -- > resisting can “create a clear sense of standing in a dual reality, one in which we use double perception and double praxis. One eye sees the oppressed reality, the other sees the resistant one.”<sup>331</sup>

I view states of dynamic disorientation through this same framework. Being dynamically disoriented within colonial social worlds means accessing forms of “double perception” and “double praxis” where one can develop a critical awareness of oppressions and open possibilities for resistant innovation. In highlighting the resistant creativity of dynamic disorientations, I focus on the poietic and productive side of actively inhabiting the tensions between oppressing/being oppressed and resisting. I maintain that dynamic disorientations involve a form of creativity that while generated from within these tense power ambiguities is also a force of production that has the potential to birth new ways of life that are not defined solely as responses to oppressive logics. There is thus a sense of liberation or becoming free in a future horizon that I take up from Lugones’ work. I read a similar hopefulness in Wynter, Ahmed, and Anzaldúa, as I will elucidate below. For Lugones, the idea of the liberatory creation of new possibilities for living is conjured by the struggle to develop the resisting self from within the nexus of being oppressed/oppressing < -- > resisting. She writes: “It is from within these processes that the practice of shifting to

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<sup>331</sup> This awareness takes effort to develop because it goes against the dominant view of power. As Lugones explains, “it is one thing to see oppression and another to understand a bit of one’s behavior or someone else’s as ‘issuing’ from a resistant *and* an oppressed motivational structure. So, there is an epistemic tendency, unless one has cultivated a resistant multiple interpretive vein, to see behavior as either resistant or oppressed” (Lugones, “Introduction,” 13).



different constructions, different spatialities, is created.”<sup>332</sup> I concur in that I understand states of dynamic disorientation to be creative states that foment a resisting self.

This sense of creativity as a process of resistant metamorphosis is captured by Lugones in her descriptions of the art of curdling. Recall from Chapter Three that curdling is a form of impure separation from oppressive worlds of sense that “may be a haphazard technique of survival as an active subject, or it can become an art of resistance, metamorphosis, transformation.”<sup>333</sup> Lugones claims that curdling within oppressive social worlds can involve engaging in practices such as “elaborate and explicitly marked gender transgression,” and the “playful reinvention of our names for things and people.”<sup>334</sup> Moreover, curdling practices thrive within coalitions because “meaning-making is interactive.”<sup>335</sup> In fact, Lugones insists that the liberatory potential contained in curdling practices, which can develop in their transition from techniques of survival to arts of resistant transformation, can ultimately only be understood and fostered collectively in the formation of alternate socialities. Hence, Lugones concludes that, “unless resistance is a social activity, the resistor is doomed to failure in the creation of a new universe of meaning, a new identity, a *raza mestiza*.”<sup>336</sup> Put simply, just as oppressions are social and intermeshed, so too ought to be our efforts at resistance and liberation.

I approach this final chapter in the same spirit of communal, reflective, and impure activity. Thinking together with Lugones, Wynter, Ahmed, and Anzaldúa about dynamic disorientations as active states of resistant creativity, I read their various examples of

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<sup>332</sup> Lugones, “Introduction,” 17.

<sup>333</sup> Lugones, “Purity, Impurity, and Separation,” 144.

<sup>334</sup> Lugones, “Purity, Impurity, and Separation,” 145.

<sup>335</sup> Lugones, “From Within Germinative Stasis,” 97.

<sup>336</sup> Lugones, “From Within Germinative Stasis,” 97.

situated and embodied creative practices as introducing possibilities for coalitional transformation. My aim in this chapter is to demonstrate that dynamic disorientations can be creative states of metamorphosis. I will show that these creative states happen inbetween oppressing and resisting power relations. It is such states, I contend, that make it possible to inhabit the world as inexhaustible, that is, as a site open to the creation of new possibilities for living beyond those circumscribed by the coloniality of being human.

## 4.2 Autopoietic Discourse in Wynter

In this section, I explain how creativity plays a central role in Wynter's understanding of resisting the ongoing reproduction of colonial genres of being human. As I have done in previous chapters, I read Wynter's epistemic method for a decolonial praxis of being in relation to the lived experience of dynamic disorientation. Building on my account of Wynterian critical proximity to power from Chapter Three, here I link her notions of criticality and autopoietic discourse. In particular, I focus on situating Wynter's ideas about the creation of minority discourses as key movements within her theory of a species-level decolonial emancipation.

Wynter argues in several essays that in order to overcome the coloniality of being human, we must learn how to fundamentally shift our autopoietic praxes so as to neither reproduce *homo oeconomicus* nor introduce a new exclusionary genre or ethnoclass of being.<sup>337</sup> She claims that symbolic and representational discourses about what it means to belong to the "we" of humanity play central parts in both the autopoietic reproduction of our current dominant genre of being and in the enacting of a fundamental shift away from

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<sup>337</sup> See especially Wynter, "The Ceremony Found," "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being," "On Disenchanted Discourse," and "Afterword".

*homo oeconomicus*. In fact, as I explain in detail below, Wynter argues that while dominant discourses work to maintain the hegemony of *homo oeconomicus*, minority discourses have the potential to create a heretical rupture in our current colonial forms of self-understanding. She thus argues that the creation of minority discourses from demonic or marginalized perspectives on dominant power is part of the effort needed to open the space for humanity to liberate itself from the colonality of being human. I therefore present Wynter's theory of minority discourse as an example of how to conceive of resistant creativity as emerging from disorienting states of liminality and critical proximity to power. Wynter's account thus helps to demonstrate that dynamic disorientations are creative in the sense that they can generate practices for transitioning from oppositional relations with oppressive social worlds toward innovative forms of liberatory becoming.

#### **4.2a. Becoming *Homo Narrans* and the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn**

Wynter's ultimate goal in diagnosing the colonality of being human is to reveal the possibility of transforming autopoietic praxis into a means of liberation. She argues that we can "'give humanity a different future' by giving it a new and species-inclusive account" of origin.<sup>338</sup> Wynter conjectures that a species-inclusive origin story, which could serve as the basis for a new and liberatory autopoietic praxis of being, would describe the emergence of *homo narrans* or the human being as self-aware narrator of its own existence. *Homo narrans* is Wynter's non-exclusivist answer to the question of who and what we are as human beings.<sup>339</sup> She thus contrasts *homo narrans* with colonial ethnoclasses of being human, like *homo oeconomicus*, which are defined in accordance with exclusionary

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<sup>338</sup> McKittrick and Wynter, 72-73.

<sup>339</sup> McKittrick and Wynter, 63-65.

descriptive statements that follow binary and hierarchical sociogenic symbolic codes of implementation, such as selected/dysselected. By contrast, *homo narrans* names the promise of a future ability to “*both consciously and communally* re-create ourselves in ecumenically interaltruistically kin-recognizing *species-oriented* terms.”<sup>340</sup> In other words, *homo narrans* operates as a kind of placeholder in Wynter’s thought. It holds open the promise, in advance, of our being capable of creatively transforming ourselves into members of a universally liberated form of humanity. *Homo narrans* is therefore not another genre of being human. It specifically names the ecumenical, or universally inclusive, autopoietic praxis of being human in accordance with terms that we have yet to collectively define.

As I understand Wynter’s work, the liberatory promise of becoming *homo narrans* in the future relies on the production of two simultaneous forms of decolonial resistance in the present: (1) epistemic delinking from colonial symbolic logics, and (2) the achievement of a species-level awareness of the processes of human autopoiesis. Wynter argues that if human beings were eventually to collectively take up both praxes of resistance, then this would create the conditions for *homo narrans* to emerge. Put differently, these two forms of resistance help create the conditions for humanity to reinvent itself in directions that would no longer be defined in advance by colonial logics of domination.<sup>341</sup> In this section, I

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<sup>340</sup> McKittrick and Wynter, 62.

<sup>341</sup> This is the ultimate hope expressed in the conclusion of “The Ceremony Found,” where Wynter envisions a future where “we no longer need illusions – such as those which now *inter alia* threaten the livability of our species’ planetary habitat – in order to now remake, consciously and collectively, the new society in which our new existential referent ‘we [...] in the horizon of humanity’ will *all* now live” (245). An analysis of Wynter’s ideas about collective practice and the politics of resistance would be outside the scope of this project. It is important to note, however, that while Wynter hopes for a species-level emancipatory reimagination of the human, she is equally insistent that the kinds of counter-narratives

focus on how both forms of resistant praxis, epistemic delinking and the development of a species-level awareness, relate to Wynter's notion of liberation from the coloniality of being human before turning in the next section to explain the role she gives to the creation of minority discourses in these praxes.

The Autopoietic Turn/Overturn is what Wynter terms the epochal shift out of the coloniality of being human and toward a full, ecumenical, species embrace of becoming *homo narrans*. I read it as a projected goal that guides Wynter's understanding of resistance in the present. Achieving the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn, Wynter argues, would mean that human beings have developed an innovative sense of autopoietic agency to replace the agency we exercise as we reproduce the coloniality of being human. As I explained in Chapter One, Wynter believes that since the birth of human self-consciousness an "*implementing bios* agency of the human brain" has functioned in accordance with two sets of instructions, one genetic and one sociocultural, to create the human being as a hybrid ontogenic-sociogenic living system of autopoietic relations.<sup>342</sup> Specifically, this implementing bios agency operates in accordance with a genetically programmed "first set of instructions", but does so in part to "neurochemically implement the 'second set of instructions'," i.e. the symbolic codes of life and death contained in our "nongenetically charted origin stories and myths."<sup>343</sup> Thus, to summarize, Wynter views humans as storytelling beings whose eusocial systems of inclusion and exclusion are implemented both genetically and socially, and this implementation has an agency that operates

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and counter-poetics necessary to begin such a transformation can only emerge from marginalized perspectives. In my treatment of Wynter, I am focused on understanding the conditions of that emergence.

<sup>342</sup> McKittrick and Wynter, 27.

<sup>343</sup> McKittrick and Wynter, 27.

according to regulatory laws of autopoietic institution that maintain each of us, and the genre-specific groups we belong to, within a cultural form of homeostasis.

The problem with the current manifestation of our autopoietic system, as she diagnoses it, is twofold. First, our autopoietic praxes reproduce a colonial genre of being human that divides humanity into privileged and oppressed social groups. Second, possibilities for overturning these divisions are seemingly unimaginable because the underlying laws defining how we practice our instituting agency are normally occluded from our view. Wynter therefore argues that to stop replicating colonial genres of being it must be the case that, “these laws, for the first time in our species’ history, be no longer allowed to function *outside of our conscious awareness*.”<sup>344</sup> Concurrently, we must also epistemically delink from the descriptive statement that defines our colonial genre of being through critique and the creation of alternative narratives about what it means to be a human being. Wynter maintains that both practices will create the necessary conditions for the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn, where after humanity can institute an emancipatory form of becoming *homo narrans*, and do so without also imposing a specific and exclusionary genre of being human.

As I have argued previously, Wynter maintains that all human autopoiesis occurs in relation to descriptive statements defined by symbolic codes of life and death, and which are justified through origin narratives attributed to extra-human powers. In her account, these elements work together to create “a genre-specific autopoietic field” of meaning for human existence.<sup>345</sup> She argues that in order bring about the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn, we must first find methods for revealing that the terms currently defining our own genre-

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<sup>344</sup> McKittrick and Wynter, 28.

<sup>345</sup> McKittrick and Wynter, 30.

specific field are, in fact, elaborate fictions.<sup>346</sup> Wynter suggests that to break free from our genre-specific autopoietic field we need to “disenchant” dominant discourses about what it means to be a human being, which will also help us to become consciously aware of our role in narrating the terms of our own existence. We can see the operation of these two syncretic and recurrent forms of resistant praxis in passages like this one from “The Ceremony Found”:

On the basis of a proposed new and now meta-biocentric order of knowledge/episteme and its correlated emancipatory view of who-we-are as humans, we can become, for the first time in our species’ existence, now fully conscious agents in the autopoietic institution and reproduction of a *new* kind of planetarily extended cum ‘intercommunal’ community.<sup>347</sup>

In other words, the possibility of becoming liberated from the colonality of being human arises on the basis of both a new episteme and a correlated new self-conscious awareness of who and what we are. These practices of resistance will create the possibility of becoming *homo narrans* as a liberatory, rather than oppressive, praxis of being human.<sup>348</sup>

There are important parallels between Wynter’s and Lugones’ understandings of decolonial resistance as they both inform my account of dynamic disorientation. They claim that resistance requires developing a critical awareness of the workings of oppressive social worlds that can uncover what is normally hidden from view. In other words, as I have argued, they both insist on the resistant knowledge-producing capabilities that can develop when one takes up a critical proximity to power from within liminal spaces and

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<sup>346</sup> “Wynter suggests that if we accept that epistemology gives us the *principles and rules of knowing* through which the Human and Humanity are understood, we are trapped in a knowledge system that fails to notice that the stories of what it means to be Human – specifically origin stories that explain who/what we are – are, in fact, narratively constructed” (Mignolo, 107).

<sup>347</sup> Wynter, “The Ceremony Found,” 194.

<sup>348</sup> See Wynter, “On Disenchanting Discourse”.

states on the margins of oppressive social worlds. They also both point to the need for collective and communal practices of resistance to colonial power. Wynter's explanation of decolonial epistemic delinking from the descriptive statement upholding *homo oeconomicus* makes this need especially apparent.

#### **4.2b. Minority Discourse**

Wynter claims that the arrival of a new and decolonial episteme will come as a result of pluralist critical practices of delinking from the processes of reproduction for the “replicator code of *symbolic life/death*” that defines our global, late capitalist, white supremacist culture.<sup>349</sup> Crucial for my purposes here, she argues that the creative production of minority discourses from demonic grounds must play an essential role in causing a radical epistemic rupture from colonial knowledges. Demonic grounds, as I explained in Chapter Three, are constructed, liminal social spaces where oppressed peoples have developed critical perspectives on colonial power and logics. Wynter argues that learning how to speak from within a demonic ground, for example, as when she writes about feminism from the specific perspective of Black womanhood, unsilences voices that threaten the coherence of *homo oeconomicus*' descriptive statement of what it means to be a human being. She therefore argues that the critical and marginalized perspectives developed within demonic grounds have the potential to be “an alternative source of an alternative system of meanings” that can rupture the colonality of being human today.<sup>350</sup>

The resistance offered from demonic grounds remains situated in marginalized lived experience at the same time as it opens possibilities for all subjects for transcending

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<sup>349</sup> McKittrick and Wynter, 30.

<sup>350</sup> Wynter, “Beyond Miranda's Meanings,” 360.



current concepts of subjectivity and embodiment as these are circumscribed by a colonial episteme. Weheliye explains, therefore, that, “Wynter is interested in human trouble rather than ‘merely’ woman-of-color trouble, even while she deploys the liminal perspective of women of color to imagine humanity otherwise.”<sup>351</sup> Demonic grounds are thus for Wynter the disorienting birthplaces of new discourses; they provide alternative frames of reference that offer heretical vantage points on the autopoietic reproduction of a colonial genre of being human. Moreover, the minority discourses created from demonic grounds can assert forms of being and knowing in opposition to their relegated status of symbolic death. They thereby contain the potential to rupture and disenchant dominant and privileged discourses of colonial racism, sexism, and classism.<sup>352</sup>

As I explained in Chapter Three, resistant critique for Wynter begins with the ability to give content to new descriptive statements specific to our hybrid existence from the perspective of demonic grounds. Minority discourse, which she defines as “the practice of narratively-experientially-empirically-neurologically knowing and telling our worlds,” are creative practices that can develop this new content.<sup>353</sup> Minority discourses parse situated and subjective experiences of liminality as objective content for revealing and dismantling the operation of the colonality of being human through the hegemonic overrepresentation of *homo oeconomicus* as humankind. Hence, Wynter’s notion of resistance thus

“disentangles Man [*homo oeconomicus*] from the human in order to use the space of

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<sup>351</sup> Weheliye, 22.

<sup>352</sup> Wynter, “Afterword,” 365-366. McKittrick explains: “Across her creative texts and her essays, Wynter demonstrates the ways in which a new, revalorized perspective emerges from the ex-slave archipelago and that this worldview, engendered both across and outside a colonial frame, holds in it the possibility of undoing and unsettling – *not replacing or occupying* – Western conceptions of what it means to be human” (McKittrick, “Introduction,” 2).

<sup>353</sup> McKittrick and Wynter, 70.

subjects placed beyond the grasp of this domain as a vital point from which to invent hitherto unavailable genres of the human.”<sup>354</sup>

To disenchant the dominant discourse that currently reproduces *homo oeconomicus*, minority discourses must be heretical, that is, they must refuse to operate in accordance with dominant logics. Specifically, Wynter claims that creating minority discourses expresses the refusal to abide by the terms of *homo oeconomicus*’ well-functioning system of symbolic life/death, which deploys binary racial, gender, and class hierarchies to enforce its hegemony.<sup>355</sup> Furthermore, she believes this kind of epistemic disobedience is only possible from learning to dwell within the liminal and critical perspectives afforded by demonic grounds. In my terms, then, minority discourses are created within states of dynamic disorientation – states defined by existential liminality, critical proximity to power, and affective disinvestments from dominant social worlds. As disoriented and disorienting, heretical minority discourses are resistant because they work to unconceal the autopoietic function of dominant discourses and can also provide alternative narratives about what it means to be a human being.

Wynter claims that minority narratives can create regulatory criteria for being human that not only erase the colonial selected/dysselected criteria of belonging to *homo oeconomicus*, but that replace this criteria with an utterly transformed notion of the praxis of being human. In order to radically rupture our current colonial order, Wynter insists

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<sup>354</sup> Weheliye, 24.

<sup>355</sup> Hence, Wynter explains, “In order to call in question this ontologically subordinated function, ‘minority discourse’ can *not* be merely another voice in the present ongoing conversation or order of discourse generated from our present episteme” (Wynter, “On Disenchanting Discourse, 233). Similarly, she writes, “For it is precisely as such liminal subjects, able to experience to varying degrees the injustices ‘*inherent in structure*,’ that we are able [...] to ‘disenchant’ our fellow systemic subjects from the ‘structure’s categories and prescriptions” (Wynter, “On Disenchanting Discourse,” 236).

that minority discourse act as “an opening onto new cultural forms in the context of a post-Industrial, post-Western and truly global civilization.”<sup>356</sup> Thus, there are two forms that minority discourse can take in the struggle to break free from the coloniality of being human. It can be a “new movement of ‘counter-exertion’” that disenchants dominant representational narratives, for example, minority critiques of sexist and racist stereotypes. Minority discourse can also positively describe alternative modalities of being, such as narratives that celebrate and detail the diverse lived experiences of Black womanhood outside of the racist and sexist terms used by dominant discourses.<sup>357</sup> In both functions – as critical and as innovative – Wynter insists that minority discourse must maintain its liminality and its critical proximity to power, or in my terms must remain dynamically disoriented and disorienting, to resist inserting itself into the dominant position.<sup>358</sup>

Wynter attempts to perform this dual function with her own writing of a minority discourse about what it means to be a human being. Indeed, one can look to her creative writing, her plays and novel, as examples of minority discourse that both disenchant dominant representations of what it means to be human and also creatively suggest innovative ways of being.<sup>359</sup> But, I suggest, we can also look to her analytical essays for

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<sup>356</sup> Wynter, “On Disenchanting Discourse,” 234.

<sup>357</sup> Wynter, “On Disenchanting Discourse,” 234.

<sup>358</sup> See Wynter, “On Disenchanting Discourse,” 236f. For example, she claims, “For the role of a minority discourse which sees itself as a utopian discourse, in Ricoeur’s sense, the kind of new discourse that can only be generated from groups who accept their liminality to the systemically functioning order, would be given up if we accepted our role as that of constituting just another ‘true’ discourse. Indeed the ‘Beyond’ of my title is intended to suggest that we need to begin our praxis by casting a critical eye on the systemic-functional role that the permitted incorporation of such a projected *true* discourse is intended to play, and the price at the level of emancipatory knowledge that would have to be paid for our newly licensed functioning within the present organization of rational knowledge” (237-8).

<sup>359</sup> An analysis of Wynter’s creative writing is outside the scope of this project. For further reading see Wynter, “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” *Savacou* 5 (1971): 95-102;

examples of minority discourse. For instance in “On Disenchanted Discourse” Wynter does more than outline her conceptual understanding of narrative disenchantment as a praxis of resistance, she also enacts that praxis in lengthy accounts of how Black literary works, like Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, diminish and erase the figure of Man or *homo oeconomicus*, in this case by disenchanting the white, western novel as the dominant literary form that expresses human existential experience.<sup>360</sup> Wynter, like Ahmed and Anzaldúa as we will see below, therefore both provides a conceptual theory of creativity as resistance and enacts it in her own work.

In fact, I suggest we can read Wynter’s theorizing of the Autopoietic Turn/Overtown toward becoming *homo narrans* as a paradigmatic example of heretical minority discourse. In “The Ceremony Found,” she argues that in order to enact an epochal shift in the autopoietic praxis of being human, an entirely new order of cognition would have to be posited, just as she claims was done in the previous epochal shift that brought us into the colonality of being human and instituted first *homo politicus* and then *homo oeconomicus*. Hence, Wynter conjectures, “to re-enact the above heresy completely [...] would have therefore called for me to project an analogical yet entirely new answer to the question of who-we-are.”<sup>361</sup> While Wynter cannot accomplish the enactment of this epochal heresy alone, she has narrated its emergence as the Autopoietic Turn/Overtown toward *homo*

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Carole Boyce Davies, “From Masquerade to *Maskerade*: Caribbean Cultural Resistance and the Rehumanizing Project,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, 203-225, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Norval Edwards, “‘Talking About a Little Culture’: Sylvia Wynter’s Early Essays,” *Journal of West Indian Literature* 10, no. 1/2 (November 2001): 12-38; Imani D. Owens, “Toward a ‘Truly Indigenous Theatre’: Sylvia Wynter Adapts Federico García Lorca,” *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (January 2017): 49-67; and, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, “Sense of Things,” *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 2, no. 2 (2016): 1-48.

<sup>360</sup> Wynter analyzes Ellison’s novel in “On Disenchanted Discourse,” 215-244.

<sup>361</sup> Wynter, “The Ceremony Found,” 191.

*narrans* in her essays. Thus, we can read her writing as an example of minority discourse, one that is created from within a disorienting demonic ground, that narrates an alternative origin story, and that thereby creates an opening for a larger and more radical transformation of human autopoietic praxis.

In sum, Wynter believes that heretical minority discourses have the potential to create new possibilities for understanding what it means to be human outside of the descriptive statements and governing codes of *homo oeconomicus*. Minority discourse therefore plays a central role in setting humanity on the path toward realizing the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn, which Wynter makes clear when she states that, “the unifying goal of *minority* discourse [...] will necessarily be to accelerate the conceptual ‘erasing’ of the figure of Man [*homo oeconomicus*].”<sup>362</sup> While we are still mired within the colonality of being human, the creation of minority discourses is a form of decolonial resistance on the way toward Wynter’s ultimate vision of full species-liberation. With minority discourse, then, she offers an example of how to read the creative and liberatory potential of inhabiting a liminal and critical relation with oppressive social worlds. In other words, she helps demonstrate my claim that dwelling within dynamic disorientation can create new and innovative capacities for action.

### **4.3 Queer Invention in Ahmed**

Much like Wynter, Ahmed argues that possibilities for new and liberatory forms of life can emerge from the margins of colonial definitions of humanity. As we saw in previous chapters, Ahmed argues that members of colonial modernity inherit racist and heterosexist orientations toward the world, which are instantiated in the lived body’s spatiotemporal

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<sup>362</sup> Wynter, “On Disenchanted Discourse,” 208-209.

and affective relations. These inheritances are normatively restrictive and homogenizing. They demand a strict adherence to the current norm, which is enabling for socially privileged white, male, and heterosexual body-subjects who can maintain their power through resemblance to the norm, and is disabling for non-white, non-male, and queer socially marginalized body-subjects who are open to sanctions and policing for their deviations. I argued previously that Ahmed is particularly interested in theorizing how radical forms of resistance can emerge from breaking points. Here, I explore how she imagines possibilities for resistant invention are generated by queer body-subjects being dynamically disoriented within white, heterosexist social worlds. Ahmed links disinvesting in coloniality with resistance, and like Wynter and Lugones, she therefore conceives of resisting as a praxis that remains dynamically related to oppressing power, while also anticipating the invention of new possibilities for liberation.

At the end of *Queer Phenomenology*, having argued that the overwhelming character of the normative relation between perception, action, and direction is one of compulsion toward the status quo, Ahmed expresses her desire for new paths to emerge from out of the disruption and breakdown of these normatively oriented relations between bodies, objects, and spaces of enactment. She writes:

When bodies take up spaces that they were not intended to inhabit, something other than the reproduction of the facts of the matter happens. The hope that reproduction fails is the hope for new impressions, for new lines to emerge, new objects, or even new bodies [...] The 'new' is what is possible when what is behind us, our background, does not simply ground us or keep us in place, but allows us to move and allows us to follow something other than the lines that we have already taken.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 62-63.

In this passage I read a description of being dynamically disoriented within dominant social worlds as the possibility to disrupt our role in the reproduction of the same. As I argued in Chapter Three, Ahmed gives us reasons to believe that affects can encourage us to dwell in states of dynamic disorientation. Here we can see that she thinks disorientation can transform into a ground for introducing difference and invention into the worlds we inhabit. As in *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed argues similarly in her essay “Mixed Orientations” that “the failure of inheritance does not mean we have nothing to follow, but can open up worlds by providing a different angle on ‘what’ is inherited.”<sup>364</sup> In *Living a Feminist Life*, we again hear a similar refrain when she quotes Marilyn Frye in *Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism, 1976-1972*, stating: “The willful creation of new meaning, new loci of meaning, and new ways of being, together, in the world, seems to me in these mortally dangerous times the best hope we have.”<sup>365</sup> In these passages and others like them, Ahmed remarks on the possibilities of radical and resistant invention that can emerge from dwelling in states of dynamic disorientation that allow the marginalized to invent practices for breaking free from reproducing the colonial status quo.

#### 4.3a. Queer Failure

There is an intimacy between being oppositional and being creative in Ahmed’s work that becomes apparent in her theorizing queer life as a life defined by normative failures. For instance, in *Living a Feminist Life*, speaking on behalf of lesbian feminists like herself, she writes: “when a world does not give us standing, we have to create other ways

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<sup>364</sup> Ahmed, “Mixed Orientations,” 101.

<sup>365</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 223.

of being in the world. You acquire the potential to make things, create things.”<sup>366</sup> In a way that recalls my reading of the links between liminality, criticality, and creativity in Wynter, Ahmed argues that the queer ability to create new possibilities for living emerges in concert with the inhabitation of a marginalized *and* critical stance against oppressive social worlds. Put differently, the becoming of a resistant queer subject reveals the ways in which dynamic disorientations are openings unto different, and potentially liberatory, ways of life. Thus, Ahmed understands resistant creativity as a force for dissent, for destruction, and at the same time, as a force to build new queer communities, which we can hear in statements like, “you can be assembled by what support you refuse to give.”<sup>367</sup> Because the ability to create comes from the inability or failure to reproduce normative ways of life, this creativity is a hybrid destruction-productive force that is characterized by the persistence to live in defiance of normative violence and erasure. Queer failure thus plays a central part in Ahmed’s understanding of resistant creativity, hope, and possibilities for liberation.

For Ahmed, converting failure into dissent through invention is how one becomes a resisting subject. While she writes about concerted efforts to do feminist and queer resistance work within institutions, such as her examinations of diversity work in the University, the notion of resistant creativity that I read in Ahmed most often appeals to everyday queer life as the primary site of failure and invention. As we saw in Chapter Three, to persist in being queer in a heterosexist world means for Ahmed that one is disoriented and creates disorientations in others. I suggest that these disorientations are dynamic when they open the space for new possibilities for living otherwise. Ahmed explains this connection when she writes:

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<sup>366</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 223.

<sup>367</sup> Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 199.



Disturbance can be creative [...] disturbance as what is created by the very effort of reaching, of reaching up, of reaching out, of reaching for something that is not present, something that appears only as a shimmer, a horizon of possibility. When the arms refuse to support and carry, they reach. We do not know what the arms can reach.<sup>368</sup>

In this poetic passage we hear the connection she draws between queer failure as the inability to reproduce heterosexist ways of life, the refusal to do so, and the new possibilities for invention (“reaching for something that is not present”) that are thereby created. We can also note the open-endedness of queer invention as that which we cannot know in advance, which again echoes Wynter and her thoughts on the open becoming of *homo narrans*. For Ahmed, the normative failures of queer life can break open the status quo and create space for something new to emerge, but cannot decide what is to come. Indeed, both Wynter and Ahmed give me reason to emphasize that states of dynamic disorientation can produce resistant praxes specifically in their ability to create possibilities for inhabiting the world as inexhaustibly given. Resistance can exist precisely in the opening of possibilities for innovative and new ways of living.

Reading queer failure as potentially creative is thus the crux of Ahmed’s conception of liberatory possibility. She gives us reason to see embracing queer failure as dynamically disorienting as a condition of becoming queer in a liberatory sense. Yet not all queer people live lives that open creative possibilities, though all queer people may be disoriented and cause disorientations in others. Resistant creativity is a potential for queer life, but is not a guarantee; queer life is also never free from the risks and harms of living against the grain of society. As reflected in Lugones’ concept of “being oppressed/oppressing < -- > resisting,” the resisting potential of queerness cannot be neatly separated from oppression.

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<sup>368</sup> Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 204.

Nor is it a guarantee of not oppressing others. Nonetheless, resolute in the face of these dangers, Ahmed argues that to resist and to generate hope for liberation means dwelling in queerness as inventive, or in the terms I have developed, dwelling in ontological disorientations as dynamic. Ahmed concedes that this dwelling can be uncomfortable, but insists that it also has the potential to be exciting and liberating. Anzaldúa, as I will show below, takes a similar approach in emphasizing the ambiguous lived experience of dwelling in dynamic disorientation as a creative space.

There is also a tension in Ahmed's work about what this dwelling would entail. On the one hand, she is clear that queer life, in an everyday sense, contains the potential for radical resistance because there are possibilities to convert failures into creativity. Hence, she states in passages like this one: "To aspire is to breathe. With breath comes imagination. With breath comes possibility."<sup>369</sup> On the other hand, Ahmed often frames queer invention as work that one needs to engage in with willful intention. For instance, in *Willful Subjects* she writes, "To create room means we still have to fight for preservation; we have to fight for life; we might have to become willful to keep going."<sup>370</sup> Thus, while she is clear that queer failure can be translated into creative resistance, she is less clear about how and when this translation might occur.

I find it illustrative to look closer at how Ahmed understands queer failure as the failure to inherit a white, heterosexist form of life in order to get a better view of her notion of resistant creativity. Ahmed reads being queer as living a life defined by the failure to take up the benefits of familial inheritance. As a queer daughter, she does not accept "the heterosexual gift" of the family line, which she argues, "demand[s] a return" through its

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<sup>369</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 221.

<sup>370</sup> Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 194.

“invitation to reproduce that line, to become another point.”<sup>371</sup> Of course the gift of inheritance offered by heterosexism, or by white supremacy, is a gift that queer and mixed race subjects like her cannot help but refuse. The ambiguity between failure and refusal here is intentional; Ahmed pushes queer subjects to transform the failure of inheritance to a refusal of inheritance. By doing so, I believe, she suggests a contrast between queerness as inert and queerness as dynamic. We can also read this contrast as one between a form of queer failure as stasis – as being blocked, made invisible, denied, thwarted – and a form of queer failure as movement and becoming. Thus, much like Lugones describes the distinction between viewing marginalized lives from within dominant logics and from within resistant logics, Ahmed concedes that queer failure is both inert and dynamic at the same time. Using the language I developed in Chapter Two, we could argue that the queer subject inhabits an ‘I cannot’ body from the perspective of heterosexist social worlds,<sup>372</sup> but has the potential to be viewed as an ‘I can’ body when it is read within a queer logic that locates meaning and value precisely in the inability to reproduce white, heterosexist social worlds. In this latter sense, the queer body-subject can become a profoundly capable subject when they dwell within the dynamic disorientations of queer life in order to create and invent rather than reproduce what already is.

Thus, because Ahmed defines being queer as inhabiting a body that “no longer extends the space or even the skin of the social,” she rethinks bodily immobility and

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<sup>371</sup> Ahmed, “Mixed Orientations,” 99.

<sup>372</sup> For example, Ahmed writes: “The queer body becomes from this viewing point a ‘failed orientation’: the queer body does not extend into such space, as that space extends the form of the heterosexual couple. The queer couple in straight space hence look as if they are ‘slanting’ or are oblique” (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 92).

inability as nonetheless, in fact as potentially defiantly, productive.<sup>373</sup> Holding up her own lesbian, feminist, and mixed race life as example, she asserts, “the ‘negated’ life still gets us somewhere, through the very turn towards others who are also seen as outside the contours of a good life.”<sup>374</sup> Ahmed, like Lugones and Wynter above, argues that resistant creativity must aim toward collective work (“the very turn towards others”) and in particular, at building the means for such collective work to continue and to thrive. In fact, for queer body-subjects to sustain dynamic disorientation as a state of being creative, queerness must become the ground from which queer subjects reciprocally relate to social worlds. The ability for queerness, in the sense of being disoriented from dominant social worlds, to act as ground for action and meaning-making is the ultimate expression of queer creative resistance for Ahmed. She argues, “disorientation happens when the ground no longer supports an action,” by contrast then, “it is not only that queer surfaces support action, but also that the action they support involves shifting grounds, or even clearing a new ground, which allows us to tread a different path.”<sup>375</sup> Queer grounds, surfaces, and spaces are all potential collective creations by those subjects who can turn queer failure into invention.

#### **4.3b. Becoming Lesbian/Queer Disinheritances**

Ahmed believes that queer disorientations could thus create their own alternate genealogies of inheritance and reproduction. “The task,” of theorizing resistance and liberation, “is to trace the lines for a different genealogy, one that would embrace the failure to inherit the family line as the condition of possibility for another way of dwelling

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<sup>373</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 102.

<sup>374</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 105.

<sup>375</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 170.

in the world.”<sup>376</sup> Without supplying the content for these other ways of dwelling, Ahmed views queerness as the potential to open space, to create possibilities, to invent new meaning, in such a way that the deprivation of meaning and significance visited on queer subjects by heterosexist social worlds “would not be livable simply as loss but as the potential for new lines, or for new lines to gather as expressions that we do not yet know how to read.”<sup>377</sup> Rather than outlining specific practices, though one could read her reflections on diversity work in universities and other institutions in this way, Ahmed instead writes about creativity and resistant disorientations as a matter of redirecting one’s effort and energy. To embrace the resistant and creative potential of being queer would therefore mean to find and invent methods for directing your energy toward alternative ways of life.

For example, in *Queer Phenomenology* Ahmed writes about her experience of becoming lesbian in the sense that she made consistent efforts to inhabit her sexuality by refusing the heterosexist norms she was raised within. Becoming lesbian therefore entails more than just recognizing her sexual desires for women, it involves shifting her bodily habits and modalities of being toward the world. She explains, “to move one’s sexual orientation from straight to lesbian, for example, requires reinhabiting one’s body, given that one’s body no longer extends the space or even the skin of the social.”<sup>378</sup> This transition affects how she is able to be in her body as the power to act and move in a world; she becomes disoriented from heterosexist social worlds. Ahmed continues, “This is not to say that moving one’s sexual orientation means that we ‘transcend’ or break with our

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<sup>376</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 178.

<sup>377</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 171.

<sup>378</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 101.

histories: it is to say that a shift in sexual orientation is not livable simply as a continuation of an old line, as such orientations affect other things that bodies do.”<sup>379</sup> Becoming lesbian therefore means finding methods for dwelling within ontological disorientations such as the forms of affective disinvestments that I discussed in Chapter Three.

Conceiving of becoming lesbian as a creative state of dynamic disorientation, allows us to rethink the capability, motility, and spatiality of the queer body. Indeed, Ahmed argues, “Lesbian desire can be rethought as a space for action, a way of extending differently into space through tending toward ‘other women’. This makes ‘becoming lesbian’ a very social experience and allows us to rethink desire as a form of action that shapes bodies and worlds.”<sup>380</sup> In becoming disinvested from heterosexual desire *and* the familial and social inheritances it helps orients the body-subject toward, the lesbian subject is no longer oriented toward the kinds of tasks, projects, institutions, and even objects, defining normative life. Ahmed argues that this means becoming lesbian is at once oppressing and productive in opening fertile spaces for invention. These spaces are often fragile and fleeting, but Ahmed insists that this too is a potentially desirable characteristic of queer life that can encourage resistant creativity.<sup>381</sup> For instance, we might think of the fragility of queer spaces as resisting stasis and rigidity. In this sense, “lesbian desires create spaces,” that can allow for differences to proliferate specifically because they “don’t easily accumulate as lines” to inherit and replicate.<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 102.

<sup>380</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 102.

<sup>381</sup> “To leave heterosexuality can be to leave those institutional forms of protecting, cherishing, holding. When things break, your whole life can then unravel. So much feminist and queer invention comes from the necessity of creating our own support systems” (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 219).

<sup>382</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 106.

### 4.3c. Creativity and Survival

Ahmed therefore encourages us to conceive of creativity as a force that opposes the replication of the same. Moreover, she argues that creativity is thus a matter of survival for queer subjects who must find ways to invent selves and social worlds outside of the oppressive and rigid terms of white, heterosexism. For Ahmed, resistant creativity can be found in the everyday efforts involved in living a queer life where one works at building a sense of self or community that is not dependent on dominant constructions of meaning. We can conclude that she views the possibility for resistant creativity as already here and immanent within queer life.

I read Ahmed's notion of resistant creativity as transforming the meaning of survival from a term that describes finding ways to tolerate or even mitigate oppressions to a sense of survival as productive, communal, joyful, and inventive. Indeed, as Ahmed claims, "survival can also be about keeping one's hopes alive; holding on to the projects that are projects insofar as they have yet to be realized."<sup>383</sup> Moreover, she continues, "when you are not supposed to live, as you are, where you are, with whom you are with, then survival is a radical action [...] some of us have to be inventive."<sup>384</sup> Queer resistance, then, is for Ahmed characterized by the effort to invent conditions of livability for non-normative lives.<sup>385</sup> Ahmed contrasts this notion of resistant survival with a neoliberal focus on resilience, which she argues can be a way of conditioning the already marginalized to take on more oppression, more violence, and more work as the effort needed to remain within shared social worlds. This contrast points to the specificity of understanding dynamic

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<sup>383</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 235.

<sup>384</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 237.

<sup>385</sup> See Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 177-178 for more on how creativity and survival connect with Ahmed's ideas about queer politics.

disorientations as states of the ongoing metamorphosis from an oppressed/oppressing self toward a resisting self. While it is the case that dwelling in dynamic disorientation takes effort, this effort is directed toward radical social change. Dynamic disorientations are achievements that require the effort to inhabit a liminal state, to develop a critical proximity to power, and therein to find ways of delinking from or breaking with oppressive social worlds enough to help sustain the conditions for resistant creativity to flourish.

#### **4.4 Artistic Practice in Anzaldúa**

Anzaldúa provides us with another theory of creativity that focuses on the metamorphosis of a resisting self from within conditions of oppression. Like Ahmed and Wynter, her notion of artistic practice theorizes the emergence of resistant forms of creativity from within liminal states and spaces on the margins of oppressive social worlds. In fact, both Anzaldúa and Wynter argue that it is through forms of heretical artistic practice, especially writing, that marginalized peoples have the power to imagine and invent their own conditions of livability beyond those circumscribed by colonial logics. While for Wynter heretical minority discourses are the poietic force behind large-scale epistemic ruptures, Anzaldúa's theory of writing as a form of resistance is self-reflective and focuses on smaller-scale personal and community transformations. It follows the form of writing she terms *autohistoria-teoría* or "a personal essay that theorizes" directly from experiences of critical self-reflection.<sup>386</sup> Anzaldúa writes about her own lived experience as well as myth, art, fiction, and history in order to theorize the awakening of a resisting self who is willing to endure the difficult process of developing a critical awareness, or *conocimiento*, of what Lugones calls oppressing/being oppressed < -- > resisting relations

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<sup>386</sup> Anzaldúa, *Light in the Darkness/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 238n14.



of power. For Anzaldúa, writing is part of the struggle to transform into a nepantlera or one who is capable of actively resisting the fragmentation caused by inhabiting racist, heterosexist, colonial worlds of sense.<sup>387</sup>

In this section, I demonstrate how Anzaldúa's theory of writing illuminates my understanding of the role of creativity in states of dynamic disorientation. I explore her descriptions of writing as a form of "border arte" performed by nepantleras who actively inhabit nepantla states that are characterized by existential liminality and a critical proximity to power. Border arte writing is grounded in the lived experience of dwelling in disorienting states in ways that break with dominant worlds and innovate new possibilities for living. As such, I read it as another example, alongside Wynter's minority discourse and Ahmed's queer invention, of the power of states of dynamic disorientation to transform the oppressing relations between marginalized subjects and colonial social worlds into resisting ones. This transformation happens through the becoming of a resisting self, that is, one capable of inhabiting worlds as incompletely given realities that are open to the institution of new possibilities. For Anzaldúa, the border arte writing of nepantleras expresses this power to shift self and shift realities.

#### **4.4a. Becoming Nepantlera**

Anzaldúa believes that writing is a thoroughly embodied practice. She describes it as a "gesture of the body" wherein "the body responds physically, emotionally, and intellectually to external and internal stimuli, and writing records, orders, and theorizes

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<sup>387</sup> Anzaldúa, "Border Arte: Nepantla, el Lugar de la Frontera," in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009): 176-186.

about these responses.”<sup>388</sup> Much like Wynter, Anzaldúa claims that engaging the imagination in artistic practices like writing can do the actual work of transforming the self and shifting social realities.<sup>389</sup> Keating explains, “Anzaldúan aesthetics enables writers and other artists to enact, materialize, and in other ways concretize transformation.”<sup>390</sup> Anzaldúa describes resistant becoming as the writing of new subjectivities into existence through critical self-reflection, imaginative storytelling, mythmaking, and other practices of autohistoria-teoría.<sup>391</sup> In order to engage in these artistic practices of self re-creation, however, one must be willing to enter disorienting states of being en nepantla and dwell within them as transformative, or as dynamic, states of becoming.

In the previous chapter I introduced Anzaldúa’s argument that inhabiting liminal states between dominant worlds of sense, viz., intersticios or nepantlas, can awaken a resisting self and provide the conditions for radical transformations to occur. In *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro* Anzaldúa explains further:

Nepantla is the place where my cultural and personal codes clash, where I come up against the world’s dictates, where these different worlds coalesce in my writing. I am conscious of various nepantlas— linguistic, geographical, gender, sexual, historical, cultural, political, social— when I write. Nepantla is the point of contact y el lugar between worlds— between imagination and physical existence, between ordinary and nonordinary (spirit) realities.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 5.

<sup>389</sup> “The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 109).

<sup>390</sup> Keating, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, xxxi-xxxiii.

<sup>391</sup> “You turn the established narrative on its head, seeing through, resisting, and subverting its assumptions. Again, it’s not enough to denounce the culture’s old account – you must provide new narratives that embody alternative potentials. You’re sure of one thing: the consciousness that’s created our social ills (dualistic and misogynist) cannot solve them – we need a more expansive conocimiento. The new stories must partially come from outside the system of ruling powers” (Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 140).

<sup>392</sup> Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 2.

Being in liminal nepantlas, therefore, allows Anzaldúa to access the dynamic power of being disoriented within oppressive social worlds, which she understands to produce imaginal resources for her writing as a praxis of resistance. She describes the experience of being in nepantla as chaotic, confusing, and painful. Yet, like Ahmed, Anzaldúa believes that it is possible for breaking points to become the starting points of radical transformation. It is thus from within the confusion of nepantla that Anzaldúa also locates the possibility of changing perspectives, transforming knowledges, and recreating realities.<sup>393</sup> In order for nepantlas to not persist in only being states of fragmentation and inaction and to instead become dynamic grounds for our resistant becoming, Anzaldúa claims we must learn from the guidance of nepantleras who are “artistas/activistas” that can mediate transformations from oppressing to resisting selves.<sup>394</sup>

Like Ahmed’s notion of becoming lesbian and Lugones’ becoming an active subject, becoming a nepantlera means learning to dynamically dwell within ambiguities. Keating explains that being en nepantla includes the potential for “both radical dis-identification and transformation. We dis-identify with existing beliefs, social structures, and models of identity; by so doing, we are able to transform these existing conditions.”<sup>395</sup> Anzaldúa, again like Ahmed, connects this experience directly with disorientation. In “Border Arte: Nepantla, el Lugar de la Frontera,” she states that rather than seeing orientation as

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<sup>393</sup> “En este lugar we fall into chaos, fear of the unknown, and are forced to take up the task of self-redefinition. In nepantla we undergo the anguish of changing our perspectives and crossing a series of cruz calles, junctures, and thresholds, some leading to a different way of relating to people and surroundings and others to the creation of a new world” (Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 17).

<sup>394</sup> Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 17.

<sup>395</sup> Keating, “From Borderlands and New Mestizas to Nepantlas and Nepantleras: Anzaldúan Theories for Social Change,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 4, no. 3 (2006): 9.

necessary for “survival and sanity,” and disorientation as the risk “of becoming psychotic,” she offers this alternative theory:

I question this view; to be disoriented in space is the ‘normal’ way of being for us mestizas living in the borderlands. It’s the sane way of coping with the accelerated pace of this complex, interdependent, and multicultural planet. To be disoriented in space is to be en nepantla. To be disoriented in space is to experience bouts of dissociation of identity, identity breakdowns and buildups. The border, in a constant nepantla state, is an analog of the planet. This is why the borderline is a persistent metaphor in el arte de la frontera, an art that deals with such themes of identity, border crossings, and hybrid imagery.<sup>396</sup>

In this passage Anzaldúa explains that ontological states of disorientation, or being en nepantla, are what open the space to creatively imagine alternative possibilities for living other than those offered by the dominating and exclusionary logics of coloniality. Indeed, Anzaldúa writes of imagining “El Mundo Zurdo,” literally the left-handed world, which names her vision of a new world for borderdwellers and mestiza peoples that proliferates differences. El Mundo Zurdo, she argues, can only be formed through the creative work of nepantleras who recreate realities informed by conocimiento, the critical awareness of oppressive fragmentations as well as resisting power that develops by dwelling en nepantla.<sup>397</sup>

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa explains that rather than being locked in a “counterstance” against dominant white/Anglo social worlds, those who could one day create and inhabit El Mundo Zurdo would have to first move beyond “a duel of oppressor

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<sup>396</sup> Anzaldúa, “Border Arte,” 180-181.

<sup>397</sup> See Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 153f and 198f for discussions of the connections between her model of El Mundo Zurdo and conocimiento. For earlier references to El Mundo Zurdo see “El Mundo Zurdo The Vision” and “La Prieta” in *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983).

and oppressed” and refuse to be “reduced to a common denominator of violence.”<sup>398</sup> We can use Lugones’ understanding of power as a nexus of oppressing/being oppressed < -- > resisting to illuminate Anzaldúa’s point. Like Lugones, Anzaldúa accentuates the idea that oppression is not a static or accomplished fact and also highlights its ongoing interrelation with resistance. By refusing to recognize the violence of oppressors as the “common denominator” defining what it means to be dominant and marginalized, she also opens the space for a more nuanced understanding of power that does not foreclose possibilities for resistance, and even liberation. Anzaldúa nonetheless affirms that taking up a reactive counterstance is a necessary step on the way toward liberation; it is akin to putting up an internal wall to block the intimate forces of oppression. “But,” she continues, “it is not a way of life. At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank. [...] The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react.”<sup>399</sup> Those who decide to act can seek out nepantlera artists to guide them through how to become nepantleras, that is, how to move from the static resistance of a counterstance against oppression and toward dynamic practices of resistance that have the power to transform reality.

Anzaldúa describes the decision to begin on the path to becoming nepantlera as the choice to respond to the Coyolxauhqui imperative. Keating explains that the Coyolxauhqui imperative “embodies Anzaldúa’s desire for epistemological and ontological decolonization.”<sup>400</sup> In naming this idea, Anzaldúa takes up the mythological figure of Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui, who was dismembered by her brother Huitzilopochtli. The goddess

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<sup>398</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 100.

<sup>399</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 100-101.

<sup>400</sup> Keating, “Editor’s Introduction,” xxi.

represents Anzaldúa's understanding of how liminal mestiza lived experience links disorienting and painful states of fragmentation with creative processes of imaginative healing.<sup>401</sup> The Coyolxauhqui imperative names the need to engage in ongoing healing processes that transform the fragmentations of oppression. For instance, in her written recollection of an assault and robbery, Anzaldúa writes to herself, "Coyolxauhqui is your symbol for both the process of emotional psychical dismemberment, splitting body/mind/spirit/soul, and the creative work of putting all the pieces together in a new form."<sup>402</sup> In a different context, Anzaldúa repeats the idea that Coyolxauhqui represents her ability to recreate herself from within states of fragmentation, she writes:

Coyolxauhqui is my symbol for the necessary process of dismemberment and fragmentation, of seeing that self or the situations you're embroiled in differently. Coyolxauhqui is also my symbol for reconstruction and reframing, one that allows for putting the pieces together in a new way. The Coyolxauhqui imperative is an ongoing process of making and unmaking. There is never any resolution, just the process of healing.<sup>403</sup>

Through this mythic figure, Anzaldúa thus asserts an understanding of disorientation as dynamic and creative, that is, as the ground for the resistant recreation of the self. As we saw in Chapter Three, marginalized life is disorienting for Anzaldúa because of colonial structures of power and identity that render mestiza subjects fragmented and degraded. By taking up a precolonial figure from Aztec mythology to represent her reimagining of disorientation as dynamic and as that which prepares the way for creative resistance to oppressions, she practices the mythmaking process of writing and re-writing the self.

Anzaldúa thus creates a new mythos to narrate the process of becoming a resisting subject while facing the intermeshed oppressions of racist and heterosexist social worlds

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<sup>401</sup> Keating, "Editor's Introduction," xxi.

<sup>402</sup> Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 124.

<sup>403</sup> Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 19-20.

shaped by colonial power. In so doing, she provides figures and stories that can populate a well of resources that help facilitate the difficult experiences of being in states of dynamic disorientation. The nepantlera who responds to the Coyolxauhqui imperative and seeks to develop *lo conocimiento* joins with Ahmed's Feminist Killjoy who affectively disinvests from dominant worlds and innovates queer forms of community and inheritance, and Wynter's writer from demonic grounds who imagines the liberatory becoming of *homo narrans*. The three accounts I highlight in this chapter all narrate new figures, sites, and relations to demonstrate that creativity can transform ontological disorientations into dynamic states of resistant becoming.

#### 4.4b. Writing and Radical Social Change

Writing is an integral part of dwelling within states of disorientation as dynamic and resistant. For Anzaldúa, writing is part of becoming a nepantlera artista/activista who can develop *conocimiento*, which I read as a critical embodied awareness of one's social location and agency within oppressing/being oppressed < -- > resisting power relations. *Conocimiento* is her way of naming epistemological transformation as a decolonizing process. As Keating explains, "Anzaldúa's theory of *conocimiento* queers conventional ways of knowing and offers readers a holistic, activist-inflected onto-epistemology designed to effect change on multiple interlocking levels."<sup>404</sup> Similarly, Andrea Pitts states, "*Conocimiento* is the term used to describe an acquired state of embodied awareness that equips one with a capacity to act and to create."<sup>405</sup> And finally Nancy Tuana and Charles Scott claim, "*Conocimiento* is a movement beyond [...] It is an imporing of mental,

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<sup>404</sup> Keating, "Introduction," *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, xxvii.

<sup>405</sup> Andrea Pitts, "Gloria E. Anzaldúa's *Autohistoria-teoría* as an Epistemology of Self-Knowledge/Ignorance" *Hypatia* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 359.

emotional, instinctive, imaginal, spiritual, bodily awareness that can give rise to subversive knowledges that disrupt conventional ways of understanding.”<sup>406</sup> In my terms, the path to *conocimiento* is enacted and created through dwelling within the dynamic disorientations of marginalized life. Anzaldúa’s account of the path to *conocimiento* demonstrates how being disoriented can facilitate a metamorphosis from incapability to capability. Moreover, she describes how this transformation creates the conditions for radical social change.

The path to developing *conocimiento* is a nonlinear seven-stage process of radical self and social transformation.<sup>407</sup> The *first* stage of the path to *conocimiento* is destabilization and the profound and devastating rupture of all that is familiar and comforting. Then, one may enter *nepantla*, where having experienced the shocking disorientation of being unable to inhabit the world as a homeplace, you enter a *second* transitional phase of liminal existence, which can become “a zone of possibility.”<sup>408</sup> In a *nepantla*, as I have argued previously, Anzaldúa believes you are able to make space for a critical awareness of the epistemological and ontological structures that co-construct you and your worlds. Yet, she warns that in this state/space of possibility you easily become overwhelmed and may pass into a *Coatlique* state, the *third* stage. *Coatlique* is a state of depression, inaction, and despairing stasis. Anzaldúa explains that, “you’re never only in one space” in the path of *conocimiento* and quite often recounts how she moves between *nepantla* and *Coatlique*, and back again. To get out of the rigid stasis of *Coatlique* requires “a call to action [that] pulls you out of your depression” so that you may begin the dynamic

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<sup>406</sup> Nancy Tuana and Charles Scott, “Border Arte Philosophy: Altogether Beyond Philosophy,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2018): 77.

<sup>407</sup> Keating, “From Borderlands,” 11.

<sup>408</sup> Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 122.



process of transformation.<sup>409</sup> Put differently, Coatlique states pull you toward reorientation by allowing you to dwell in habituated coping mechanisms that, according to Anzaldúa's analysis, continue to bind you to oppressive social worlds. The move out of Coatlique is thus also the transition away from reorientation and deeper into disorientation, but this time, by embracing its possibilities to be dynamic and transformative.

It is at this point in the development of *conocimiento* that creativity becomes essential as a *fifth* and recurrent stage. The aim of creativity is to continue the disorienting process of being *en nepantla* dynamically. Thus, one moves closer to *conocimiento* by becoming a *nepantlera* and engaging in artistic practices that envision new realities and new selves, including the process of writing "a new narrative articulating your personal reality."<sup>410</sup> The *sixth* stage involves the effort to create new creative communities through the attempt to "take your story out into the world, testing it."<sup>411</sup> According to Anzaldúa, this is "the critical turning point of transformation" where together with others "you shift realities" by engaging in collective meaning-making practices that do not erase or subsume differences.<sup>412</sup> Like Lugones, Anzaldúa therefore insists that the recreation of the oppressed/oppressing self into a resisting self is doomed to fail without forming a community of resisters. Resistant communities can then enter the *seventh* and final stage, which is the enacting of what Anzaldúa calls "spiritual activism" and is the ultimate goal of *conocimiento* as a process.<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>409</sup> Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 123.

<sup>410</sup> Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 123.

<sup>411</sup> Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 123.

<sup>412</sup> Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 123.

<sup>413</sup> "This work of spiritual activism and the contract of holistic alliances allows conflict to dissolve through reflective dialogue. It permits an expansive awareness [...]. You form an intimate connection that fosters the empowerment of both (nos/otras) to transform

Therefore, the process of developing *conocimiento* occurs by dwelling in liminal and critical states of disorientation as dynamic. This dwelling is made possible through creative praxes like writing. By writing, Anzaldúa believes that she takes on the role of a *nepantlera* artista/activista who imaginatively creates new possibilities for living. She explains:

For me, writing begins with the impulse to push boundaries, to shape ideas, images, and words that travel through the body and echo in the mind into something that has never existed. The writing process is the same mysterious process that we use to make the world.<sup>414</sup>

Like Wynter's minority discourse written from demonic grounds, Anzaldúa's notion of writing is thus crafted to resist the silencing caused by dominant cultures. Writing is a form of border arte, that is, a resistant meaning-making practice endemic to borderlands or *nepantlas*. As border arte, writing "tries to decolonize that space with shifting identities, border crossings, and hybridism – all strategies for decolonization."<sup>415</sup> Border arte writing communicates marginalized perspectives that are inaudible from the vantage point of dominant worlds of sense. Hence, Anzaldúa experiments with different forms of meaning making that disrupt the categorizing strategies of white, western, and heterosexist logics. For example, she frequently reimagines and rewrites her own history as a *mestiza Chicana* subject by taking up figures and stories from Aztec and other prequest mythologies, African and African diasporic cultures, Christian theology and folklore, and other

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conflict into an opportunity to resolve an issue, to change negativities into strengths, and to heal the traumas of racism and other systemic *desconocimientos*" (Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 154).

<sup>414</sup> Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 5.

<sup>415</sup> Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 63.

sources.<sup>416</sup> In her writing, Anzaldúa creates new worlds of meaning that compensate for what she cannot find in dominant worlds.<sup>417</sup>

Hence, Anzaldúa views writing as a transformative act of self re-creation. She claims, “When I write it feels like I’m carving bone. It feels like I’m creating my own face, my own heart – a Nahuatl concept.”<sup>418</sup> It is through writing that she learns to dwell in the painful and fragmentary experience of being disoriented from dominant social worlds without becoming stuck in Coatlique states, and instead becoming open to experiencing disorientations as resistant and dynamic states of metamorphosis. Tuana and Scott explain that, “writing functions for her as a path in-between, a way to find her voice with silenced lineages and to give voice to them.”<sup>419</sup> In other words, her border arte practice of writing is a means of transforming experiences of oppression into grounds for resistance.

Furthermore, the nepantlera writer transforms herself and her reality also by guiding others in similar journeys through collective praxes of resistant meaning-making.<sup>420</sup> In fact,

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<sup>416</sup> Anzaldúa engages in this kind of part fictional creation, part self-history in most of her work including her two major texts, *Borderlands/La Frontera* and *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*. Though she intends this practice of writing to be a practice of decolonization, she has been criticized for appropriating the figures and stories of other cultures. For a sympathetic reading of Anzaldúa’s practices of appropriation see Erika Aigner-Varoz, “Metaphors of a Mestiza Consciousness: Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*,” *MELUS* 25, no. 2 (Summer, 2000): 47-62; and Laura E Pérez, *Chicana Art: the politics of spiritual and aesthetic altaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). For a detailed treatment of Anzaldúa’s appropriative myth-making practices in relation to other Chicana literature see Sheila Marie Contreras, *Blood Lines: Myth, Indigenism, and Chicana/o Literature* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2008), especially Chapters Three and Four.

<sup>417</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 169.

<sup>418</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 95.

<sup>419</sup> Tuana and Scott, 77.

<sup>420</sup> “En este lugar we fall into chaos, fear of the unknown, and are forced to take up the task of self-redefinition. In nepantla we undergo the anguish on changing our perspectives and crossing a series of cruz calles, junctures, and thresholds, some leading to a different way of relating to people and surroundings and others to the creation of a new world. Nepantleras such as artistas/activistas help us mediate these transitions, help us make the crossings,

Anzaldúa viewed her writing as a form of performance art that is enacted each time it is read by another. "Writing," she explains, "is a collaborative, communal activity not done in a room of one's own. It is an act informed and supported by the books the author reads, the people s/he interacts with, and the centuries of cultural history that seethe under her skin."<sup>421</sup> Nepantlera writers create bridges for crossing over thresholds. They thus help to enact the collective transformations of self and of social worlds needed to dwell in nepantla states and spaces in ways that open the possibility for new and innovative ways of life. Anzaldúa's theory of writing, therefore, presents another example of how inhabiting creative states of dynamic disorientation within oppressing social worlds can produce the conditions for the becoming of a resisting subject.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

In this final chapter, I explored accounts of resistant creativity in Wynter, Ahmed, and Anzaldúa to demonstrate that dynamic disorientations can catalyze the creation of new possibilities for living beyond those produced within colonial power systems. Each thinker uses creative practices to describe experiences of radical disintegration and transformation on the margins of colonial power. Wynter's notion of minority discourse offers an example of how to read the creative potential of inhabiting a liminal and critical relation with oppressive social worlds. Ahmed's understanding of queer invention argues that marginalized subjects have the potential to transform normative failures into opportunities for innovation. Anzaldúa claims that a resisting subject is necessarily creative because they

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and guide us through the transformation process – a process I call *conocimiento*" (Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 17).

<sup>421</sup> Anzaldúa, "To(o) Queer the Writer – Loca, escritora y chicana," in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 169.

must develop new means of understanding and inhabiting self and community beyond those defined by the terms of their oppressors. In sum, all three theorists conceive of resistance as an ongoing creative praxis that remains dynamically related to oppressing power, while also anticipating the invention of new possibilities for liberation.

My account of dynamic disorientation – as characterized by liminality, critical proximity to power, affective disinvestments, and creativity – rests on and augments accounts like those of Wynter, Ahmed, and Anzaldúa to demonstrate that it is possible to break with colonial modalities of embodied relation to the world. By developing this term, I have presented a rethought notion of disorientation where disorientations do not diminish capacities for action, but in fact dynamically facilitate the development of new capacities. In this chapter's focus on creativity, I demonstrated that states of dynamic disorientation could produce new possibilities for inhabiting the world as inexhaustibly given, that is, as a site open to innovation.

## Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have argued that we can understand dynamic disorientations as necessary, though not sufficient, conditions for the possibility of resisting the colonality of being human. I have therefore shown that possibilities for decolonial resistance can emerge from within seemingly totalizing conditions of structural oppression.

In the previous chapters, I demonstrated that the inhabitation of what Wynter terms a colonial genre of being human, and which I see as expressed through normative embodied modalities of being oriented toward the world, requires ongoing praxes of autopoietic genre-coherence. Using the work of critical phenomenologists like Ahmed, Al-Saji, Ngo, Sullivan, and Young, I have explained that in racist and heterosexist social worlds defined by colonial power, bodily norms defining masculinity, whiteness, and heterosexuality act as orientation devices that motivate the continuous reproduction of dominant and exclusionary ways of being. But, I have also demonstrated that experiences of disorientation are possible particularly for those who inhabit marginalized positions within shared social worlds. Informed by the decolonial theories of Ahmed, Anzaldúa, Lugones, and Wynter, I claimed that states of being dynamically disorientated within dominant social worlds can open possibilities for the creation of resistant embodied styles of being-toward-the-world. I concluded that through states of dynamic disorientation, one can come to experience social worlds structured by oppressive power relations as incompletely given realities that are no longer overdetermined in advance by colonial logics of domination.

In this conclusion, I will return to a set of concerns that opened this project by offering some brief consideration as to whether we can sustain dynamic disorientations in everyday life. Laura E. Pérez argues that “a decolonizing politics resides in an embodied practice rooted in lived and liveable worldviews,” and the task I am facing is to consider the conditions under which states of dynamic disorientation can be livable embodied practices of resistance.<sup>422</sup> I noted in Chapter Four that Ahmed, Anzaldúa, Lugones, and Wynter each insist on forming coalitional grounds for effective decolonial resistance. In different contexts, they assert that the ability to sustain what I have called disorienting states as dynamic necessitates gathering together with others in attempts at knowing, subverting, and moving beyond intermeshed oppressions. Moreover, I suggested that the creativity of dynamic disorientation incorporates community through collective and reciprocal practices of meaning making. Here, I offer a way of framing how dynamic disorientations can be lived in ways that motivate both personal and collective transformations as praxes of resistance to the colonality of being human.

I believe that dynamic disorientations can be lived as embodied practices in two concerted senses. One, dynamic disorienting states can help marginalized body-subjects to block what Anzaldúa calls the “intimate terrorism” of forces of oppression by opening an inwardly antagonistic space for the self to take on a resistant position.<sup>423</sup> As Lugones says, “the inhabitation of this [resistant] place/vantage enables me to withdraw my energies from cementing and contributing to the relations of power that define me as servile or as

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<sup>422</sup> Pérez, “Enrique Dussel’s *Ética de la Liberación*, U.S. Women of Color Decolonizing Practices, and Coalitionary Politics amidst Difference,” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 18, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2010): 123.

<sup>423</sup> Anzaldúa, “En Rapport, In Opposition: Cobrando cuentas a las neustras,” in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 113.

nonsensical.”<sup>424</sup> Becoming disoriented from within dominant and oppressing social worlds by, as I have suggested, inhabiting liminal states/spaces and developing a critical proximity to power can insulate the oppressed self through the refusal to quietly abide by the terms of one’s own oppression. In this way, disorientations create an impure separation from oppressing worlds of sense by intensifying the awareness of the possibilities of living beyond them. Lugones’ metaphor of cocooning helps to illustrate my meaning. She explains that a cocoon is a space for “insulating strategies; since she cannot respond in the terms of her oppressors to their harm, she must make space apart for creation, for new sense.”<sup>425</sup> We might also think about this first sense of dynamic disorientation as akin to putting up an internal wall to stop one from being overwhelmed by dominant logics. We can see it expressed for example in Ahmed’s notion of radically disinvesting from normative pleasures and attachments, which also serves as a reminder of the need to find ways to epistemically delink, as Wynter argues we must, from an oppressing world even as we continue living within it. Understood only in this way, however, states of dynamic disorientation may seem isolating, exhausting, and difficult to sustain.

Two, I believe that being in states of dynamic disorientation opens possibilities for creative transformations that have liberatory potential, which is best fostered collectively with others. As I argued in Chapter Four, resistant practices of creativity can recreate the fragmented and isolated self by facilitating the becoming of something new – new modalities of being practically related to the world, new social worlds, new forms of meaning, and new forms imagining. The examples of creativity I discussed all point to the need to bridge between solitary experiences of disorientation and coalitional ones. In short,

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<sup>424</sup> Lugones, “From Within Germinative Stasis,” 85.

<sup>425</sup> Lugones, “From Within Germinative Stasis,” 89.



it is impossible to create new meaning without others to understand it. This, however, is not about asking for recognition or uptake from dominant worlds of sense. It is, as Ahmed explains in her “A Killjoy Survival Kit,” actually “about the experience of having others who recognize the dynamics because they too have been there, in that place, in that difficult place.”<sup>426</sup> Lugones likewise makes it clear that being in a difficult place is necessary for any hope of pursuing radical and collective political resistance. “We always may feel the temptation to engage in political activity without this preparation, as if oppression did not touch our selves,” she writes, “[but] Anzaldúa shows the transformation of reality to require a tense inhabitation of our selves.”<sup>427</sup> In this statement, we can hear the linkages between the two practices of dynamic disorientation, both insulating and creative.

While dynamic disorientations can draw the oppressed self inward into brooding states of critical germination, they can also urgently push forward and outward to motivate the collective creation of the conditions for future liberation. Put differently, while disorientations may leave a subject fragile in their opposition to existing worlds of sense, they also can compel them to join with others in a collectivity of resisters in the midst of radical self-transformation. It is thus imperative, I believe, that communities of resisters are able to shelter dynamic disorientations together in ways that preserve their radical force of resistance. This can mean learning to make space for each person’s resisting self to form and expand. It also means learning to view dynamic states of disorientation as what can vitalize collective practices of resistance.

By outlining four characteristics of dynamic disorientation, I have sketched a framework for understanding the resistant potential of breaking with normative practical

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<sup>426</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 244.

<sup>427</sup> Lugones, “From Within Germinative Stasis,” 92.

relations toward dominant social worlds. I have suggested that the practices of resistance that can emerge from within states of dynamic disorientation are both techniques of survival and arts of liberatory transformation. Returning to the examples of everyday resistance I began this project with, we might therefore think about how the classroom within a correctional facility or a workshop on political resistance for marginalized youth can become sites of dynamic disorientation that produce resistant practices. For instance, the classroom and the workshop bring together marginalized subjects from diverse social locations. By devising exercises that center each person's lived experience, we can create spaces for the development of liminal worldviews that breakdown binary hierarchies of difference and encourage us to think about identity as intersectional and multiplicitous. We can also work to disenchant dominant ideas about power through exercises that resignify everyday techniques of negotiating oppressive situations – reading after lights out, refusing to smile when asked, sharing pens – into forms of exercising one's embodied power to resist. Likewise, we could reinterpret uncomfortable affects like anger into affective forms of disinvesting from oppressive social worlds. This can happen by using the group as a space that grants permission to express anger as a form of justified communication about the world.

These exercises would aim to disrupt the ways that being in relation to oppressive social worlds thwarts the ability to participate in crafting the meaning of your own life. In other words, they work to disrupt the sedimented effects of colonial cultural histories on the acquisition of practical orientations within oppressive social worlds. These exercises, and others like them, use disorientations to open the space for practices of resistant creativity that allow one to take hold of the world as a site of possibility and power. My

hope in developing my account of dynamic disorientation is to provide a conceptual framework for understanding how we are enabled to engage in the process of creating new meaning from within the lived experiences of structural oppressions. In other words, I aimed to show that dynamic disorientations are states of becoming a resisting self.

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Young, Iris Marion. "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality." *Human Studies* 3 (1980): 137-156.

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- 2010       B.Hum., Humanities and Philosophy, summa cum laude, Carleton University  
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**DISSERTATION**

**Title:** "Embodied Orientations and Decolonial Praxes of Resistance"

**Committee:** Nancy Tuana (advisor), Kathryn Sophia Belle, Leonard Lawlor, Eduardo Mendieta, Ted Toadvine, and Hilary Malatino (WGSS, outside reader)

**REFEREED ARTICLES**

- 2020    Tsantsoulas, Tiffany. "Anger, Fragility, and the Formation of Resistant Feminist Space." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. *forthcoming*.
- 2018    Tsantsoulas, Tiffany. "Sylvia Wynter's Decolonial Rejoinder to Judith Butler's Ethics of Vulnerability." *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*. vol. 2, no. 22 (Fall): 158-177.
- 2018    Tsantsoulas, Tiffany, Robert Chiles, Stephen Rachman, Gretel Van Wieren, Renee Wallace. "Constructing A New Food Ethics: Waste and Discourses of Difference," *Public Philosophy Journal*. vol 1, no. 2 (Fall): DOI: 10.25335/M5/PPJ.1.2-4.
- 2018    Rachman, Stephen, Robert Chiles, Gretel Van Wieren, Tiffany Tsantsoulas, Renee Wallace. "Going Beyond "Agrarian vs. Industrial" and Moving towards a New Food Ethics," *Public Philosophy Journal*. vol 1, no. 2 (Fall): DOI: 10.25335/M5/PPJ.1.2-3
- 2018    Van Wieren, Gretel, Stephen Rachman, Robert Chiles, Tiffany Tsantsoulas. "Taking Back the Narrative: A Dialogue with FoodPLUS Detroit's Renee Wallace about Culture Change, Consciousness, and Compost," *Public Philosophy Journal*. vol 1, no. 2 (Fall): DOI: 10.25335/M5/PPJ.1.2-5.

**SELECT AWARDS, FELLOWSHIPS, AND HONOURS**

- 2019    Iris Marion Young Prize for the Best Paper in Feminist Philosophy, the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy
- 2019    Humanities Institute Summer Residence Fellowship, The Pennsylvania State University
- 2017    Graduate Student Essay Prize, the Canadian Society for Continental Philosophy
- 2016    University Graduate Fellowship, The Pennsylvania State University