

A Phenomenological Practice

In this conclusion, I offer a way of thinking about diversity work as a phenomenological practice. Diversity work does not simply generate knowledge *about* institutions (in which the institution becomes a thematic); it generates knowledge of institutions in the process of attempting to transform them. We could also think of diversity as praxis, drawing on a Marxist understanding of the point of intellectual labor: as Marx argues in *Theses on Feuerbach*, “Philosophers have only interpreted the world differently but *the point* is to change it” ([1845] 2009: 97; emphasis added). Drawing on this radical tradition, Paulo Freire defines praxis as “reflection and action upon the world *in order to* transform it” ([1970] 2000: 51; emphasis added).¹ I want to offer a different way of thinking about the relationship between knowledge and transformation. Rather than suggesting that knowledge leads (or should lead) to transformation, I offer a reversal that in my view preserves the point or aim of the argument: transformation, as a form of practical labor, leads to knowledge.

The very labor of transforming institutions, or at least aiming for transformation, is how we learn about institu-

tions as formations. We can thus think of diversity work as a “phenomenological practice.” What do I mean by this? Edmund Husserl in his Vienna lecture (presented in 1935 and published in the appendix of *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*) offers an important redescription of the phenomenological method. He suggests that phenomenology has its roots in classical Greek philosophy as *theôria* or theoretical attitude. A theoretical attitude is a reorientation of a previous attitude, defined as “a habitually fixed style of willing life comprising directions of the will or interests that are prescribed by this style” ([1936/54] 1970: 280). An attitude is thus not simply a reflection on the world but is worldly: an attitude could even be thought of as institutionality, in which a norm is also prescribed as a style of life. A norm is how we are immersed in a life. For Husserl, phenomenology is defined as reorientation: “The theoretical attitude, in its newness, refers back to a previous attitude, one which was earlier the norm: [with reference to this] it is characterized as a *reorientation*” (280; emphasis added). The phenomenological attitude in reflecting on the previous attitudes is thus a new style; a theoretical attitude is new in relation to what already exists because *in* reflecting on what exists, it withdraws from an immersion, such that an existence is transformed. In this new attitude the world becomes thematic, as what consciousness is directed toward. Husserl argues explicitly that such a new attitude is theoretical: it must, at least in the first instance, be “totally unpractical” (282).²

We can offer a different angle on the task at hand by thinking about how phenomenology can work as a practice or even “practically.” It is not simply that diversity workers are philosophers—in the sense of being reflexive and critical—in their attitude toward institutions (though they can be). It is not simply that they become conscious of what recedes from view. Rather, diversity workers acquire a critical orientation to institutions in the process of coming up against them. They become conscious of “the brick wall,” as that which keeps its place even when an official commitment to diversity has been given. Only the practical labor of “coming up against” the institution *allows this wall to become apparent*. To those who do not come up against it, the wall does not appear—the institution is lived and experienced as being open, committed, and diverse.

Diversity workers thus generate knowledge not only of what institutions are like but of how they can reproduce themselves, how they become like and keep becoming alike. We come up against the force and weight of something when we attempt to alter the conditions of an existence. But we can also come up against something in our experience of an existence. Doing diversity work is institutional work in the sense that it is an experience of encountering resistance and countering that resistance. Each new strategy or tactic for getting through the wall generates knowledge of what does or does not get across. Perhaps diversity workers aim to transform the wall into a table, turning the tangible object of institutional resistance into a tangible platform for institutional action. Thinking of diversity work in this way allows us to understand how speaking in the happier languages of diversity does not necessarily mean an identification with the institution but can be understood as a form of practical knowledge of the difficulty of getting through.

Getting people to the table by not speaking of the wall (by not speaking about what does get across) does not mean the wall disappears. Even if the wall is a metaphor for immobility, it can move. When practitioners overcome resistance, it seems to reappear elsewhere. Institutional immobility thus requires a mobile defense system. I described in chapter 1 how diversity workers have to be mobile: embedding diversity requires inhabiting different kinds of institutional spaces. The experience of physical mobility also involves the feeling of coming up against the same thing, *wherever* you come up against it. One of my primary aims has been to describe the physical and emotional labor of “banging your head against a brick wall.”

I want to expand the terms of my argument here by thinking of diversity work in two distinct but related ways. First, diversity work can refer to work that has the explicit aim of transforming an institution; second, diversity work can be what is required, or what we do, when we do not “quite” inhabit the norms of an institution.³ When you don’t quite inhabit the norms, or you aim to transform them, you notice them as you come up against them. The wall is what we come up against: the sedimentation of history into a barrier that is solid and tangible in the present, a barrier to change as well as to the mobility of some, a barrier that remains invisible to those who can flow into the spaces created by institutions.

Feminist and race theorists over generations have taught us that to inhabit a category of privilege is not to come up against the category. What makes a lesson hard is what makes a lesson worth repeating. When we fail to inhabit a category (when we are questioned or question ourselves whether we are “it”), then that category becomes more apparent, rather like the institutional wall: a sign of immobility or what does not move.⁴ There is an implicit relation between categories and mobility that we can make more explicit. When a category allows us to pass into the world, we might not notice that we inhabit that category. When we are stopped or held up by how we inhabit what we inhabit, then the terms of habitation are revealed to us. We need to rewrite the world from the experience of not being able to pass into the world. In *Queer Phenomenology* I called for a phenomenology of “being stopped,” a description of the world from the point of view of those who do not flow into it (2006: 140). I suggested that if we begin with the body that loses its chair, the world we describe will be quite different (139).

Diversity work can take the form of description: it can describe the effects of inhabiting institutional spaces that do not give you residence. An example: we are at a departmental meeting with students to introduce our courses. One after the other, we come up to the podium. A colleague is chairing, introducing each of us in turn. She says: this is Professor So-and-So; this is Professor Such-and-Such. On this particular occasion, I happen to be the only female professor in the room.⁵ And I am the only professor introduced without using the title. She says, “This is Sara.” In taking up the space that has been given to me, I feel like a girl, and I giggle. It is a “girling” moment, to use Judith Butler’s evocative term (1993: 7). Girling moments do not stop happening, even after we have been pronounced girls. We can feel an assignment as atmosphere. When you look like what they expect a professor to be, you are treated like a professor. A somber and serious mood follows those who have the right kind of body, the body that allows them to pass seamlessly into the category, when the category has a certain affective value, as somber and serious.

Diversity work can involve an experience of hesitation, of not knowing what to do in these situations. There is a labor in having to respond to a

situation that others are protected from, a situation that does not come up for those whose residence is assumed. Do you point it out? Do you say anything? Will you cause a problem by describing a problem? Past experience tells you that to make such a point is to become a sore point. Sometimes you let the moment pass because the consequences of not letting it pass are too difficult.

Some have to “insist” on belonging to the categories that give residence to others.⁶ If you point out the failure to be given the proper title, or if you ask to be referred to by the proper name, then you have to insist on what is simply given to others. Not only that, you are heard as insistent, or even as self-promotional, as insisting on your dues. If you have to become insistent to receive what is automatically given to others, your insistence confirms the improper nature of your residence. We don’t tend to notice the assistance given to those whose residence is assumed, those informal networks that are often behind arrivals into and occupations of institutional space as I discussed in chapter 4.⁷ When assistance is assumed, insistence is not required.

I could add here that I was the only professor of color in the room (as the only professor of color in the department, this detail was not so surprising). Other critics have documented what it means to occupy the place and position of a professor of color. Pierre W. Orelus, for example, offers an account of how being a professor of color causes trouble, as if being one thing makes it difficult to be seen as the other: “After I formally introduce myself in class, I have undergraduate students who ask me, in a surprised tone of voice, ‘Are you really the professor?’ I have overheard some of them asking their peers, ‘Is he really the professor?’” (2011: 31). Orelus compares this mode of questioning, this sense of curiosity and astonishment, with the questions typically asked of immigrants about “funny accents.” Or we could think of the question typically asked to strangers, “where are you from?” as if to say, or more accurately, which is to say, “you are not from here.” When we are asked questions, we are being held up, we become questionable. Being asked whether you are the professor is a way of being made into a stranger, of not being at home in a category that gives residence to others.

To catalogue these incidents is not a melancholic task. To account for experiences of not being given residence is not yet another sad political lesson, a lesson of what we have had to give up in order to keep going. I suspect there is a loss at stake here, but it is not ours. The failure to inhabit the categories that give order to an existence or bring an existence into order can be understood as beneficial, not in the sense that this failure might propel us forward but that it might give us insight into the very system of propulsion, into what does and does not move forward. I realize how much we come to know about institutional life because of these failures of residence, how the categories in which we are immersed as styles of life *become explicit when you do not quite inhabit them*.⁸

When the restrictions governing who can occupy a category become explicit, you are noticing what is around you, what gathers, but what does not ordinarily come into view. When you realize that the apparently open spaces of academic gatherings are restricted, you notice the restriction: you also notice how those restrictions are either kept out of view or defended if they come into view. Over and over again, it is revealed to me: this institutional lesson, which is also a life lesson, of coming up against a category *in the very attempt to make the restrictions more explicit*. How many times have I had male colleagues defending all-male reading lists, all-male speaker lists, all-male reference lists? To give an account of these defenses is to give an account of how worlds are reproduced.

An open call comes out for an academic event on power and resistance. A number of speakers are named on the call: all male speakers but one, all white speakers but one (is this “but one” a way of holding onto the “all”?). Some of us point out the restriction. A wall comes up in the very denial of a wall. We begin with a friendly openness. It’s an open call, they say. Come along, they say. Take our places, they even say. Note here how the gesture of inclusion, which is also a promise of inclusion, can be offered in a way that negates a point about exclusion. To suggest incorporation as potential (come along as you *can* come along) prevents any acknowledgment that the open call was restricted as a call. How to respond? We point out publicly that the publicity of the call suggests the event is not open.⁹ We didn’t mean anything by it, they say; it’s unfair to assume we did, they say.

You have hurt our feelings; you have presumed knowledge of our intentions. That's just who turned up. I respond: if privilege means going the way things are flowing, then letting things flow will mean that's who ends up going. The friendly tone ceases. You are the problem, they say. In assuming we have a problem, you are the problem.

It is not noticeable, this "all" to those who pass through this "all," until you point it out, becoming a feminist killjoy, making a sore point, being a sore point, assumed to be sore because of your point. I do not usually bother to point out that "all male" is often "all white," though I could make that point, becoming an angry person of color. Sometimes we have to take the risk of fulfilling the fantasies other people have of us! I should note as well that I have experienced the most defensive reactions to such points from white male academics who think of themselves as "critical." When criticality becomes an ego ideal, it can participate in not seeing complicity. Perhaps criticality as an ego ideal offers a fantasy of being seeing.¹⁰ As I suggested in chapter 5, critical whiteness might operate as a way of not seeing in the fantasy of being seeing: the critical white subjects, by seeing their whiteness, might *not* see themselves as participating in whiteness in the same way.

At one moment I express my fatigue at the repetition of these gatherings, where the all is hidden by the assumed generality of a particular ("open to all" often translating into all male, all white, or all but one). I express a sense of what is lost when academic gatherings are restricted to certain kinds of bodies. Someone replies that he thought I sounded "very 1980s," and he thought we had "got over" identity politics. Not only might we want to challenge the use of identity politics here as a form of political caricature, we might want to think of this as "over." What does it mean to assume we have "gotten over" something? This claim participates in the genre of argumentation that I describe as "overing." In assuming that we are over certain kinds of critique, they create the impression that we are over what is being critiqued. Feminist and antiracist critique are heard as old-fashioned and outdated, as based on identity categories we are assumed to be over. We are even heard as the ones who are oppressive, in our influence or existence, because we point out the existence of oppression.

Diversity work could be described as a very practical refusal of the theoretical argument about overing. The very practical work of doing diversity work brings a wall to the surface. A wall can be defined as that which you do not get over. It is not over if you don't get over it.

It is not always the case that overing arguments are made explicitly. I would say that in the landscape of contemporary critical theory there is a sense—sometimes spoken, sometimes not—that we need to “get beyond” categories like gender and race: as if the categories themselves have restricted our understanding, as if the categories themselves are the blockage points. Those who point out restrictions and blockages become identified with the restrictions and blockages they point to, as if we are creating what we are describing. The hope invested in new terms (mobilities, becomings, assemblages, capacities) can thus be considered a way of overing, as if these terms allow us to get over the categories themselves. In turn, academic work that works on questions of gender or race or that works with existing social categories (whether or not these categories are the starting points, and whether or not the categories are assumed in advance of starting) becomes associated with stasis.

An example of how categories are understood as “blockages of thought” is offered in the following statement by the geographer Susan Ruddick:

for instance for those of us who want to build on struggles in a way that embraces and amplifies the capacity to act instead of storying every momentary gain as “cooptation,”—no wonder there is still a lingering melancholia of the left in some corners!—or those who want to think beyond the narrow categorizations of gender race and class (and ableism, ageism, et cetera) to new configurations and alliances I think *Hegel or Spinoza* provides a kind of metaphysics that helps us move beyond current blockages in thought. (2011, n.p.)¹¹

Here race, gender, and class (and all that is relegated to the bracket, as well as all that is pointed to by the “et cetera”) enter theoretical discourse as “narrow categorizations.” The implication is that to exercise such categories would be to restrict not only the “capacity to act” but our capacity to think that capacity. Category thinking becomes seen as a narrowing of vision, associated with a lingering melancholia, as what is holding us back,

stopping us from moving on. Perhaps those who point to such categories are the ones who linger, who are stopping the forward movement we might attach to progression. This is how those who “stay behind” can get in the way of a forward progression. I am not saying that we need to dismiss these new theoretical vocabularies: we need resources to think differently as we encounter worlds.¹² I am suggesting that the hope invested in new terms can mean *turning away* from social restrictions and blockages by identifying restriction and blockages with the old terms that we need to move beyond.¹³ Indeed, we need to note that the *narrowing* of the descriptive or analytic potential of the old terms is part of this narrative of overcoming; a caricature of the work done by these terms allows the terms to be, as it were, “given up.”

In giving up these terms, we give up more than the terms: we give up on a certain kind of intervention into the world. It is not that the categories described as “blockages of thought” introduce blockages into our thought; rather, we need to account for blockages and restrictions within institutional worlds. Maybe we could redescribe social categories as blunt instruments. It could be the case that by exercising their bluntness we might lose a certain precision. Or we could say that institutional life is full of blunt instruments. Stop and search, for example, is a technology that makes this bluntness into a point: stop! You are brown! The blunter the edges of political instruments, the sharper their points. Being sharp in our descriptions of this world requires a certain willingness to be blunt.

The very tendency to “look over” how everyday and institutional worlds involve restrictions and blockages is how those restrictions and blockages are reproduced. It is not the time to be over it, if it is not over. It is not even the time to get over it. Social categories are sediments: they go all the way down, and they weigh some of us down. They might even appear lighter and more buoyant to those who can float, as if they are “above” them. Perhaps the experience of aboveness creates the impression of overness. Perhaps lightness and buoyancy are the affects of privilege—the affective worlds inhabited by those whose bodies don’t weigh them down or hold them up.

We can also consider the language of critique and how it is assumed to be dated. I think even within some feminist writing, the idea that we

should be critical of sexism has indeed become understood as rather dated and even as a habit that is blocking us, holding us down, or keeping us back: stopping us from reading or engaging most positively, affirmatively, and creatively with the texts that are the objects of critique.¹⁴ It would be timely to restate the arguments that sexism and racism are not incidental but structural, and thus to understand sexism and racism requires better, closer readings of what is being gathered. To account for a situation—which is to account for the situated nature of knowledge—means we can offer “a better account of the world” (Haraway 1997: 187).¹⁵ Attending to the restrictions in the apparently open spaces of a social world brings us into closer proximity to an actual and material world. We need feminist and antiracist critique because we need to understand how it is that the world takes shape by restricting the forms in which we gather. The time for this is now. We need this critique now if we are to learn *how not to reproduce what we inherit*.

A critical task is thus to attend to categories given that they do not have any ontological ground (we do not assume there is such a thing called white or black in advance, as it were). We attend to categories to understand how what is ungrounded can become a social ground (we know there is such a thing as being called white or black, and we know that the call “calls us” into different places). A phenomenological approach shows how a critique of the ontological basis of categories does not mean that the categories themselves disappear (see Alcoff 2006: 185). I would thus not argue, as Paul Gilroy (2000) does, that our problem is with the category of race itself and the solution is to unlearn the habit of using the category.¹⁶ To proceed as if the categories *do not matter* because *they should not matter* would be to fail to show how the categories continue to ground social existence.

An account of diversity as a phenomenological practice is an account of how racism is reproduced by receding from view, becoming an ordinary feature of institutional life. My critique of this disappearance can be related to wider critiques of the contemporary as postracial, or critiques in the United States of the discourse of color blindness (see Street 2007: 37; Eng 2010: x; Wise 2010).¹⁷ The very idea that we are beyond race, that we can