

Exorcising the Present: Queer Phenomenology, Hauntology, and Pragmatic Deconstruction

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**I. Introduction**

Does Jacques Derrida's famous critique of phenomenology as partaking in the "metaphysics of presence" still hold for phenomenology? Or does it merely re-focus the phenomenological toward the realm of the social ontological? If for Derrida, there is no foundational without the trace of an(o)ther similarly primordial concept, then the present remains radically under-determined. Similarly, the semiotic content of identities tracks with the popular or prevalent narratives that define such identities, whether for ill or for good, that are always prior to the individual subject. The benefit of the phenomenological perspective is the ever-present possibility of disrupting those prevailing narratives, of revealing what has been occluded.

In this paper, I draw out the Derridean "hauntological" aspects of Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, in an effort to render the social-ontological implications of phenomenology more salient. I begin by reflecting on how differing ontologies haunt singularities – which includes objects and persons – as the repressed (yet nonetheless present) narratives that affect and inflect their semiotic content. The sedimentation of such identities, as Ahmed points out, is taken as normative simply for being presented as normal; phenomenology enables a queering of the objective that exorcises these narratives. Via this reflection, I argue that the social arrangements of/around such haunted objects reveals the ecological relationship between the semiotics and narrativity of an objective identity. That is, the disruptive capability of a phenomenological orientation entails a pragmatic deconstructive capacity that is present within the everyday, which can be used as a "practical-metaphysical" paradigm for the reformulation of political imaginaries.

**II. Ontologies, Queerness, and Haunting**

In her *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed argues that a "queer" orientation toward the world allows for staging a politics uncommitted to the presumption that "lives have to follow certain lines in order to count as lives, rather than being a commitment to a line of deviation." (Ahmed 178) Key to her argument is a notion of "disorientation," described as "the 'becoming oblique' of the world, a becoming that is at once interior and exterior, as that which is given, or as that which gives what is given its new angle." (Ahmed 162) Although she does not claim to be utilizing Derrida's schema from *Specters of Marx*, Ahmed's contention that the materiality of

objects is revelatory due to a subject's orientation, nonetheless captures Derrida's claim that "haunting" describes the "staging of an event", which I take to be inclusive of both bodies and objects. Because such staging allows for the appearance of past histories, I argue that Ahmed's embodied phenomenology materializes Derrida's notion of hauntology. This notion pervades Ahmed's reflections on how (dis)orientation is revelatory through the spectral histories embedded within their materiality. Hence, queer phenomenology becomes a hauntology that enables thinking the radical malleability of sociality given its multi-textured materiality.

For Ahmed, taking a queer phenomenological orientation toward objects reveals phenomena less clearly captured by the classic phenomenological model. This objective history of an object's givenness remains, even if not immediately present as pure appearance of direct experience, without reducing to a mere representation of a purported image. Ahmed's phenomenological account is a reading that "summons forth" prior histories of the object that presently affect one's experience of (and orientation toward) the object. Two of her footnotes suggest this: she reformulates the Heideggerian and Gadamerian critiques of the suspension of the natural attitude as an irreducibly hermeneutic move (Ahmed 33 [n 5]; 184); and she references the material culture of matters that are "entangled" in the social relations and productions of signs. (Ahmed 42 [n 12]; 187) An object's contours present as a surface, but its past exceeds its present(ed) givenness, constituting the object as an artifact of socio-cultural (and thus politico-economic) production and thus allowing disorientation to occur. For Ahmed, "disorientation" can be understood as an "opening-up" of what appearance presents as real, or simply overlooks as something that can be ignored along the preferential pathways laid out in normative discourse and practice. Such moments of disorientation allow these histories to emerge more fully than in everyday perception, which I claim is a Derridean "hauntology".

For Derrida, the logic of the ghost "points toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic, the logic that distinguishes or opposes effectivity or actuality (either present, empirical, living—or not) and ideality (regulating or absolute non-presence)." (Derrida 2006: 78) The ghost goes beyond mere present comparatives, toward what remains real in its non-actualized presence – i.e., the various histories that subsist, even if not consciously perceived, within these objects. Commenting on Marxism, one such spirit that Derrida claims he will "never be able to renounce" is "a certain emancipatory and messianic affirmation, a certain experience of the promise that one can try to liberate from any dogmatics

and even from any metaphysico-religious determination, from any messianism.” (Derrida 2006: 111) Without distancing too much from Derrida’s specific concern, this seems to commit him to obscuring simple perception:

To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration. (Derrida 2006: 202)

To use Ahmed’s language, Derrida recognizes the queerness of Marx in the radical heterogeneity of Marxism, by accepting the heterogeneity inherited across its lineage. In this sense, “ontology” as a “conjuration” refers to a particular inherited lineage (and thus, history) that has been privileged as “the History”, as a particular description called forth as more definitive against others. Against ontology, hauntology is prior, anterior in its openness.

Ahmed doesn't explicitly take this step of radical heterogeneity alongside Derrida. However, her argument consists in blurring the contours of mere presence in order to render the materiality of the object as a touchstone rather than a firmament – resisting objectivity as the being-there of brute facticity, rendering it instead as the reference point for instantiations of being-such that might occur. With her procedure, the “thisness” of the object – the aim of a more traditional ontology – is not as clearly apprehensible as Husserlian phenomenology wishes it to be, so the spectral aspects of the object – that which consists in the unseen back that grounds the present, which is itself rendered “ghostly” – takes that which is “objective” to be less absolute than what it pretends or portends to be. While not a complete break with Husserl, Ahmed nonetheless presents a much fuzzier perception of objects: queer phenomenology goes beyond a Husserlian eidetic approach by assuming the persistence and presence of a contextual history for (re-) interpretation to occur. In a moment of disorientation, Ahmed claims, every possible objective present is revealed in an object alongside their situational arrangements, from which Ahmed maintains one may reorient.

This notion of phenomenology disrupts ontologizing the objective: “mere givenness” is rejected by Ahmed as a socio-cultural (and thus, political) effect of normalizing states of affairs through the naturalization of the preferred orientation toward an object. Disrupting the clarity of a perceived object, negating the static object as but one moment that appears as preferred or privileged – or conveniently left alone – disrupts the fundamental ontological assumptions that normally orient the subject. If, for Derrida, ontology is the conjuring that one performs at the

moment of exorcism, then Ahmed's phenomenology effects a conjuring of occluded ontologies that ground queer orientations, in the phenomenological experience of disorientation. Keeping the aforementioned Derridean reading of queerness as accepting the radical heterogeneities that emerge across a lineage, consider the following:

If a mixed genealogy takes us back to a time before our arrival, then it reminds us how orientations involve secrets: what we cannot uncover or recover about the histories that allow objects to gather in the way that they do. [...] Such acts of conjuring involve not only what we perceive in the present, but also the histories out of which objects emerge we might even conjure what is behind them. Such histories are spectral in the sense that the objects we perceive are traces of such histories, and even keep those histories alive, but the histories cannot simply be perceived. Indeed, such histories may be alive insofar as they resist being converted into something that is available, like the side that is revealed by our viewing point." (Ahmed 152-3)

Ontological conjuring occurs, for Ahmed, in a resuscitation of the occluded histories that remain "amidst" or "within" (if not present or actualized) objects, reviving historical possibilities still embedded in them. Selecting a particular history presages a future and dictates how that future plays out: conjuring entails a conscientious covering-over of alternatives. Key to this conjuring is that the history must exceed the present(ation) of the object; compare Derrida's claim that the ghost emerges precisely when it seems that there is no future (Derrida 2006: xviii): a teleological suspension of the objective that allows new orientations to emerge.

How does this cash out in terms of a queer politics? Human bodies occupy the unique situation as both agentic subjects and affected objects. The situatedness of a particular body within its social, political, and cultural arena reflects the placement of a particular being's regard within such circumstances: "if orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then disorientation occurs when that extension fails." (Ahmed 11). Citing Fanon, Ahmed notes that the corporeal schema cannot be navigated without reference to the grid of historico-racial interpretation: such institutions delineate our lines of motility. *Pace* phenomenology, when we move and experience the (objective) world, our corporeal schema necessarily takes the body as a part-object in a field of objects that are situated in the field before it, within which one can(not) act or move toward. For Ahmed, the revelatory "twisting" that a queer phenomenology effects, serves to orient a subject toward possible futures by revealing the secret of the normative, as dependent on the homogeneity of the hetero (normative), as opposed to the heterogeneity within the queer. Despite its pretensions, the hetero

depends on the queer by occluding its necessity in the generation of difference: *queerness is the difference from which the norm is selected before being elevated as such*. Hence Ahmed's interest in "mixed" genealogies: such a lineage disrupts the notions of purity that undergird much ontologizing that occurs within the socio-cultural sphere. In this sense, one does not have a greater claim to a primordial truth or state of affairs by virtue of the straightest line. Mixing functions as a hauntology, wherein plural ontologies that undergird and prefigure moments of disorientation, such that alternative lineages might be conjured into queer expression.

This mixed genealogy opens up different possible future paths to be taken for the subject understood as an embodied spectral object, as the multiple lineages contained within mixtures offer different trajectories that can be taken from the moment of disorientation. For Ahmed, an object's spectral histories are rendered in terms of the future orientations that one can effect, coordinate, and embody in terms of the effect that these indeterminately perceived objective ghosts have. She effectively materializes the Derridean hauntological notion of the "to come": "At bottom, the specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come or come back." (Derrida 2006: 48) The political imprimatur thus emerges: the embodied phenomenological subject, as an inheritor of histories and an agent of history, serves as its own spectral object; one that can affect/effect the arrival of a future undetermined by the putatively objective, via how one orients oneself toward various histories presaging arrival.

### III. Phenomenology as Pragmatic Deconstruction

Now that the notion of a queer phenomenology has been presented, I want to explore the relation between pragmatism and deconstruction. Earlier in this paper, I alluded to a "fuzziness" by which a queer phenomenology renders the subjective world: I see this "fuzziness" as a conceptual cloud of signifiers that surrounds and helps constitute *any* object of experience – both solely and in relation to other objects and its environment – from whence its particular significance is derived. Of particular consequence is the Derridean notion of *jeu libre*,

Freeplay is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Freeplay is always an interplay of absence and presence, but if it is to be radically conceived, freeplay must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence; being must be conceived of as presence or absence beginning with the possibility of freeplay and not the other way around. (Derrida 1967: 294)

In my reading, this notion of *jeu libre* is what allows for the pragmatic selection of alternatives amongst the possibilities surrounding the object of experience.

However, not all pragmatists see deconstructive concerns as concordant with pragmatism, let alone as politically efficacious. Notably, Richard Rorty claims that what is most foreign to (neo-)pragmatists about Derridean deconstruction is the “suspicion of empiricism, and naturalism – his assumption that these are forms of metaphysics, rather than replacements for metaphysics. To put it another way: they cannot understand why Derrida wants to sound transcendental, why he persists in taking the project of finding conditions of possibility.” (Rorty 16) For Rorty, these transcendental gestures render Derrida’s contributions as mainly his then-more recent autobiographical expositions of his relationship with Heidegger and Freud, rather than his earlier work like *De la grammatologie*. (*Id.* at 17) Hence, Rorty prefers later works such as “Envois” in *La Carte postale*, and “Circonfession”, because they exemplify to him the “private ironism” that is “more vivid and forceful forms of private self-creation than is possible through the explication of texts.” (*Id.*) Further, it seems that Rorty’s essential difficulty is that he cannot see the relation of the Lévinasian strains of Derrida’s thought as connected with his (i.e., Rorty’s) notion of politics, which is “a matter of reaching accommodation between competing interests, and as something to be deliberated about in banal, familiar terms—terms which do not need philosophical dissection and do not have philosophical presuppositions.” (*Id.*) Rorty therefore specifically contrasts political readings of Derrida against the public liberalism of John Dewey, the pragmatist philosopher *par excellence* for Rorty.

It is within this Lévinasian strain that Simon Critchley takes Rorty to task for his insistence on this “private ironism” he sees in “later” Derrida. Critchley contests Rorty’s claim that Derrida remains quasi-transcendental by claiming that Derrida is, in fact, quasi-*phenomenological* – not via Husserl, but rather, through Lévinas. Critchley argues (rightly, I think) that the material, body-dependent aspects of Lévinasian phenomenology are what render Derridean deconstruction into a profoundly ethical and political enterprise, that also disputes that there is a meaningful difference between “early” and “later” Derrida:

Are not Rorty’s definition of liberalism and Lévinas’s definition of ethics essentially doing the same work, that is, attempting to locate a source for moral and political obligation in a sentient disposition towards the other’s suffering? Do they both not agree that cruelty is the worst thing that there is, and that, furthermore, this is the only social bond that we need? (Critchley 34)

Critchley therefore ties Rorty's vision of liberal pragmatism to Lévinas' ethical phenomenology, by which he rehabilitates Derrida into a "public liberal" in line with Rorty's own commitments, without doing violence to the deconstructive enterprise that Derrida undertakes. The homology between Rorty and Lévinas is what opens up a pragmatic reading of deconstruction: Critchley opens his essay by noting that pragmatism deconstructs the epistemological presumption of being a "mirror of nature", while deconstruction itself is pragmatic in its anti-foundationalism and its capacity to be assimilated into a context-dependent theory of truth. (*Id.* at 19) However, Critchley qualifies these characterizations by claiming that deconstruction is not pragmatist "all the way down", because deconstructive practices are motivated by a fundamental commitment to an "undecidable experience of justice" which "does not arise in some intellectual intuition or theoretical deduction, rather it always arises in relation to a particular entity, to the singularity of the other [*Autrui*]." (*Id.* at 35, citing Derrida 1992: 20.) This notion of justice depends on the Levinasian casting of justice as such an ethical relation wherein the subject must give an accounting of oneself before *Autrui*, that which places the spontaneous freedom of the subject into question, whilst demanding a response to its ethical call. Critchley thus pins his reading of the relation between pragmatism and deconstruction on the ethical impulse of a material, embodied phenomenology.

In his response to both Rorty and Critchley, Derrida connects the trace "with a certain notion of labour, of doing, and that what I called then *pragrammatology* tried to link grammatology and pragmatism," as well as a performative dimension that links the two. (Derrida 1996: 80) What is the *pragrammatology*? Etymologically, perhaps, it could be "the study of the act or enactment of writing systems". This term seems to imply further that deconstructive practice is precisely that – an act or enactment. For Derrida, deconstruction is hyper-politicizing, in that it follows "paths and codes which are clearly not traditional," which he believes awakens politicization in a way that "permits us to think the political and think the democratic by granting us the space necessary in order not to be enclosed in the latter." (*Id.* at 87-88) At the same time, Derrida disputes both Rorty's distinction and characterization between of his oeuvre between the early public and later private, in that one cannot exist without the trace of the other being present in one. That is, the performative aspect of Derrida's own deconstructive practices, across his oeuvre, effect a textual demonstration of such an orientation. Hence, if deconstruction is a grammatology wherein pragmatic concerns play out within a text, is phenomenology not the pragmatics wherein

deconstructive concerns play out *hors-texte*? And if so, is there not a quasi-textual interface between these approaches, that also spans the material plane of embodiment, such that the insights gleaned from these investigations might be performed?

#### IV. Narrative as Semiotic Conjunction

In the first section, I claimed that a queer phenomenology effects a hauntological conjuring that allows a subject to be receptive to the hidden histories that subsist within objects and their relations in states of affairs, allowing the subject to “discover” occluded histories hidden beneath or amongst their mere ontological” presentation”, by loosening the normative import of such presentation. In the previous section, I examined the affinity between pragmatism and Derridean deconstructive practice, noting their shared epistemological concerns as built on an embodied, relational experience that resists foundationalism. However, as Critchley argues, the distinction is that Derridean deconstruction is merely practically pragmatic in that it remains committed to a Levinasian notion of justice as its end. In this sense, if hauntology serves as a para-ontology of (Levinasian-Derridean) deconstructive practice, then (a queer) phenomenology also orients deconstruction toward a pragmatic practice, such that one analyzes how the sign(ifier)s toward which one has reactive attitudes, as well as how those channel how such attitudes play out in action. Hence, I claim that the capacity to creatively link signification in an “open-ended” way emerges from the semiotic coding of narratives, which allows recognition of affectively-laden sign-functions that are exorcised in hauntology. That is, the conjuring that occurs as a result of a hauntological orientation is precisely the pragmatic effect of deconstructive practice, which can then be materialized into a narrative form for political purposes.

Understood semiotically, the power of a narrative consists in organizing sign-functions, based upon their attendant structures of significance – which, as Eco stated, are situated within a cultural context. Simply, a sign in a story is significant because it refers to something already significant: while a sign-function is arbitrarily linked, that link is always to a concrete, substrate already endowed with signification, that also guides how those linkages occur. For his part, Eco does not describe how such links occur, deferring to a Husserlian phenomenological *epoché* that would “refer perception back to a stage where referents are no longer confronted as explicit messages but as extremely ambiguous texts akin to aesthetic ones.” (*Id.* at 167.) Hermeneutics reminds us, however, that there is a never-eliminable gap between a human subject and the lifeworld: to bridge this gap is to of necessity engage in a discourse of *metaphor*. Similarly, if a



sign-function is simply something that stands in for something else, then metaphor is essential for narratives to function, for there must be some break within the existent semantic logic in order to express this new relation – and that break is accomplished by the imagination. As Paul Ricoeur further reminds us, the creative imagination is itself a process by which semantic meaning is loosened, “imagining is above all restructuring semantic fields,” with its work as “the schematization of metaphorical attribution.” (Ricoeur 1991: 173)

Ricoeur claims that, in schematizing, imagination diffuses itself in all directions, retrieves former experiences, and awakens dormant memories – a process that he calls *retentissement*, or reverberation, that allows for a “free play of possibilities in a state of noninvolvement with respect to the world of perception or action”. (*Id.* at 173-174.) Ricoeur claims this process allows for the movement from sense to reference in fiction, which endows the imaginative product with a heuristic force that creates a new “reference-effect” that re-describes reality. (*Id.* at 175) Ricoeur argues that certain fictions lend themselves over to the narrative form, which ties together both *muthos* and *mimēsis*, fiction and redescription, into a single artefact: “Between what could be a logic of narrative possibilities and the empirical diversity of action, narrative fiction imposes a schema of human action.” (*Id.* at 177.) Hence, for Ricoeur, narrative allows imagination to have a projective function in its artefacting, and imagination allows narrative to be intersubjectively transposable across different egos. (*Id.* at 179-181.) This intersubjectivity is possible due to what Ricoeur, following Karl Mannheim, refers to as a “common criterion of *noncongruence* with respect to historical and social reality,” which “presupposes that individuals, as well as collective entities (groups, classes, and nations) are always already related to social reality other than that of immediate participation, following the figures of non-coincidence, which are, precisely, those of the social imaginary.” (*Id.* at 182.)

It seems, then, that the construction of the narrative occurs after a disruption of the theretofore-stabilized semantic relations between what has been presented in past experience, and what is either intentionally or consciously encountered in present experience. What bridges this disruption is the metaphor, which then becomes the constituent feature of crafting a narrative, which resonates not just with the subject, but also with similarly situated subjects. Such a disruption, I have maintained with Critchley, is the font of an enactive deconstructive practice toward the presentation of the world – per Derrida’s tentative *pragmatology* – which itself partakes in hauntology. Depending on the degree of similarity in situatedness amongst

such subjects – based on concrete factors such as affective relations, material conditions, and ideological orientation – such narratives can effect an intersubjective horizon that work toward the futures they contain and inspire. In other words, the insights of a (queer) phenomenological orientation toward the world – that which conjures up the histories “absent present” in everyday perception – becomes concretized through narrative practices, and allows such an orientation to be intersubjectively shared so as to effect the phenomenological experiences of other subjects.

## V. Conclusion

In this paper, I analyzed Sara Ahmed’s queer phenomenological orientation toward the world, such that it takes disrupts a smooth presentation of the world by revealing the histories occluded by that presentation. Following Ahmed and Derrida, I take these disruptions in everyday experience as revelatory, in that it reveals these occlusions and the entire field of interpretive-perceptive possibilities, in terms of its “hauntological” aspects. The conjuring effected by such a hauntology, I have claimed, depends on a pragmatic reading of deconstructive practice, such that a subject can enact such deconstructive practices through a queer phenomenological orientation. Such practices entail a necessarily pragmatic element of deconstruction – however, its breaks with pragmatism, *pace* Critchley, are due to the Lévinasian strains of Derrida’s thought, which orients deconstructive practices toward justice. Because the link between pragmatism and deconstruction lies within phenomenology, I further explore how the gap between deconstructive textual practices (“*grammatology*”) and deconstructive “*hors-textuel*” practices (the so-called “*pragmatology*”) can be bridged in the “mixed” practice of narrative-crafting. Through Eco, I note that “overcoding” is the phenomenon that allows for the construction of novel semantic meaning for objects that serve as sites of sign-functions. Narrativity, I claim, allows for the encoding of new signifiers within a text that captures the fundamentally practical aspects of deconstructive practice, as dependent on the phenomenology of a subject. Hence, the power of narratives resides in their capacity to muster various subjectivities towards experiences of the world that resonate with them – the necessary ingredient for effecting political change – as inaugurated by deconstruction itself. This essential link, then, between the pragmatic and the deconstructive, lies within the phenomenological – thus, my claim that (a queer) phenomenology effects a pragmatic deconstructive endeavour, by exorcising the various signifying possibilities present – yet not yet perceived – within what is present to experience.

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