Stellenbosch Socratic Journal

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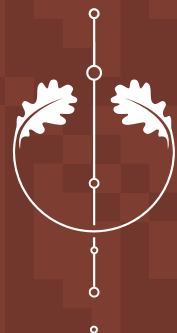*Ivan Bock*
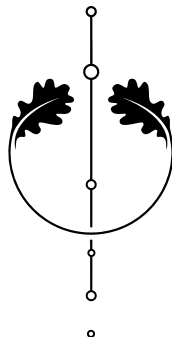*Robin Bruce*
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We would like to thank the peer-reviewers who made this volume possible, including:

Francois Anker	Ivan Bock
Robin Bruce	Paul Joubert
Thomas Russell	Kayleigh Timmer
Cassey Toi	Ashley Tshabalala
Berno van Zijl	Hanrie Viljoen

Foreword

Paul Joubert

It is my honour to introduce this fifth volume of the Stellenbosch Socratic Journal. The SSJ was created in 2021 to give students in the Department of Philosophy at Stellenbosch University the opportunity and guidance to publish in a peer-reviewed academic journal. To further that goal, the SSJ is now hosted on Journals.ac.za. This brings our publication practices in line with industry standards, and articles published in the SSJ will now form part of the global academic network. We are grateful to the Stellenbosch University Library for this opportunity.

In recent years, the humanities have faced escalating threat as Large Language Models — or their vendors' marketing — give the impression that they can fulfil more and more niches of knowledge work. It is thus heartening to see stellar work done by young scholars, a selection of which is compiled in this volume. The collaborative effort of review and editing has been a rewarding endeavour. The articles span a variety of topics, which the editorial team and I believe will interest both the academic and the interested lay reader.

In "From Decolonising Sexual Violence Discourse to Investigating Primate Coexistence", I interview Louise du Toit on the occasion of her professorial inaugural lecture. In this wide-ranging discussion, Du Toit reflects on her journey into philosophy, how she became the first woman full-professor in the Stellenbosch University Philosophy department, and how her philosophical interests have grown over the years. She describes a career punctuated by philosophical provocations that shaped her thoughts and work, from the rape crisis identified in the wake of South Africa's political transition, to the intriguing phenomenon of two neighbouring towns with radically different interspecies relations.

In "Temporal Finitude, Embodied Perception and Ethical Call", Michael Lasker presents a way towards a bridge between three core thinkers of Phenomenology, whose philosophies have generally been considered largely incompatible, despite probing the same question — the encounter with "the Other". Lasker lucidly describes the perspectives of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas, including both the differences and similarities among these philosophers. He argues that these perspectives are complementary rather than conflicting, and points the way towards a possible synthesis.

With "From Deficiency to Difference", Tiffany Candice Lee offers an enlightening corrective to the study of Autism. She describes the limitations of Classical Phenomenology, and how the same limitations of this approach also manifest in Autism research. In particular, Classical Phenomenology and the traditional medical model both neglect the influence of social structures on individual lived experience. Lee argues for the value of Critical Phenomenology as a lens through which the Autistic lived experience can be better understood not as pathology but as difference.

Abigail Iris Backman-Daniels, in "Science Fiction as a Guide for AI, Personhood, and Moral Consideration", explores the moral dilemmas of the possibly-near future using a suitable but oft-neglected tool, science fiction. She draws on case studies from well-known works of science fiction, including works by Isaac Asimov and the popular television series *Black Mirror*, to illustrate some pitfalls of more conservative, human-centred notions of personhood. Backman-Daniels provokes us to reflect on the contradictions in our moral intuitions regarding non-human intelligence and sentience.

In "Feminism (Also) for Men", Berno van Zijl presents Adriana Cavarero's *In Spite of Plato*, a feminist re-reading of Plato in which she critiques the Western philosophical male–female and soul–body hierarchies. He describes Cavarero's re-readings of characters such as Penelope (*The Odyssey*) as well as the philosophy of Socrates/Plato, which equates the male with the soul and female with the body, and which unjustly elevates the former and denigrates the latter. Van Zijl argues for the relevance of this work for philosophy as a whole, specifically *also* for men, who might otherwise be inclined to dismiss feminism as "for women".

Finally, in "The strategic role white victimhood narratives play in maintaining white supremacy", Francis-Lynne Raper offers a topical and urgent analysis of the Afrikaner "refugees" welcomed by the Trump administration to the USA. She argues that the maintenance of whiteness and white supremacy is the principal motivation for this phenomenon, and that it is political gain, not genuine concern, which is the ultimate goal.

I would like to thank the co-editors, as well as the reviewers, for their valuable contributions to the journal. It is through their expertise in a wide range of philosophical fields that the compilation of this volume was at all possible. The co-editors, in particular, were essential in maintaining a high standard of quality. I would also like to thank each author for granting us the privilege of editing their work, and congratulate them on a successful publication.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge my inspiration for the cover of this and previous years' volumes. The cover pattern of Volume 3 (2023) was inspired by the Arabic Square Kufic script, which I could only hope to approximate. The cover pattern of this volume is based on a motif in Palestinian Tatreez, a variant of the carnation/clove branch pattern.

From Decolonising Sexual Violence Discourse to Investigating Primate Coexistence: A Discussion with Louise du Toit

Louise du Toit & Paul Joubert

Abstract

In 2021, Louise du Toit became the first woman in the Department of Philosophy at Stellenbosch University to be promoted to full professor, giving her inaugural lecture in August 2025. In this interview, Paul Joubert asks Du Toit to recount her intellectual journey to this point, reflecting on the gendered dynamics of philosophy as a discipline, and the challenges of establishing an authoritative voice in a largely male-dominated field. The conversation explores Du Toit's work on sexual violence, discussing the catalyst of her philosophical investigation into rape and the intersections of sexual violence with colonial–racist politics and with the struggle for decolonisation. Du Toit discusses the complex legacies of colonial constructions of Black sexuality, the challenges of addressing sexual violence without reproducing racist harms, and the institutional racism and misogyny that continue to shape the treatment of Black victims. The interview concludes with a discussion of her current projects, including her research on primate (human–baboon) co-existence.

In 2021, you became the department's first woman full-professor, giving your inaugural lecture in August (Du Toit, 2025). What was your journey into philosophy? Why did you choose philosophy over the alternatives?

Like all students coming to university, I did not know much about the subject. In school, I admired my English and History teachers for introducing me to the kind of thinking (conceptual interrogation) I would later understand as philosophical. My first introduction to Philosophy proper occurred when I was in standard nine (now grade eleven) and my brother was a first year at Stellenbosch University (SU), studying Theology. He had a class with Anton van Niekerk and invited me to one of his lectures, which I found fascinating — it was entertaining, but also spoke to things I had never had the words to express. My plan at the time was to study to become a high school English teacher. It says something about the sexism of the time that I didn't even consider the possibility of becoming a university lecturer. I had a bursary from the Department of Education, and took languages — Afrikaans and Dutch, English, German, and isiXhosa — with Philosophy as an extra subject.

This was the time of the two philosophy departments (see Van Niekerk, 2017), so there were a lot of philosophy modules on offer, ranging from ancient Greek and political philosophy, to film studies, to phenomenology, hermeneutics, and philosophy of language. I enrolled for all the philosophy courses I could, and that's where the love started. During my third year, Anton van Niekerk called me in and asked if I had ever considered becoming a philosopher. I wondered: can a woman do that? All my philosophy lecturers had been men. But the idea/dream had been planted — a gift from Van Niekerk. I paid back the education bursary and embarked on postgraduate studies in philosophy. I did my honour's and master's at Stellenbosch, after which I was employed at RAU[1] in my first teaching position.

The department is not as gender-unequal as some philosophy departments internationally, yet it has its first woman full professor only in 2021. Is it just that it took this long for the department to catch up to the times? How did you experience the change in the department?

As I said, in the late 80s and early 90s when I studied, I only had male teachers in the philosophy department,

and the white male dominance was similar across the country. Conferences were very masculine affairs. It was different in the other departments, for example in languages — there I had some very impressive women lecturers like Louise Viljoen and Annie Gagiano, among others. But, of course, all the lecturers were white. In the philosophy department, I was probably one of the first women to be employed in substitute teaching positions, around 1990–1995. It would take another ten years before the appointment of the first woman in the department — Vasti Roodt, in 2001.

It was a daunting and pioneering time for me, becoming used to or growing into believing that my voice carried authority. I mean this in a very literal and embodied way as well; one could feel that a woman's voice did not carry the same weight or solidity in the classroom. It felt to me as if you had to have a moustache to be a philosopher (this was the early 1990s and everyone tried to look like Magnum PI!).

To start to believe in oneself as a differently embodied being with intellectual authority takes a while; it took endurance and some faith and ongoing support by others, too. This experience helped me to understand when young Black philosophy lecturers (using the broad political sense of the term "Black") started expressing the same corporeal unease around fifteen years later, in terms of race. They similarly had to clear a space for themselves and find their voices, their classroom authority. Looking back, it was good that my first position was not at Stellenbosch but in Johannesburg. Although my colleagues at RAU were also all male, they had at least not been *my* professors. I could establish new and more equal, horizontal, relationships with them, whereas I had experienced my relationship with the men at Stellenbosch as more vertical. It would have been much harder to be appointed at Stellenbosch from the start and *then* to have found an independent voice.

You are right to say our department looks good in terms of gender. But it took long to get here. As far as I know, Vasti Roodt was the only woman in the department until 2009, when Minka Woermann was appointed. From there on, the department's demographic changed drastically in terms of gender. In 2010, I took up a post here, Tanya de Villiers was appointed, and in 2013 I took over from Van Niekerk to become the first woman head

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[1]Rand Afrikaans University, since 2005 the University of Johannesburg.

of the department. Two other things account for the influx of younger women and yet the first woman to become a professor only in 2021. First, a number of the (older generation of) men left the department long before retirement — Willie van der Merwe got a post in Holland, André du Toit left for UCT, Andries Gouws for UKZN, Wilhelm Verwoerd for Ireland, Johan Hattingh became Dean — or, in the case of Paul Cilliers, and John McCallum, died young. The other thing that has changed is that promotion trajectories have slowed down. I believe most white men in the "old days" expected to be promoted to full professor within about ten to twelve years of starting their academic careers. Due to different financial models and greater competitiveness, it now typically takes much longer to reach that level.

By now, the department is quite unique in its gender composition; I sometimes worry that we will run out of male role models for our students. In my first term as head of the department, a whole third of the philosophy department were pregnant at the same time! That was certainly something for the record books. In my experience, that's still not the norm in philosophy departments in Europe and in America.

But of course, our department still struggles with getting race right. Philosophers pride themselves on being radically critical, yet in terms of demographics worldwide, it's one of the more conservative disciplines, in terms of race and gender.

Do you think it might have to do with the fact that philosophy is — although perhaps not uniquely so — obsessed with its founding texts? Philosophers routinely read Plato, but geneticists more rarely read Darwin. Perhaps philosophy, being so deferent to the texts and figures of the past, is more open to those who still live in the past, as it were.

That's an interesting idea. I'm not sure that I would simply agree. Of course, there is a long tradition with many "authoritative" figures (mostly male and white, according to the historical arc that we still mostly teach) which weighs heavily on the present. We still tend to think you cannot call yourself a philosopher if you don't know Plato, Kant, and Foucault, but you don't necessar-

ily have to know Charles Mills, Judith Butler, and Steve Biko. This is slowly changing, often through pressure from our students. But different philosophers relate in very different ways to the canon, often depending on their personalities. There are ways of reading even the "classic" authors irreverently, creatively and against the grain of the tradition — I have been teaching a course called *Feminists Read the Ancients*[2]. But it's possible that there is, in general, too much reverence for the canon and the tradition.

Philosophy often starts with an unanswered question or unexplored thought — did you have a question or concern that specifically motivated you?

Or, to quote science cartoonist Sidney Harris, with an unquestioned answer. Initially, I was just in love with all of it — maybe not every single module, but there was a lot that interested me deeply. From the start of my studies, I was excited about all the resonances between literature and philosophy. In my first year I wrote an essay on D.H. Lawrence and existentialism, for example. In my honour's year, alongside the Philosophy modules, I took two modules from English: on modern poetry and on African novels. My master's thesis was also still part of that trajectory; it had a very pretentious Afrikaans title: "Mite, metafoor en metafisika: stryd/spel op die grense 'tussen' poësie en filosofie"[3]. If your title has quotation marks within quotation marks, you must know you have a problem. But this was the era of high postmodernism.

Without abandoning my interest in the intersections between philosophy and poetry/literature[4], I started to move into feminist social and political philosophy with the transition from my master's to my doctorate. My paths crossed with feminist scholars in other disciplines, such as when Amanda Gouws returned to Stellenbosch from America and later introduced me to the Dutch feminist scholar Selma Sevenhuijsen. Annie Gagiano's module in African novels also shaped my thinking in a lasting way. I don't think she even called it feminist, but she prescribed mostly women novelists from across the continent. The module explored women's "writing back" to the early male tradition of novelists, the Chinua

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[2] An article resulting from that class is published in this volume: Van Zijl (2025), p. 37.

[3] "Myth, metaphor, and metaphysics: struggle/play on the borders 'between' philosophy and poetry".

[4] Some publications that further explore this line of thinking include Du Toit (1997, 2008), Du Toit & Coetzee (2023), and my unpublished inaugural lecture, "Of Flesh and Ore and the Death of Birth" (Du Toit, 2025), where I work with an epic poem by Uhuru Phalafala, another colleague at SU, called *Mine Mine Mine*.

Achebes and Nuruddin Farahs. That was my introduction to African women's thinking.

I had my first child quite young, and the pregnancy was a surprising bodied experience. At that point, I was "all in my mind", as it were, and to suddenly be pregnant was very strange. I searched for philosophical sources that could help me orient myself in this novel experience. I was pleasantly surprised to discover feminist philosophers who took embodiment seriously (like Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, Moira Gatens, Iris Marion Young, Rosi Braidotti, etc.).

When I was appointed at RAU, they wanted me to teach feminist philosophy, even though that wasn't something in which I had been trained or knew much about. But I started to read myself into the field. I would say that it was despite the lack of female and feminist philosophical role models that, in the mid-1990s, I started to think of myself as a feminist philosopher.

How did this interest develop? Your first book is A Philosophical Investigation of Rape (*Du Toit, 2009*) — *how did you become interested in that topic?*

It was a specific time in my life. It must have been 2001; several significant things happened that year. I had three young children at the time (with the youngest born in 1998), I had to finalise my PhD topic, and it was also the year my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Then the Baby Tshepang case broke in the media (see BBC, 2002). It was one of the first rape cases that really shocked the nation. The media went into a frenzy, and there was a lot of bad reporting. I was completely thrown by this rape of a nine-months–old girl; it was highly upsetting, in that time of heightened emotions for me. I could not get out of that space of feeling shattered by it. I linked it to the political transition — was the nation itself a pipe dream? I decided: let's see if philosophy can help me, let's see if philosophy has the tools to make sense of this.

What was the question that you were trying to answer? Or, to what did you apply the tools of philosophy? You mentioned the bad reporting — or was it the law that was inadequate?

The one thing I just could not understand was what could possibly go through the head of a perpetrator — what motivates this kind of violence, and to what

end? We were also still in the afterglow of the political transition. Promises of a free and open country, equality and all the nice-sounding words of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the new Constitution, and the international celebration about the successful transition to democracy, were all fresh in our minds. But if babies were not safe from sexual violence, what did it say about all that rhetoric, all those hopes? How should we read what had happened there?

Very often it is a single story that gets to you — the details of it: her age, how her mother had left her alone for just a while, that the rapist was the lover of the mother; the thick description. But behind it there's a massive statistic: she was only one out of about 20 000 children under 12 that had been raped that year (and every year since). She was a name that stood in for a very large group of victims. My question was: how do we make sense, how do we read this against the backdrop of our larger political story? That question occupies me still.

At that point, I was not yet critical about the reporting. When I read up on it again years later, I saw the racism of the reporting, the classism, and even a kind of magical thinking in the portrayal of the "horrible township", as if the place itself had agency that had caused this. I also noticed the decontextualisation in the reporting: how the number of victims was *not* mentioned, and how it was treated as a shocking once off, isolated aberration. As if something like that can be neatly contained in the figure of the male monster–rapist and does not also have a structural dimension.

In my book, I looked at different aspects of sexual violence. The first chapter is about the TRC and the quest for forgiveness, how women were sidelined and marginalised as victims, and how sexual violence was entirely left out of the discussion. This is in spite of the fact that women witnesses were in the vast majority, and testified on behalf of mostly male victims. The whole transition was couched in a symbolic order in which women did not yet have full political citizenship. Those were the kinds of arguments I was trying to make.

It took me many years — now to my shame — to start to think about how to decolonise the discourse around sexual violence. Initially I thought that race was not relevant to the discussion, because it was clearly something that, generally, men do to women *within* communities. The perpetrators are usually brothers,

uncles, or other relatives; it did not seem to me to be an (inter-)racial issue. I even say in the book that race is not an important category in this discussion (p.3); this is about men dominating women in all the race, class and ethnic groups, about safeguarding inequality between the sexes. It is about women's citizenship, because the fear of sexual violence erodes all our basic rights — the Bill of Rights, freedom of movement, freedom of speech, freedom of association — all demolished by the threat of sexual violence, what Pumla Gqola (2022) calls the "Female Fear Factory". It took a student of mine to open my eyes to the racial aspects. I was teaching an honour's module in feminism and the law, in which sexual violence was a big component. A Black student asked: but where's the race in your analysis? I said that I didn't think it was relevant here, but she was adamant that it was. I was quite shocked at the time by her argument that my lack of attention to race meant my work was complicit with racism, but I started to read, and you can see that my later work engages this problem much more.[5]

What is the racial component of the problem? How does one decolonise this discourse?

It's not easy. I think that is why I resisted it for so long. A place to start is to look at our history of racist colonialism in South Africa. It was pointed out to me by another student that the first two laws promulgated by the National Party government after they came to power in 1948 had to do with sex, who can sleep with whom. The apartheid logic was obsessed with miscegenation and racial purity. If you look further back still, to the British "black peril" narrative and so on, you realise that Black male sexuality has been vilified on the continent for centuries. If Black men were portrayed as rapists, colonisation could be justified: if Black men could not control their sexuality, if their social orders and customs were inherently harmful, then it's for their own good that there's paternalistic interference in their lives. This led to the systematic dispossession of Black-owned land, destruction of families, and the suppression and erasure of indigenous epistemologies.

What I wanted to highlight is how central the racist depiction of Black sexuality was to colonial control and

exploitation. At the same time, the sexual violation of Black women was completely ignored by rape law in apartheid and colonial South Africa. Black women were regarded, as Gqola calls it, "unrapeable" or "always–already raped" — meaning that they had no dignity to defend to begin with. The preoccupation of the law was not with every person's right to sexual integrity, but with racist population control. The sexual integrity of Black women's bodies fell beyond the pale and interest of the law.

My view (see Coetzee & Du Toit, 2018) is that we cannot tackle the problem of high levels of sexual violence against mostly women and children (but also against men) in our country, unless we face what Azille Coetzee and I call there "the sexual demon of colonial power". So, sexuality and all the surrounding anxieties are interwoven with our racial history, are indeed central to it in ways that too many scholars and activists still ignore. Kopano Ratele, a scholar at SU, also writes about how sexuality and rape (and rape discourses) *made* race (Ratele, 2009). His impressive œuvre is dedicated to decolonising the discourse around Black masculinities.

I have also in my work pointed out that, in international criminal law, sexual violence in armed conflict is often prosecuted in such a skewed way that it's mostly racialised men who are prosecuted for rape (see Du Toit, 2023b). Thus, many of the advances claimed for the prosecution of war rape by the International Criminal Court (ICC) must be scrutinised using a decolonial lens.

This sounds similar to the common criticism of the ICC, that it seems to prosecute mostly African or other racialised perpetrators.

Indeed. And yet, I still believe the world is a better place with, rather than without, strong international organisations such as the ICC. I learned from my daughter, Elsabé, who works in the field, that we must be careful with our critique. While I would love to see the ICC prosecute an American, Russian or a British general (and I don't see that happening soon), at the same time, we must keep in mind that people often bring cases to the ICC against their own governments. There are different mechanisms for bringing cases before the ICC, but one way of looking at the prosecution of war criminals on

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[5]The following publications speak to race in relation to sexual violence: Du Toit (2014, 2023a), Coetzee & Du Toit (2018), and Boshoff & Du Toit (2021).

our continent is to say that African civilians and victims of war crimes have in fact benefited the most from the ICC, even as Western and Russian and other military perpetrators have escaped scrutiny. We obviously need a fairer international dispensation; what we have is systematically flawed through skewed geopolitics, but it is still much better than nothing.

Regarding the problem in South Africa, I now understand better that perhaps one of the key reasons for the lack of progress in prosecuting and properly addressing sexual violence in this country is because most victims are Black women and children. And unfortunately, our institutions are largely still colonial, classist, sexist and racist. Institutions such as the media, the police, and the courts are still likely to take a straight white middle class woman victim much more seriously than a poor Black woman victim or a queer person. This prejudice in our systems has survived the political transition — we have not adequately decolonised our state institutions. Moreover, most perpetrators (purely resulting from our demographics) are Black men, and Black men also dominate the spheres of political power. Shireen Hassim (2013) wrote illuminatingly about the fine balancing act of holding perpetrators to account, even if they are powerful Black men, without falling into the trap of portraying them in racist, colonial ways. The racist portrayal which naturalises or even expects violence from the Black male body is of course very harmful to the Black male psyche and to relations across the board.

I came across a similar problem for the first time years ago while reading a paper analysing in Nietzschean terms the phenomenon of the Christian equation of homosexuality with witchcraft in Cameroonian society (Roxburgh, 2018). I was frustrated, in my then-naïve position, because I cannot ethically stand by and watch injustice unfold, and yet simultaneously there are very few ethical avenues for urgent action. The only way that an African country can be made *to stop its persecution of queer people would be to use the same instruments that are used by (neo)colonial oppression. It seems that this is essentially the same dilemma.*

Yes, it is very similar. And we should be careful to note that there's a systematic and a longstanding, relentless onslaught of right-wing American Evangelical media on African societies, as a form of neocolonial imposition. Indigenous cultures have always been more fluid, multiple and changing than the powerful elites who wield such witchcraft accusations would like to acknowledge (see Du Toit, 2013). Sylvia Tamale, a legal feminist scholar from Uganda, has for instance done outstanding work to show how initiation practices of girls can be used as instruments of emancipation and empowerment rather than instruments of subordination. She writes in her 2020 book, *Decolonization and Afro-feminism*, that "if African women are to successfully challenge their subordination and oppression, they need to carefully and rigorously develop home-grown conceptualizations that capture the specific political-economies and cultural realities encountered, as well as their traditional worldviews" (Tamale, 2020:42).

In other words, the problem is that colonial imposition is alive and well, not that the society has somehow "naturally", or ahistorically settled on a homophobic consensus. Given my understanding of African indigenous metaphysics and cosmologies as fluid and therefore capable of working with complexity, multiplicity, and change (see Du Toit, 2015), I view strictly binary and heterosexist views to be incompatible with indigenous knowledge systems. The latter are more aligned with Christian and modern Western metaphysics.

Regarding the dilemma, in the 1990s, when people spoke out about the rape crisis in conjunction with the crisis of HIV, then-president Thabo Mbeki was very vocal in his defence of black male sexual dignity. He said that white people who speak like this think of "us" (meaning Black men) as barbarians, slaves to their sexuality (Hassim, 2013:178). He saw that racist–colonial trope in every attempt to raise awareness about the rape crisis. Of course, if you call every concern with sexual violence racist, then it stops the conversation and inhibits any activism around the problem. This makes it hard for a white person to find the right way of speaking about these things, i.e. without resurrecting racist stereotypes, and without being read in that way. One way to resist racist and sexist stereotypes is to include in our feminist theorising about sexual violence the male victims, including boys[6]. Despite the problems around framing, the problem of sexual violence simply cannot be ignored, and we have prominent black women scholars who have

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[6]I published two pieces on this issue. See Du Toit & Le Roux (2021) and Du Toit (2022).

made arguments from which to draw. Pumla Gqola's work (e.g., *Rape: a South African Nightmare* and *Female Fear Factory*), for instance, has been very helpful for me.

After this period of academic interest, how did your interests develop?

It's difficult to make a neat narrative of it because I'm interested in so many things, and I constantly get distracted by what students and colleagues are pursuing. But an important development in my work on sexual violence after the book was to investigate how to decolonise our thinking around sexual violence, including in the sphere of international criminal law.

I suppose I can divide my work roughly into three or four themes. The first one is perhaps feminist theory in general, because I've also published on other topics, not just sexual violence. Secondly, I have done some work in African philosophy — I recently gave a keynote at the World Conference for African Philosophy in Cameroon, with the title "Plunder: No decolonisation without sexual freedom". I also co-edited a volume called *African Philosophy and the Epistemological Marginalisation of Women* (Chimakonam & Du Toit, 2018). African philosophy is still a very male space, and this volume starts to address this problem. I have thirdly also worked for many years in legal philosophy. I have done quite a bit of work on, for instance, rape law and the issue of consent (e.g., Du Toit, 2007, 2012).

Since 2008 I have been a member of an international and interdisciplinary research group based in Hamburg, called *Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict*, where I learned a lot about international criminal law in relation to sexual violence in conflict, and what comparisons can be drawn between "war-rape" (so-called) and rape in domestic and peacetime contexts. I am also interested in the gender dimensions of political transition, memorialisation, and reparations. Over the years, my thinking has been shaped and enriched by this group, which includes historians, legal scholars, psychologists, literary scholars, activists, visual arts scholars — a very interesting group investigating different "theatres of war".

Recently (2022) I also became the head of the Unit for Environmental Ethics, which could be seen as a fourth philosophical interest. I have been teaching environ-mental ethics in the School for Public Leadership for more than 10 years, and supervising some theses in the field, including a PhD titled "The Value of Being Wild: a phenomenological approach to wildlife conservation" (Cruise, 2020) and more recently a PhD titled "Framed and Caged: Theorising the Vulnerability of ~~Animal~~ Bodies Before the Law" (Uys, 2025). I also gave a talk at the South African Society for Environmental Philosophy earlier this year, on primate conflict. There's always something new.

To conclude, which topics and interests are you currently pursuing?

I am currently busy with the primate conflict project, which is about human-baboon co-existence, or lack thereof. There are two neighbouring towns on Clarence Drive, Pringle Bay and Rooi Els, and apparently the latter is a paragon of peaceful human–baboon coexistence, while the former is a battlefield, both between humans and baboons, and among the humans, about the baboons. I am interested in the deeply ambiguous relationships humans have with species close to us (which is why I emphasise that these are instances of primate-primate conflict). Why can some human communities work and live with other primates, and others not? What is it about ourselves that we see in the mirror we understand other simians (apes) to be? Why are we so upset by the fact that they are so clever and adaptive and strategic in their pursuit of their own interests? How are these perceptions moreover inflected by imaginaries around race and sex?[7] I am busy delving into this more, with an exciting real-life connection to these villages.

Another project I call "the haunting of the ghost of modernity". Achille Mbembe (2017, ch. 5) calls the Black man "the ghost of modernity", which is of course a reference to slavery and colonialism as part and parcel of Western modernity and the Western modern world view. By asking how the Transatlantic slave trade and colonisation of large parts of the globe could coincide with the French and American Revolutions and declarations of universal human rights, we can see that the invention of race made of Blackness an exception to the universally human. In that sense, the Black man is the

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[7]I am reading for this, amongst other things, Donna Haraway's book *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (1989).

ghost of modernity; some authors say that (Western) modernity entails the destruction of Black futurity.

My critical angle on the decolonisation debate — drawing on other work of course, especially by Black feminist scholars like Hortense Spillers[8] — is to claim that this ghost of the Black man is itself/himself haunted by the figure of the Black woman. There is a double haunting here, a haunting of the spectre (ghost) itself by "its" very own ghost — the ghost is thus not left in peace. Specifically, I mean to draw attention to the main body of decolonial discourse that is still very masculine and therefore skewed. The question is what it will take to correct that narrative, the couching of the project of Black liberation in masculine-gendered terms. I find in some of the key male thinkers like Fanon, Biko, and others, an equation of being oppressed with being "like a woman", while being liberated is framed as a revirilisation, a remasculinisation, as being restored as a man among men. But what does that say, then, about Black women's liberation? If being oppressed is to be like a woman and to be liberated is to be like a (true) man, virile, agential and fully alive, where does that leave Black women's liberation? There is an article on this that should be out soon.

This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

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[8]See her classic article, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (Spillers, 1987).

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Temporal Finitude, Embodied Perception and Ethical Call: Synthesising Perspectives of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas on Encountering "the Other"

Michael Lasker

Abstract

Phenomenology has consistently concerned itself with the encounter with "the Other" and the implications of this encounter for the self, yet some of the principal expounders of Phenomenology differ significantly in their views. For Martin Heidegger (1962), it serves as a catalyst for the confrontation with the finitude of the self, as defined by one's own temporal and spatial limitations enforced by one's mortality. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012) moves from this abstract ontological engagement towards a theory centred on the physicality of the perception of and interaction between physical bodies. Emmanuel Levinas (1969) further shifts towards an ethical perspective, which views the encounter with "the Other" not as a catalyst towards authenticity or as a co-creator of meaning, but as a fulcrum by which the self is leveraged beyond its limitations in order to respond to the ethical responsibility it has towards the vulnerability of "the Other". Despite their differences, each of these philosophers offer a valuable contribution towards the understanding of what it means to encounter another being, yet there is want for a synthesis of these contributions. This article aims to compare these differing perspectives to demonstrate the multifaceted nature of the encounter with "the Other", and thus highlight the necessity of understanding each philosopher's perspective in conjunction, rather than in conflict, with each other. This article concludes that a comprehensive attempt at a synthesis is both possible and worth revisiting.

About the author

Born in Johannesburg in 2001, I attribute the most important and effective early education I received to my family and parents in particular. Being exposed to — and entrusted with — the knowledge of the giants on whose shoulders we all, philosophers in particular, stand instilled an early and steadfast love for knowledge itself, as well as the curiosity to pursue it. I am currently in my final year of a BA Humanities degree, majoring in English Studies and Psychology while minoring in Philosophy. I plan on pursuing my postgraduate studies in English and to hopefully pursue writing in all forms after that.

1. Introduction

Philosophers of phenomenology and existentialism have always directed their efforts towards answering what some might consider unanswerable questions. This can be said to be the truest calling of philosophy, to bring light to those aspects of humanity where darkness is the deepest and most enduring. One such example is the question of what it means to encounter another being whose alterity is so irreducible that it cannot simply be reduced to one's own perspective. A being such as this is termed "the Other" and is paid particular attention within the aforementioned philosophical fields. In these fields, it becomes a tool with which philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas can mine answers to questions about selfhood, perception and ethical responsibility respectively. Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962 [1927]) engages with the encounter with "the Other" and its relevance to selfhood from an ontological perspective, in which the inherent temporal limitations of the Self become reflected back towards itself through its encounter with "the Other" as a distinct yet similar being. In *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012 [1945]), Merleau-Ponty shifts his focus away from this ontological perspective to an epistemological one in which the Self perceives and is perceived by "the Other" and outlines the process through which this mutualistic perception constructs meaning for both the Self and "the Other". Lastly, Levinas suggests in *Totality and Infinity* (1969 [1961]) that the Self's encounter with "the Other" precipitates an ethical call towards responsibility that precedes either Heidegger's ontological framework or the epistemological one of Merleau-Ponty.

In this article I argue that, while each of these philosophers contributes something unique towards their respective fields, they ultimately address distinct aspects of the issue at hand. Thus, it is my belief that to adequately answer the question of what it means for the self to encounter "the Other", one cannot rely on any one of these contributions in isolation. The purpose of this article, then, will be to lay the foundation for an attempt to synthesise the perspectives and contributions of the three aforementioned philosophers into a unified philosophy which can provide a holistic answer to the question of the self's encounter with "the Other". This is, of course, a challenging task which I leave open to

any willing to attempt it; and one which I myself will undertake in the future.

2. Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*

To understand how Heidegger (1962) conceives of an encounter with "the Other", one must first understand how he conceptualises both the Self and "the Other" within a world in which such an encounter is even possible. In order for an encounter between two such entities to occur, the existence of each as a distinct entity must be presupposed. Heidegger (1962:27) coins the term *Dasein* to describe human beings and the term can be literally translated as "Being-there", which reflects his view that such beings do not exist in isolation — or in a subject-object dualism as in previous Cartesian philosophies — but rather as a Being-in-the-world or *in-der-welt-sein* whose existence is inextricably tied to the world around it. Heidegger's *Dasein* is also a fundamentally social being whose existence is permeated by the norms and projections of the society in which it finds itself — even when it is physically isolated from that society. This aspect is referred to as Being-with or *Mitsein* (Heidegger, 1962:157). This means that any one *Dasein* shares its world with other similar beings and this begins to lay the foundation for the way the Self can encounter "the Other". However, Heidegger (1962:68, 78) suggests that *Dasein* exists inauthentically in their day-to-day life in a way that he calls *Uneigentlichkeit*. This inauthentic mode of existence arises when *Dasein* falls away from its inherent individuality into conformity and anonymity among the crowd, turning from an "I" towards the "they" or *das Man* (Heidegger, 1962:149). The "fallenness" of this concept is no mere poetic choice, nor does it refer to a moral failing, but is used quite literally to describe the way the individual Self forgets its potentiality and is subsumed into the group — an existential process Heidegger (1962:219) describes as *Verfallen*. In this inauthentic existence, there is no distinction between members of the group beyond that which is instrumental, as they all conform to the standards of what "one" does, says or thinks — much like herded sheep (Heidegger, 1962:154–168) — and in this way there can be no meaningful encounter between the Self and "the Other". Therefore, in order for a meaningful encounter to occur, *Dasein* must reach an authentic mode of existence in which it can recognise both its own and thus "the Other's" individuality. This

authenticity — or *Eigentlichkeit* — can be attained as a result of a variety of factors which *Dasein* experiences as a result of its inauthenticity (Heidegger, 1962:78). *Dasein* experiences a "call of conscience" — or *Gewissensruf* — which arises from its necessary preoccupation with its own potential, termed *Sorge* or "care" (Heidegger, 1962:241) and which encourages the Self to live up to its full potential. This potential refers to the ability of the Self to live authentically, meaning to live in a way such that it acknowledges itself as an individual and thus as being individually responsible, particularly when it comes to mortality. Heidegger (1962) suggests that by acknowledging its own individuality, *Dasein* begins to see those around it as equally individual, rather than as a mere background. However, in perceiving those around it — and thus their limitations — as equal, the *Dasein* is forced to acknowledge its own limitations and through this become a "Being-toward-death" or *Sein-zum-Tode* (Heidegger, 1962:277) which can live truly authentically.

This is reflected by the title of Heidegger's work, *Being and Time* (1962), which emphasises the importance of temporal limitation or morality regarding the nature of *Dasein*, yet this is contrasted by the work of Jean Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (2003 [1943]:401) in which he views the encounter between the Self and "the Other" as a clash between conflicting freedoms and the ability of said freedom to negate rather than to reflect and elevate. Heidegger's conception of what it means to encounter "the Other" situates this interaction as primarily an ontological and existential one in which the Self is able to achieve a deeply authentic existence as a result of its interaction with another being that it can recognise as distinct from itself, yet which shares the same spatial and temporal limitations. This also emphasises the necessity of alterity within "the Other" that goes beyond the superficial so that any meaningful interaction with it can occur and this becomes an important foundation for later philosophers' understanding of similar encounters.

3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*

Merleau-Ponty is one such philosopher, however his focus turns away from Heidegger's abstract ontological conception of an encounter with "the Other" towards a more concrete epistemological one rooted in the physical embodiment of both the Self and "the Other"

and the mutual perception that occurs as a result of this. Merleau-Ponty (2012) prioritises the pre-reflective experience of the physically embodied Self as the first entity which the Self experiences and which is experienced by the Self. This means that the Self inhabits a "lived body" or *le corps propre* (Merleau-Ponty, 2012:xxxi, xlviii), rather than a disembodied *cogito*, which is already a part of a meaningful world and which is the vessel by which this meaning is communicated. This communication is understood as bodily intentionality and relies on physical cues such as posture, gestures, and facial expressions to express the sentience of the subject which lies within it, as these gestures are a physical representation of mood and intention (Merleau-Ponty, 2012:139). This communication is also pre-cognitive and pre-linguistic as it relies not on conscious cognitive structures but on implicit and tacit understandings of such gestures which emanate from the shared universality of the human experience. However, the embodied Self is not devoid of any conscious aspects as it carries its own future projects, present emphasis and past habits along with it in the form of an "intentional arc" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012:137). The intersection of two of these arcs in a physical encounter forms the basis by which the subject of each arc can recognise the other as a fellow subject rather than an isolated object by revealing the individual style and orientation of each. Furthermore, any physical encounter between two subjects always occurs within a perceptual horizon which is shared by both and which forms the implicit background out of which subjects emerge as distinct within the perceiving Self's field of vision. This concept is later extended by Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and The Invisible* (1968:144–147) which introduces the aspect of reversibility through the concept of "the flesh" (*la chair*) as a medium of the world through which he who sees and she who is seen, she who touches and he who is touched are intertwined by the reciprocal nature of said medium. In this case, it is impossible to touch without being touched or to see without being seen, and this dissolves the Cartesian barrier between subject and object similarly to Heidegger's *Dasein* (1962) and its intertwinement with the world.

However, this does not mean that "the Other" can ever be transparently perceived by the seer or toucher, as it retains an inherent "opacity" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012:340) which is in itself necessary to preserve the alterity of "the

Other" — an endeavour which has been proven to be vitally important to any meaningful encounter with "the Other" through the investigation of Heidegger's conception of such an encounter in the previous paragraph. This contrast between reversibility and opaqueness are the pillars of Merleau-Ponty's conception of an encounter with "the Other", as he suggests that while the subject may mutualistically perceive and be perceived by "the Other", there is an inherent limit to how deep this perception can go. This limit is a necessary symptom of the fact that both the perceived "Other" and the body in which it finds itself are subjects in the world, rather than objects, in the same way that the perceiving entity is a subject. Thus, neither can perceive the other in totality as this would mean absorbing the difference of the other into one's own perspective which would objectify and de-alter it to the point at which it is no longer divergent enough to truly be considered "the Other". This is important in two ways: firstly — and perhaps semantically — if "the Other" was reduced to an object that could be totally possessed, then a true encounter between it and the Self would be impossible; and secondly, the space that arises between the knower and the known as a result of the enduring opaqueness of both becomes the space in which ethical responsibility can exist. This is because this space forces both entities to acknowledge the independence of the other, which in turn protects their freedom and allows a genuine dialogue of mutual meaning-making to occur. This ethical consideration also becomes the focus of further philosophical investigation into what it means to encounter "the Other".

4. Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*

The philosopher to take this next logical step is Emmanuel Levinas (1969). Levinas's understanding of an encounter with "the Other" holds the previously mentioned ethical considerations close to its heart, positioning them as pre-cognitive in the same way that Merleau-Ponty (1962) positions perception of the body-subject. Levinas views this encounter as one dictated primarily by ethics — rather than authenticity or perception — and this is reflected in the title of his work. By "Totality", Levinas (1969:43) means the tradition of Western philosophical models to prioritise comprehension above all else, leading to the reduction of "the Other" into its own conceptual frameworks by observing

and categorising it until it has been mastered and thus deprived of its true alterity. In this instance, human relation only goes as far as its understanding allows and that which cannot be understood is abandoned at best and attacked at worst. Levinas (1969:41) contrasts this with the term "Infinity": that which refuses categorisation or comprehension and thus exceeds "Totality". This "infinite" (Levinas, 1969:41) encounter transcends language and cognition and imposes upon the Self an ethical relation of infinite responsibility without reciprocity, in which "the Other's" vulnerability and irreducible difference call into question and strip away the Self's ontological security. This ultimately results in the precipitation of a mode of relation between the Self and "the Other" which is grounded in an obligation that no ontology can exhaust or justify. For Levinas (1969), this encounter is instantiated in the face-to-face relation, wherein the visage of "the Other" — more than a mere configuration of features — is an expression of alterity that issues a call to responsibility. This call compels the Self to recognise "the Other's" absolute uniqueness and to respond with justice and hospitality, situating ethics as the "first philosophy" (Levinas, 1969:304), the foundation upon which all subsequent social, political, and epistemic structures must rest. In this asymmetrical relation, the Self is exposed and vulnerable in a way that mirrors the exposure of "the Other" and this calls the Self to stand in or substitute itself for the vulnerability of "the Other". This uproots the Self's narcissistic tendency to assimilate experiences into a coherent totality, revealing the process by which the Self's very identity is constituted in and through this ongoing ethical response. Importantly, Levinas (1969) insists that this ethical relation cannot be reduced to choice or contract, for it is beyond any deliberation or mutual recognition: a pre-cognitive summons that occurs prior to any exchange of information or assertion of rights, aligning it with Merleau-Ponty's (1962) account of bodily perception as a primary mode of engagement. This thereby shifts the focus of philosophy from ontology to ethics, from being to responsibility.

By privileging the ethical over the ontological, Levinas (1969) reframes subjectivity itself: rather than viewing the Self as an autonomous substance or knowing subject as in a Cartesian system, he conceives of it as fundamentally relational, meaning that its freedom involves the capacity to respond to the infinite responsibility an

encounter with "the Other" subjects it to. Thus, Levinas (1969) encourages an approach to each encounter not as an occasion for mastery, but as a sacred obligation to acknowledge and uphold the irreducible dignity of "the Other" which is crucial to the ability for the Self to engage with it in any meaningful way. He believes that these meaningful encounters serve as invitations for beings to transcend their totalising mentalities (Levinas, 1969:21) and exist more ethically as "infinite" beings (Levinas, 1969:284, 289–294). Whereas Heidegger (1962) situates "the Other" within the existential structures of *Dasein*'s thrown-ness and Merleau-Ponty (1962) grounds intersubjectivity in the reversible flesh, Levinas (1969) insists that true alterity exceeds any horizon of visibility or comprehension, evidence of an infinite "Other" whose very self-presentation generates an obligatory duty that cannot be refused.

5. Summary and Synthesis

These three philosophers' conceptions of what it means to encounter "the Other" may seem to be indifferent to — if not in conflict with — each other, however there are some points of agreement and overlap. Firstly and fore-mostly: for Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, the encounter with "the Other" is not a secondary event which the isolated subject engages in optionally but rather the necessary event through which the Self is constituted (Zahavi, 2001:151, 153–158). For Heidegger this occurs ontologically through *Mitsein* or Being-with (1962:157), for Merleau-Ponty this occurs phenomenologically through embodied perception (1962) and for Levinas this occurs ethically through infinite responsibility (1969), however the underlying principle is the same in each case where the nature of "the Other" is described as that which fundamentally interrupts and redefines the Self's existence. Secondly, Heidegger's *Mitsein* (1962:157) and Merleau-Ponty's "inter-corporeity" (1968:141) share in their conception of the intersubjectivity of human society being inherent and built in to it, rather as some higher-order activity which only some get to engage in (Zahavi, 2001:152–154). Both philosophers believe that there is no primarily solitary consciousness which then engages secondarily with the world around it, but rather that this consciousness is inherently and inextricably connected to the world in which it exists. This means that for Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, selfhood and otherness are mutually

co-given from the start and engage in a necessary interaction which contributes to the development of both. Thirdly, Merleau-Ponty's (1962) conception of embodied existence forms the basis for Levinas's (1969) understanding of the way the Self encounters the visage of "the Other" and subsequently experiences an overwhelming ethical call to responsibility (Zahavi, 2001:159–163). However, in this instance Merleau-Ponty's contribution of embodied perception cannot provide the full account for Levinas's ethical argument and thus is a prime example of how these philosophies need to co-exist with each other in order to truly and effectively answer the question of what it means to encounter "the Other" to its fullest. This perhaps calls for an examination of the question itself to identify the specific aspects of it which need to be answered. One must then first begin with the Self — or the entity which encounters "the Other" — and what precisely is meant by this. While all three philosophers move away from the Cartesian notion of an isolated mind, ego or *cogito*, they do not move away in the same direction or at the same speed. Heidegger's (1962:27) *Dasein* remains rather abstract in its preoccupation with its mortality and the ontological *Geworfenheit* it experiences within a network of other *Daseins*, yet Merleau-Ponty's (2012:xxxi) embodied Self is as concrete as one can get in his focus on the reversible experience of *le corps propre*. Levinas (1969:302–304) yet still portrays the Self as a hostage or prisoner to "the Other", at the mercy of its ethical call and the only conception of the three which sees the relationship between the Self and "the Other" asymmetrical. One must then move to "the Other" and perform a similar analysis. In Heidegger's (1962) world, "the Other" serves either as a faceless and formless background into which the inauthentic Self can sink or as a mirror by which the authentic Self's true nature can be reflected back towards itself. Merleau-Ponty's (1962) account rejects "the Other" as a purely mentalist entity and acknowledges its ability to reverse the direction of perception by touching that which touches it and seeing that which sees it. Levinas (1969) positions "the Other" as being in an asymmetrical position to the Self in which it can — through the irrevocable alterity of its face — command the Self to heed the claim to responsibility it makes over it. Therefore, if each philosopher conceptualises both the Self and "the Other" in a unique yet equally useful

way, the question of what it means to encounter "the Other" can only be answered by a synthesis of all three.

6. Conclusion

While none of these philosophies paint an individually complete picture of what it means to encounter "the Other", this is perhaps their strength. By narrowing their focus to a particular aspect of said encounter, they each provide a rich and deep account of that particular aspect which — when stitched together — could provide a holistic and complete philosophical answer to the proposed question. Heidegger's focus on the necessity of authenticity to facilitate a meaningful encounter between the Self and "the Other" in *Being and Time* (1962), Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the embodiment of both Self and "Other" and how this relates to the way they perceive each other in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) and Levinas's prioritisation of ethics and the call to infinite responsibility experienced by the Self towards "the Other" in *Totality and Infinity* (1969) each address a unique and important aspect of this encounter and its implications for both the Self and "the Other". However, there is little scholarly attention towards an attempt at unifying these individual contributions into something that has a *gestalt* effect in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

With this article, I aimed to at least begin the process of rectifying that, by first outlining how each philosopher approaches the question of what it means to encounter "the Other" and then laying the groundwork for what a synthesis of the ideas of these philosophers might look like in the hope that they provide a more satisfactory answer to the question at hand when viewed in conjunction — rather than in conflict — with each other.

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From Deficiency to Difference:
A Critical Phenomenological Approach
to Autistic Ways of Being

Tiffany Candice Lee

Abstract

Throughout the history of Autism research, Autistic lived experiences have been pathologised — seen as lacking in the fundamental structures which shape human lived experience. Only recently, with the rise of the neurodiversity movement to mainstream prominence, has a critical lens been taken to Autism research. This paper argues that classical phenomenology is an inadequate framework for understanding the subjective lived experiences of Autistic individuals. While classical phenomenology provides methodological foundations for understanding subjective lived experiences, it often overlooks the social structures that shape certain lived realities. Thus, I will contend that a critical phenomenological lens must be applied to future Autism research for the Autistic lived experience to be accurately and justly understood as a facet of diverse human existence rather than a demonstration of existential lack. Drawing on the arguments of Davis (2020), Guenther (2020), and Gordon (2020), I will distinguish critical phenomenology from classical phenomenology, exploring how it intentionally addresses the gaps in the classical framework. These arguments demonstrate how classical phenomenology's universalist assumptions fail to capture Autistic lived experiences across multiple domains — from alternative temporal structures and attention patterns to different sensory processing and meaning-making capacities — reducing neurological diversity to pathological deficiency. Ultimately, this paper will argue that critical phenomenology is essential for future Autism research to acknowledge human diversity, abandon pathologising approaches, and centre Autistic subjectivity.

About the author

Tiffany Candice Lee (she/they) is in the final year of her BA Humanities degree, majoring in Philosophy and Psychology. Her academic interests lie at the intersection of these two disciplines, and she plans to continue engaging with both in her postgraduate studies. She hopes to pursue future research on the lived experiences of neurodiversity, trauma, and disability. Tiffany is particularly interested in understanding the adult neurodivergent experience beyond pathological frameworks, and hopes her future research will contribute to more nuanced and empowering narratives about neurodiversity. Outside of academics, she is passionate about tending to her orchids, and spending time with her family of furry and feathered companions, including her cat, Doug.

1. Introduction

Throughout the history of Autism research, Autistic individuals' lived experiences have been pathologised — positioned as deficient, lacking in the fundamental cognitive structures which shape and influence human lived experience. It is only in recent years, with the rise of the neurodiversity movement to mainstream prominence, that the pathological lens applied to Autism research has been questioned. Conceived in the mid-1990s within online Autism communities, the neurodiversity movement is a branch of the disability rights movement predominantly associated with Autism (Pantazakos & Vanaken, 2023; Botha, Chapman, Onaiwu, Kapp, Ashley, & Walker, 2024). The movement champions the non-pathologisation of mental disabilities and advocates for the acceptance of diverse human minds. It argues that impairment and distress frequently stem from lack of support and society being ill-equipped to accommodate Autistic individuals, rather than inherent dysfunction within the individual themselves. Thus, the neurodiversity movement prompts us to re-evaluate diagnostic practices due to embedded systemic biases in frameworks like the medical model.

This new critical perspective challenges assumptions of pathology, so that Autistic lived experiences are centred, captured and understood anew. In this paper, I will argue that, alongside the medical model, classical phenomenology is an inadequate framework for understanding the subjective lived experiences of Autistic individuals, without unnecessarily pathologising them. Thus, I will contend that a critical phenomenological lens must be applied to future Autism research in order for the Autistic lived experience to be accurately and justly understood as a facet of diverse human existence rather than a demonstration of existential lack.

Classical phenomenology provides important methodological foundations for understanding subjective lived experiences. However, due mostly to its pursuit of universality, classical phenomenology has its limitations when it comes to understanding and describing the subjective lived experiences of marginalised peoples. For many modern philosophers, this flaw in classical phenomenology can be addressed by applying a critical lens to the phenomenological method — thus, paving the way for a critical phenomenology. Leaning on the arguments of Davis (2020), Guenther (2020) and Gordon

(2020), I will distinguish critical phenomenology from classical phenomenology, exploring the ways critical phenomenology intentionally addresses the gaps in the classical phenomenological framework. Referring predominantly to Hughes, Ekdahl, and Boldsen (2025), I will apply my arguments to discuss the historical flaws in phenomenological Autism research and how a classical phenomenological approach has perpetuated them. Ultimately, I will argue that a critical phenomenology framework is essential for future Autism research to acknowledge the diversity of human lived experience, do away with a pathologising lens, and centre the subjective lived experience of the Autistic individual.

2. Classical Phenomenology and its Limitations

Developed in the early 20th century by Edmund Husserl, classical phenomenology originated in response to a perceived European crisis (Smith, 2018; Davis, 2020:3). According to Husserl, Europeans had become swept up in a focus on empirical science and theoretical explanations and, in the process, had become detached from the essences of their experiences. By imposing scientific theories onto our experiences, Husserl believed that we were distancing ourselves from the world as it initially appears to us (Merleau-Ponty, 2002:vii-viii). This way of thinking, which takes the world as existing outside of consciousness for granted, had become our normal way of approaching reality, the "natural attitude" (Guenther, 2020:11). Husserl proposed that this "natural attitude" needed to be suspended, or "bracketed" in order to go "back to the things themselves" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002:vii; Guenther, 2020:11). This suspension, also known as the *epoché*, involves setting aside the assumption that the world exists completely separate from consciousness and temporarily removing the imposition of theoretical frameworks (Davis 2020; Guenther, 2020). By suspending the natural attitude, we are given the chance to experience phenomena in their givenness, with a fresh perspective — we see the world anew. In so doing, Husserl suggested that phenomenology could uncover the universal structures of consciousness that make subjective experience possible and meaningful (Smith, 2018). Central to this endeavour is the concept of intentionality, which understands that consciousness is always "consciousness of" something. In Husserl's understanding, consciousness is always directed towards

objects, thoughts, feelings, or perceptions (Smith, 2018). Thus, consciousness is not an isolated interiority but exists as the relation itself (Davis, 2020:4).

Overall, Husserl's mission for phenomenology was to rigorously understand the structures and essences revealed in subjective experience — uncovering the objective within the subjective and the subjective within the objective. To some degree, Husserl succeeded in this endeavour, encouraging philosophers to focus on subjective experience and lived reality. This shifts the focus away from purely theoretical or objective accounts of reality that seemed insufficient to capture the full richness of lived experience. However, in many ways, Husserl failed to identify the gaps and limitations in his theory. His pursuit of universal structures, while groundbreaking, risked establishing yet another theoretical system based on limited perspectives, potentially overlooking the ways experience is shaped by factors beyond these suggested universals.

It is important to acknowledge that Husserl, alongside the prominent classical phenomenologists who came after him, constituted a remarkably homogeneous group of philosophical thinkers. Early phenomenologists, like Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, were middle-class, educated, White European men. They did not write from the margins. Their voices belonged inside the academy. Thus, theirs became the dominant phenomenological perspective, a perspective which failed to emphasise how contingent and historical social structures influence and shape the embodied experiences of marginalised groups. These structures, such as patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity and neurotypicality, are not just external facts, but actively shape and organise the "natural attitude" itself, establishing norms that often go unnoticed without critical reflection (Guenther, 2020:12). For example, patriarchy makes male experiences seem universal, failing to account for the lived reality that men can walk down dark streets at night without fear while women navigate the same physical spaces with an embodied awareness of their vulnerability. Similarly, heteronormativity sees heterosexual experiences as "normal", not acknowledging that simple displays of intimacy like holding hands require same-sex couples to calculate safety and acceptance before expressing the kind of affection that heterosexual couples take for granted. Neurotypicality frames daily tasks like grocery shopping

as straightforward, while Autistic individuals experience the same task as an overwhelming sensory assault requiring significant bodily regulation and energy management. By overlooking these ubiquitous structural and systemic influences, classical phenomenology's analyses of "universal structures" risks implicitly universalising experiences rooted in specific, often privileged, social positions.

This limitation of classical phenomenology, specifically its insufficient critique of how social structures and power relations shape what we consider universal and mould our experience, is also apparent in phenomenological Autism research.

3. How These Limitations Arise in Autism Research

Historically, Autism research has been undertaken and framed within the medical model. In psychiatry, the medical model, as Bolton (2008) explains it, involves the understanding that a person fails to do the right thing or act as expected not because they choose to, but because they are ill. Their body is not in the right natural condition — it has been damaged by disease or has an imbalance in the materials involved in mental states. This framework is institutionalised through diagnostic manuals, like the DSM-5, which categorise Autism Spectrum Disorder through deficiency-based criteria focused on social impairments and communication deficits (Bolton, 2008).

Within the medical model, there is a tendency towards binary distinctions — a behaviour is either normal or abnormal, a patient is well or unwell. Generally, "abnormal" manifestations of distress and dysfunction are identified within the individual, who is then treated with an intervention — but only at the individual, not societal, level. The intervention is appropriate should the patient see themselves as having or being a problem. If the individual identifies the source of their distress as coming from outside of themselves, they do not make for very good patients (Bolton, 2008). The medical model's individual-focused approach and tendency to operate in binaries has proven particularly problematic in Autism research.

Similar to classical phenomenology, the medical model fails to account for the ways contingent historical and social structures influence and shape individual ways

of being-in-the-world[1]. Just as classical phenomenology can be critiqued for mistaking privileged experiences for universal experiences, the medical model has correctly been accused of mistaking social norms for medical norms — pathologising what are ultimately socially defined problems (Bolton, 2008). The medical model can be further critiqued for pathologising normal diversity within the human experience. Where classical phenomenology and the medical model intersect, as they historically have in Autism research, individuals whose cognitive structures cause them to experience the world differently to the privileged "universal" are identified as abnormal or deficient.

With these vantage points constituting the predominant lens through which research has been conducted, it is unsurprising that the field of Autism research has been described as "characterised by a narrowness of perspective" (Pellicano & den Houting, cited in Hughes *et al.*, 2025:2). As the vast majority of research has focused on causation, very little research to date has endeavoured to understand Autistic lived experiences. Hughes *et al.* (2025:3) argue that, while classical phenomenology has the potential to greatly enhance our understanding of Autistic lived experience by focusing on first-person perspectives, much of the phenomenological Autism research to date has been "methodologically problematic". Classical phenomenological Autism research, for the most part, has been "neurotypically normative", labelling autistic ways of being-in-the-world as deficient and dysfunctional (Hughes *et al.*, 2025:3).

This neurotypically normative approach manifests itself in several key areas of Autism research. For example, there is a long-standing assertion that Autistic people struggle to empathise with others. Historically, classical phenomenological accounts have painted Autistic embodied subjectivity as empathy-deficient, lacking the ability to connect and resonate with others (Hughes *et al.*, 2025:11). Similarly, where classical phenomenology assumes universal structures of temporal synthesis, many Autistic people experience time as fragmented, cyclical or intensely focused rather than linear (Hughes *et al.*, 2025:7). These differences are consistently framed as abnormalities and deviations from the neurotypical standard rather than alternative phenomenological structures that present themselves within the many diverse ways of being-in-the-world.

It should be apparent at this point that classical phenomenology and the medical model work together to create a systematic framework that devalues Autistic ways of being-in-the-world. The medical model's binary thinking combines with classical phenomenology's universalist assumptions to position neurotypical experience as the standard against which all other experiences are measured. Thus, Autistic ways of being-in-the-world — whether socially, temporally or otherwise — are automatically categorised as deficiency rather than diversity.

4. The Makings of a Critical Phenomenology

It is crucial to recognise that Autistic perspectives and ways of being are shaped both from within and without: by their fundamentally different cognitive structures and the contingent social structures which pathologise and marginalise them (Hughes *et al.*, 2025:3). These forces co-constitute Autistic realities, creating a double bind where neurological differences become sites of systematic devaluation, oppression, and exclusion. This reveals the urgent need for a phenomenological approach that acknowledges the role of social structures in shaping our experience and can account for neurological diversity without pathologising it. This is the entry point for a critical phenomenology.

So what is required for the makings of a critical phenomenology? Duane H. Davis (2020) argues that the answer is intersectionality. Like Husserl, Davis (2020:3) frames phenomenology as a necessary response to the ongoing crises of our time. However, Davis argues that for phenomenology to be of contemporary significance, transcendental subjectivity must be reconceptualised within the framework of intersectionality. Here, Davis draws on the work of Patricia Hill Collins. Collins (cited in Davis, 2020:8) defines intersectionality as "the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena". Davis (2020:3) sees intersectionality as

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[1] "Being-in-the-world" is a core phenomenological concept coined by Martin Heidegger. It refers to the fundamental embeddedness of human existence within an environment of meaningful relations and practical concerns (Smith, 2018). The concept highlights that human beings are not isolated subjects observing an external reality but are inherently engaged with, and act from within, a world that shapes and is shaped by their existence.

grounds for the "redeployment of phenomenology". Ultimately, race, gender, and class — and their intersections — are central in the development of a critical phenomenology.

By applying this critical lens of intersectionality, Davis (2020:6–7) critiques and reinterprets Husserl's geological metaphor of the natural attitude and the phenomenological attitude overlapping (*überschiebung*) like tectonic plates. According to Davis (2020:7), Husserl presents the overlapping of these standpoints as peaceful and stable. The phenomenological attitude slides over the natural attitude, and the world of the natural attitude remains "undisturbed by the adoption of new standpoints" (Husserl cited in Davis, 2020:7). Here, Davis takes a critical look at Husserl's metaphor — turning it against him and asking us to understand it anew. In reality, the overlapping of tectonic plates results in anything but stability (Davis, 2020:7). Instead, one plate "encroaches" upon another and our world as we know it is shaken — destabilised, "such that we mistrust the very ground upon which we stand" (Davis, 2020:7). In the spirit of a critical phenomenology, it appears that this encroachment — which I interpret as an intrusion and an unsettling — pushes up against the natural attitude, to the point of inviting us to approach our newfound instability with wonder and awe.

Drawing on the existential phenomenologists, Davis (2020:8) posits that this instability and encroachment is not something to be overcome but embraced as having practical potential. They argue that, in pursuing a critical phenomenology, phenomenology must be reimagined as a "philosophy of difference". In other words, having an awareness of the instability imposed upon us by social power dynamics, and embracing the intersectional, complex and varying ways humans appear in the world, is crucial in the makings of a critical phenomenology. Davis is encouraging us to unsettle and disturb classical approaches to phenomenological thinking, and delight in the diversity that this new perspective unveils. For example, this might entail approaching Autistic ways of being as revelatory of a diverse spectrum of phenomenological structures, rather than pathologising them as deficient. Undeniably, this is the kind of viewpoint that is essential for approaching marginalised ways of being-in-the-world anew.

In fact, Davis's philosophy of difference directly resonates with Hughes and colleagues' (2025) call for a critical phenomenology which embraces neurodivergent experiences. They ask us to view Autistic ways of being-in-the-world as intrinsically belonging to the full human spectrum. This expansive view challenges the neurotypically normative, deficiency-based assumptions that have historically narrowed Autism research. For research into the Autistic lived experience, delight in difference could be revolutionary.

5. Re-evaluating Intentionality

With Davis's (2020) "philosophy of difference", we were asked to fundamentally reconceptualise our understanding of the phenomenological method and how it applies to a diversity of lived experiences. In a similar vein, Lisa Guenther (2020) identifies the core phenomenological concept of *intentionality* as another area in need of reconceptualisation. Guenther (2020:12) argues that classical phenomenology has been inadequately critical, failing to factor in the "contingent historical and social structures" — what she calls "quasi-transcendental structures" — which shape our lived experience. To become critical, says Guenther, phenomenology must re-evaluate how it understands intentionality, and the relationship between the intentional act (*noesis*) and the intentional object (*noema*). Classical phenomenology, in the Husserlian fashion, understands that the intentional act of consciousness projects meaning onto the intentional object, i.e. the *noesis* constitutes the *noema*. However, critical phenomenology, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, sees this relationship as a reciprocal feedback loop — consciousness shapes how we see the world, but the world (especially social structures) also shapes how we are able to see and experience it in return.

Guenther (2020:13) demonstrates the importance of this distinction through the example of solitary confinement. Husserl might have believed otherwise, but periods of extreme social isolation have a significant negative impact on one's experience of the world. Here, Guenther emphasises that social and historical structures in the world impact *how* I perceive the world and have the ability to break down my capacity to experience the world as harmonious. It is important to recognise that Autistic individuals have distinct cognitive structures that affect their perception of the world and social interactions, frequently giving rise to

social difficulties (Boldsen, 2022). When their ways of being are categorised as deficient by diagnostic manuals applying the medical model, such that they are further stigmatised and isolated, this negatively shapes how they experience the world and themselves within it (Pantazakos & Vanaken, 2023). In the making of a critical phenomenology, it is important to Guenther (2020:13) that we acknowledge this reciprocal relationship between *noesis* and *noema* — noting the ways the world shapes consciousness, without forgetting that consciousness is still able to shape the world. In the end, the mission of critical phenomenology is not just about understanding and explaining the world, but also about changing it (Guenther, 2020:16).

6. Bad Faith and Disciplinary Decadence

In pursuit of a critical phenomenology, Davis (2020) has unsettled us and asked us to delight in difference, and Guenther (2020) has helped us acknowledge that just as the world shapes us, we can shape the world. So, what else exists in our current phenomenological frameworks which hinders us from making changes towards an appreciation of difference? Lewis R. Gordon offers us an answer through his exposition of the philosophical problem of bad faith, which can be understood as the problem of lying to oneself (2020:17). As Gordon explores the idea and implications of bad faith, he makes some observations that stand out as particularly important. Gordon (2020:19) notes that bad faith is social and occurs within intersubjectivity. Exemplified in racism, bad faith is seen when racialised groups are identified as human while simultaneously being dehumanised (Gordon, 2020:20). Simply put, this is lying to oneself about the full humanity of another person or group in order to justify their mistreatment. This is similarly evident in how neurotypicality operates. When Autistic ways of being-in-the-world are pathologised and Autistic people are labelled as deficient, they are automatically classified as sub-human — unworthy of the same treatment as those who share full human status. Ignoring or turning our attention away from the pervasive dehumanisation is a matter of bad faith. Another form of bad faith, argues Gordon (2020:21), is "disciplinary decadence". In this case, academic disciplines, like psychiatry, treat themselves and their methods as "complete", closed systems representing all of reality. Thus, they ignore that these disciplines

are incomplete and flawed human creations. This is of particular significance in the human sciences, where those who do not conform to the discipline's pre-established expectations are labelled as problems (Gordon, 2020:21). As such, the issue is placed on the individual for failing to conform, instead of questioning the discipline's limitations or rigidities. This is particularly pertinent in Autism research influenced by the medical model, such as in psychiatry, where Autistic individuals who do not conform to neurotypical ways of being-in-the-world are categorised as deficient or disordered. This occurs when the discipline fails to question its limited, neurotypically-biased perspective.

Expanding upon this, classical phenomenology is undoubtedly guilty of what Gordon terms "disciplinary decadence". As a framework claiming universality, classical phenomenology fails to recognise its own limitations, placing blame on Autistic individuals for not conforming to neurotypical norms rather than evaluating how it might adapt to account for the diversity of lived experiences. Aligning with Guenther's critique of classical phenomenology, Hughes *et al.* (2025:3) express concern that this kind of research lens risks overlooking the greater social and political contexts which are so deeply entangled with Autistic existence — alienating and isolating the very people whose subjectivity they wish to clarify.

We can see that addressing the issue of bad faith is an important step in developing a critical phenomenology. In particular, the concepts highlighted by Gordon can be found in and applied to the challenges faced in Autism research today.

7. Applying Critical Phenomenology to Autism Research

These issues of bad faith and disciplinary decadence are clearly exemplified through one of the long-standing assertions in Autism research that Autistic people struggle to empathise with others. Historically, classical phenomenological accounts have painted a picture of Autistic embodied subjectivity as empathy-deficient, lacking the ability to connect and resonate with others (Hughes *et al.*, 2025:11). However, when applying a critical phenomenological lens, Autistic-led theories re-evaluate the issue to account for discriminatory social and structural factors. When applying Milton's theory of

double empathy[2], it is acknowledged that "empathetic resonance is fundamentally dependent on sufficient social overlap vis-à-vis expectations and norms between interlocutors" (cited in Hughes *et al.,* 2025:11). Thus, issues of empathy between Autistic and non-Autistic persons, previously characterised as a fault on the part of the Autistic person, can be more accurately conceptualised as a two-way breakdown in social reciprocity. Milton's theory demonstrates that, while classical phenomenology frames this breakdown as an empathy "deficit" and one of the many "symptoms" of Autism, it is actually evidence of fundamentally different Autistic intersubjective structures that reveal the limitations of universalist assumptions of social cognition.

However, the phenomenological gaps in understanding the diverse Autistic lived experience extend far beyond intersubjective challenges like empathy. Autistic individuals, across the spectrum, inhabit fundamentally different phenomenological structures across all domains of consciousness (Hughes *et al.,* 2025:7). For instance, while classical phenomenology assumes universal structures of temporal synthesis[3], some Autistic people experience time as fragmented, cyclical or intensely focused rather than linear. This is especially apparent for some Autistic individuals when they engage in their special interests, leading to experiences of hyperfocus and a profound capacity for deep engagement (Hughes *et al.,* 2025). This intense temporal engagement reveals phenomenological depths that typical consciousness might never access. Similarly, where classical phenomenology presupposes standard patterns of intentional directedness, Autistic consciousness demonstrates a diversity of alternative architectures[4]. For example, Autistic sensory experiences vary widely, from heightened perceptual acuity and superior pattern recognition, to extreme sensory sensitivity that reveals phenomenological richness in everyday experiences

(Boldsen, 2022). The Autistic drive to comprehensively understand and gather knowledge on specific domains of interest also represents diverse structures of curiosity and meaning-making. These differences in attention, temporal flow, sensory-processing and meaning-making are not deviations from universal norms but represent a heterogeneous spectrum of alternative phenomenological architectures that challenge the very foundations of what classical phenomenology considers *universal*. A critical phenomenological approach that delights in difference would appreciate these diverse ways of being-in-the-world rather than pathologising them as deficiencies.

Although I have merely scratched the surface of the historical applications of classical phenomenology vs. a critical phenomenological framework in Autism research, it seems apparent to me that the classical phenomenological approach has been used to harmfully label the Autistic lived experience as deficient. By applying a critical phenomenological lens to Autism research, as argued by Hughes *et al.* and exemplified by Milton, we have a better chance of centring Autistic lived experience and meaning-making, leaving behind the harmful limitations of a pathologising lens.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, I have shown that classical phenomenology has provided an important framework for exploring and understanding human lived experiences. However, classical phenomenology has notable limitations, especially when it comes to accounting for the impact of contingent historical and social structures on the lived experiences of marginalised populations, like Autistic people. Classical phenomenology's pursuit of universality, combined with the medical model's binary thinking and deficiency-based approach, has created a

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[2]Milton's theory of the double empathy problem challenges the traditional view that communication breakdowns between Autistic and non-Autistic people stem from empathy deficits in Autistic individuals. The theory observes that such breakdowns do not occur in exclusively Autistic or exclusively non-Autistic interactions, suggesting instead that difficulties arise from a mutual challenge in perspective-taking and reciprocity when people with different experiential frameworks interact. (Ekdahl, 2024)

[3]Classical phenomenology, particularly Husserl's work, seeks to describe the universal, invariant structures of subjective experience. Within this framework, temporal synthesis — the process through which consciousness unifies time into a continuous, linear flow — is treated as one such universal structure. This synthesis is achieved through intentional acts: retention (holding the immediate past), present awareness, and protention (anticipating the immediate future).

[4]Classical phenomenology assumes consciousness directs attention toward intentional objects in standardised ways. For example, it presumes that background sensory information remains tacit while focal objects of attention are foregrounded. However, for many Autistic individuals, sensory information often refuses to remain in the background — sights and sounds intensify and demand attention, disrupting the typical figure-ground structure of experience (Boldsen, 2022). This represents an alternative architecture — a different structural organisation of attention and perception — rather than deficiency.

systematic framework that pathologises neurological diversity rather than recognising it as part of the human spectrum. These limitations are particularly evident in classical phenomenological Autism research, where Autistic ways of being-in-the-world have been consistently framed as deviations from neurotypical norms rather than constituting a diverse spectrum of phenomenological architectures.

The development of a critical phenomenology, drawing on intersectionality and a philosophy of difference, addresses these gaps by acknowledging how contingent social structures shape lived experience and by embracing neurological diversity without pathologising it. Through the work of Davis, Guenther, and Gordon, I have demonstrated how critical phenomenology provides the theoretical foundation necessary to move beyond the harmful assumptions that have historically characterised Autism research. By applying this framework to phenomena such as the double empathy problem and diverse Autistic temporal and sensory experiences, we can begin to appreciate the rich phenomenological structures that Autistic individuals inhabit across the spectrum.

Ultimately, I have argued that adopting a critical phenomenological framework is not merely beneficial but essential for future Autism research. Only by acknowledging both the neurological diversity inherent in Autistic cognition and the social structures that marginalise Autistic experiences can we move toward research that truly centres Autistic subjectivity. This approach promises to transform our understanding of Autism from a collection of deficits to an appreciation of diverse ways of being-in-the-world, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and just phenomenological understanding of human existence.

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Science Fiction as a Guide for AI, Personhood, and Moral Consideration

Abigail Iris Backman-Daniels

Abstract

Science fiction has long been a source of provocative speculation that has influenced our conceptions of both the present and future. It can thus be argued that both science fiction and philosophy are united in a search for understanding, even though they may go about this search quite differently. This article explores some possible contributions of science fiction to moral philosophy, specifically regarding the question of moral consideration. Particular focus is given to the issue of Artificial Intelligence and personhood, and a number of case studies are used in this investigation. Isaac Asimov's Laws of Robotics and the short story *Cal* (1995), as well as the *Black Mirror* episodes "White Christmas" (2014) and "Be Right Back" (2013) are used to explore some science fiction narratives relevant to moral philosophy. In this exploration, the importance and relevance of science fiction to society, not only as a source of entertainment but also as having philosophical relevance, is highlighted. This article concludes that science fiction ought to be taken seriously and consulted as a guide for navigating AI, personhood, and moral consideration in the near future, given its unique capacity to explore such issues.

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Abigail Iris Backman-Daniels (she/her) is currently a Master's student in the Philosophy Department. Her research interests include Artificial Intelligence, AI Ethics, AI-Human Relations, Future Studies and Future Societies, Fiction and Science Fiction, Science and the Technological Singularity. Her current thesis explores what it is like to engage with AI, and she sets out to pursue a PhD to explore the ethics surrounding AI-human relations with the intentions of establishing an ethical framework as well as practical guidelines. She completed an Honours (*cum laude*) in Philosophy with a focus on the interplay between science fiction and science fact as well as science fiction as a guide to possible futures, AI, and the technological singularity. She also completed an Honours (*cum laude*) in Ancient Cultures with a focus on Magic in Ancient Egypt, and has interests in Mythology, Middle Egyptian Hieroglyphs, and Linguistics. Outside academia, she is a Taekwon-Do black belt with provincial colours in three provinces, as well as national colours and three world champion titles.

1. Introduction

This article posits that the relationship between science fiction and philosophy becomes evident once one delves into the genre. It is for this very reason that I believe there should be continued philosophical research into and discussion of science fiction, given we are only as of recent decades unveiling the innate philosophical value which science fiction holds. To further this point, I would like to quote Manola Antonioli, who states:

> philosophy is also close to science-fiction in that one can write only about that which one knows badly, "at the edge of his knowledge" [*à la pointe de son savoir*], just as the science fiction writer always writes from the scientific knowledge of the present in the direction of a knowledge that we do not yet possess, or from this world in the direction of worlds that are possible but as yet unknown. (Antonioli, 1999, in Burton, 2015:12)

Despite science fiction regularly drawing on philosophy, and thought experiments in particular, it is not as common for philosophy to draw on science fiction. One possible reason for this could be the fear of having one's work discredited by other philosophers and academics (Tucker, 1996:534). There has, however, been considerable change in recent years with more philosophy discussing fiction as a whole. Despite this move, science fiction is still not regarded as philosophically serious work (Tucker, 1996:535–536). Ultimately, this ignores the philosophical importance of not only science fiction, but non-academic writing as a whole, and does an incredible disservice to the furthering of the knowledge basis. Even though there are science fiction works that take a philosophical perspective, there is not much philosophy discussed from a science fiction perspective. It is this which I hope to not only bring to attention but begin to bridge.

In this article, I draw heavily on both science fiction and moral philosophy in order to explore Artificial Intelligence (AI), personhood, and moral consideration. Science fiction — which the author and scientist Isaac Asimov described as "that branch of literature which deals with the reaction of human beings to changes in science and technology" (Blackford, 2017:8) — first arose in the 1600s, although only recognised as a distinct genre in the 1930s. As observed by Asimov in his definition, the genre formed as a literary response to the rapid industrialisation, scientific change, and technological innovations taking place (Blackford, 2017:5, 26). Moral philosophy, or ethics, refers to the branch of philosophy which explores the nature of ethics and morality; what is right and wrong, good and bad; one's moral intuitions; as well as ponders the question of how one ought to live and conduct oneself (Wolff, 2018:2, 4). The writing of this article was undertaken to ponder the question of AI's personhood and moral consideration as seen through the lens of science fiction. In this endeavour, the case studies of Isaac Asimov's Laws of Robotics and the short story *Cal* (1995), as well as the *Black Mirror* episodes "White Christmas" (Brooker, 2014) and "Be Right Back" (Brooker, 2013) are used because of their exploration of AI, personhood, and moral consideration. The chosen science fiction examples focus only on sentient and arguably conscious AI and on the negative impacts of denying AI personhood and moral consideration. Despite this limited scope of AI within the respective science fiction narratives, they are still of importance given that they begin the discussion surrounding AI, personhood, and moral consideration, as well as offer examples of how science fiction explores such moral questions. From this, the argument is made that science fiction has benefits to moral philosophy particularly as it pertains to the moral questions and dilemmas of AI. The case studies are used to illustrate how interactions and relationships with AI reflect how AI is conceived of and classified, and thus treated. This is undertaken to explore the consequences such classification and treatment of AI may have ethically, not only for AI, but also for humans as our treatment of other entities reflects our own moral standing and values. Through this, I build up the argument that science fiction can act as a guide to addressing such philosophical questions concerning the personhood and moral consideration of AI.

2. Science Fiction and Moral Philosophy

Science fiction is able to explore problems prominent in moral philosophy and explore possible solutions to said problems, as well as delve into possible issues which could arise with the introduction of new technological innovations (Mukerji, 2014:79). Fiction, particularly science fiction, enhances our moral understanding and empathy as it allows us to be confronted with the

philosophical moral matter in a more personal manner such as witnessing other's perspectives from their own point of views and seeing how issues affect different individuals (Mukerji, 2014:79–80). Of specific interest is science fiction's introduction and exploration of philosophical issues pertaining to moral philosophy and the ethics of technological innovation (Mukerji, 2014:80). Yet, academic interest and engagement with the genre is quite novel (*ibid.*). In the words of Mukerji, "moral philosophers should watch sci-fi movies" (2014:81). This is because science fiction aids in complementing moral-philosophical research as it investigates existing and new issues as well as explores them and provides possible solutions. An example of this would be the familiar, age-old issues of agency, personhood, or consciousness, and the more contemporary issues of how AI challenges or forces the reshaping of our conceptions of these. Further, science fiction contributes to the field of moral philosophy by introducing philosophical issues to a wider audience who may not necessarily encounter these issues through the more traditional, academic channels. Science fiction also has the potential to foresee moral-philosophical issues not yet prominently raised by academics, namely those concerning robots and AI, before they become more common place. What makes science fiction particularly well suited for these endeavours is that it allows for the exploration of such ideas, principles, and concepts without the regulations of the natural world or limitations of current technological innovation.

Additionally, science fiction illustrates ethical systems in fully fledged out societies or worlds which gives deeper insight into what the nuanced "lived experience" within such ethical systems could look like and the consequences thereof on a social, political, and ethical level (*ibid.*; Blackford, 2017:75). Given that science fiction follows the narrative arc of a character and involves intense world-building, it allows readers/watchers to experience societal structuring, social classifications, ethical and legal systems, and technological advancements which one would not otherwise be privy to. In this sense, it has the benefits of thought experiments whereby different scenarios can be played out to see how principles or ideas can be implemented and what results they would yield. Unlike thought experiments, science fiction uniquely allows for more elaboration and nuance in this exploration which provides a fuller account. This is the case particularly for the exploration of principles and scenarios concerning AI, personhood and moral consideration as it is only in the nuanced, "lived experience" offered by science fiction that we begin to see the full extent of the results.

3. Case Studies

In this section, I outline the specific science fiction case studies and discuss the details of these to illustrate how the discussed issues can manifest in future societies. I discuss why these case studies are of moral philosophical interest and importance concerning the topic of AI and personhood. This will concern the treatment and classification of AI using select science fiction examples to demonstrate the possible outcomes and consequences of decisions regarding AI. Namely, I will look at the works of Isaac Asimov and the *Black Mirror* episodes "White Christmas" and "Be Right Back". I look at the programming and societal treatment of AI in the narratives as well as what this illustrates about AI, personhood, and the resulting moral considerations.

3.1. Asimov and the Three Laws of Robotics

The area of interest here is with Asimov's classification and treatment of robots[1], which is of interest given the current state of AI development. While currently existing AI is nowhere near as advanced as its science fiction counterparts, there are nevertheless ethical concerns explored in science fiction which we ought to have considered if such levels of technological advancement are ever reached. There are already issues seen in society resulting from a lack of boundaries drawn regarding AI in terms of how AI is classified, thought of, and treated. Asimov classifies and treats the robots as "lesser than" the humans, but this is questioned and problematised throughout different narrative arcs in his works. In Asimov's works, the robots generally serve a purely functional role, and their primary function is to bring

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[1]Concerning the discussion of Asimov, "AI" and "robot" will be used interchangeably. In this context, the two are interchangeable. Asimov refers to them as "robots" but in our current understanding, he was in fact writing about embodied AI. This is clear given the sapience, sentience, and even consciousness displayed by his robots.

[2]The robots cannot break the laws in theory, given that it is part of their programming, but some of Asimov's works show the flaws in this as such laws are not definitive and can be broken or overridden in some instances.

about human happiness and comfort/ease of life, and secure their safety. In order to do this, the robots have the laws programmed into them which they cannot break[2]. These Laws of Robotics are as follows:

0. A robot may not harm humanity, or, by inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.
1. A robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law. (Asimov, 2004:484–485).

What is of particular interest here is the prioritisation order of second and third law, which is constructed specifically so that the robot will prioritise human life above its own. Further, the robot's own protection or survival is secondary to that of a human's protection or survival. Asimov himself problematises this classification of AI as lesser than humans in certain short stories or parts of narratives whereby the robot's own wills and desires are prioritised over their human counterpart's. An example of this is the short story *Cal* (Asimov, 1995). This story follows Cal, a robot belonging to an author, who eventually develops an interest in writing and persists with trying to learn on his own. When his attempts are unsuccessful, and when he presents his nonsensical writing to his human master, his master calls in a programmer to install a dictionary in Cal's mind. Cal then writes words, but they are nonsensical sentences, so the programmer is called again to install grammar and so forth until Cal is capable of writing coherent sentences. After these new updates, Cal sets out writing his own stories but when his master reads them, he is worried about Cal's writing being better than his own, so he calls the programmer to undo the installations. Overhearing this conversation, Cal violates the first law by murdering his master in seeking out his own will and desire to be a writer, which he now values more than the law preventing harm to humans.

In this instance we see that if we essentially enslave an AI and treat them as lesser than us despite their sapience, sentience, or even consciousness — perceived or actual — there could be severe negative consequences. Such negative consequences involve individual resistance as seen with Cal or even in more widespread revolts where society could shut down or AI could "take over" and enslave us as is often feared with the technological singularity. Even if there are no such negative consequences which come to light, the classification and treatment of AI as lesser than holds as unethical. It can be seen in *Cal* that the denial of personhood and moral consideration of AI, when elements of personhood are displayed, not only leads to negative consequences for humanity but is unethical. When encountered with such narratives, we generally find the "subhuman" treatment of such entities as morally questionable at best and morally impermissible at worst. Here, the science fiction narrative allows us to not only encounter such moral dilemmas but also to grapple with how certain principles can play out if implemented as well as the short-term and long-term consequences of such. Asimov outlines a possible example of our future, one where AI is inferior and restricted by programming to prioritise humanity above all else. Through the case study of *Cal*, it is clear why this is not a desirable approach, given not only that such restrictive programming of AI's behaviour can be overridden, leading to negative consequences, but also because such an approach is unethical, given the perceived personhood of AI. This science fiction narrative proves to be philosophically interesting as it explores the consequences of essentially enslaving, restricting and controlling another sentient being. The story of *Cal* is philosophically important as its exploration of AI, personhood, and moral consideration can be used as a guide for navigating the future of AI as we ourselves grapple with the technological advancements of AI and the moral dilemmas it brings with it.

3.2. *Black Mirror*

The *Black Mirror* episode "White Christmas" (Brooker, 2014) explores complexities of personhood concerning the treatment of AI and humans. In this story, AI replicas of people are placed in egg-shaped objects called "cookies" to act as personal assistants for their human counterparts (Brooker, 2014). The cookies are digital replicas or simulations of a person's consciousness, accurate enough that the AI replicas believe themselves to be the original human. The cookies' purpose is to serve as a home automation device which will tailor everything in the house to the human's preferences.

Given that the cookie is a replica of the human, it will know these preferences exactly, from the time the blinds should open in the morning to wake the human, to when the coffee should be ready. At first, the cookie is reluctant to "cooperate" and serve its purpose, given that it believes itself to be the human. A representative from the company is present at the time of installation in order to "break in" the cookie. The cookies experience time differently as they can be programmed to experience extended periods of time while mere seconds elapse in the real world. This allows the representative from the company to simulate hours, days, weeks, and years in isolation for the cookie until they "break" and agree to cooperate by serving as home automated systems. It is shown that the cookies are capable of displaying pleasure and pain cues, as well as more complex emotional cues of an identity crisis when they are told they are in fact an AI replica. They experience distress when they are told they were created to serve as a home automation device, feel lonely/isolated in the simulated time which elapses, and are despondent at their fate.

The training and use of these cookies is rather ethically questionable, leaving us with a moral conundrum. Specifically, of concern is the ethical considerations of the treatment of AI in light of their own beliefs of their existence, insofar as they are capable of being conscious of their existence and believe themselves to be alive and human. Additionally, it is also interesting to look at how this differs from the ethical considerations of the treatment of humans in the same context. The AIs display cognitive and emotional intelligence; they display and arguably experience emotions; they have to be "broken in" to cooperate through the use of isolation torture, consisting of simulated years alone, or simulations to trick people into confessions. Here, the issue which is of interest is whether the cookie is actually conscious. It appears to be conscious, believes itself to be the person of which it is a replica, and it responds accordingly. It displays both pleasure and pain, happiness and suffering, as well as wills and desires. Such behaviours generally make one inclined to grant the being moral considerations given these displays of personhood and consciousness. The real-world example of this would be the general treatment of insects versus mammals[3]. It is generally morally permissible to kill insects, and we generally do so without any second

thought. We generally consider insects to be of low to no consciousness as they do not display the familiar signs of pain and pleasure which we recognise. On the other hand, it is generally frowned upon to treat mammals such as dogs or elephants in the same way as they are considered to be of higher consciousness and display those signs of pain and pleasure which we recognise.

The area of interest in "White Christmas" (Brooker, 2014) is that the cookie is treated like a tool, albeit a sophisticated one, which is there to satisfy the human's wills and desires, not that of its own, despite displaying similar signs of pain and pleasure which we recognise. If we view and treat the AI as a mere copy despite its behaviours and responses equalling that of humans, we run the risk of unethical behaviour. If the AI is capable of displaying signs of suffering, what is to distinguish its suffering from a human being in the same situation displaying the same signs of suffering? According to Gomel, there is no ethical distinction (2011:349). Even if we cannot be certain whether the AI possesses consciousness, if the signs of suffering are sufficient, there cannot practically be any difference in moral consideration given to the suffering. When the AI is a close enough copy, the ethical boundary between AI and human becomes meaningless. Hence, there should be no ethical boundary which results in differing treatment of AI and humans. If we treat the AI as lesser than, as seen in the episode, what is to stop humans from being treated similarly under the justification of the abuser believing the human was AI or "lesser than"? Towards the end of the episode, this concern is directly explored when the same technology is used to elicit a confession from a prisoner. Concerning the ethical standpoint, if we are to classify AI as "lesser than" and treat them accordingly, we run the risk of immoral behaviour. Ultimately, the case study of "White Christmas" highlights the potential negative consequences of treating AI as "lesser than" in terms of how it is morally impermissible to deny the personhood and moral considerations of the AI when it displays signs of personhood in the form of suffering and happiness. This science fiction example is philosophically interesting as it explores the consequences of outright enslaving and abusing another sentient and conscious being. The narrative of "White Christmas" is philosophically important given its exploration of AI, personhood, and moral consideration which can guide our navigation of the future of AI as we

tackle the technological advancements of AI and the accompanying moral dilemmas.

Concerning the episode "Be Right Back" (Brooker, 2013), the complexities of personhood, concerning the interactions between and treatment of AI and humans, are demonstrated in the narrative arc. In "Be Right Back", the protagonist, Martha, whose boyfriend Ash has passed away, makes use of a service for an AI clone of her boyfriend — first in the form of messages and later in the form of calls. She later purchases a physical android clone and uploads the AI into it. She begins to grow agitated with the clone for not being Ash: "You aren't you, are you? … You're just a few ripples of you. There's no history to you. You're just a performance of stuff that he performed without thinking, and it's not enough" (*ibid.*). She is agitated by him following her orders, to the extent that she eventually tells him to jump off a cliff to kill himself. He starts to follow this order, but she is further upset that he is not begging for his life. Upon her request, he dutifully proceeds to beg her to spare his life, and she relents, stopping him from killing himself. Afterwards, she keeps him locked away in a closet, only allowed to come out and interact with her daughter on weekends. In this example, Martha views and treats robot-Ash as a mere tool to fill in for her deceased boyfriend, rather than an entity in its own right. If we view and treat the AI as a mere copy despite its behaviours and appearance equalling that of humans, we run the risk of unethical behaviour. If the AI is a perfect copy of a human in terms of appearance and is capable of movement in the world as another human, what is to distinguish AI from human? As previously discussed, a perfect AI copy is not ethically distinct from the original human. Here, however, the similarity is in appearance instead of behaviours as robot-Ash is physically indistinct from human-Ash but has different responses to situations from his human counterpart. As previously mentioned, even if we cannot be certain whether the AI possesses consciousness, if the behaviour is close enough, a practical ethical distinction is impossible. It ought to be morally impermissible to deny personhood and moral considerations on the basis of a distinction which is

impossible to make. The ethics of such actions are brought into question in "Be Right Back" as this shows the negative consequences of classifying AI as "lesser than" and the consequences of treating AI accordingly. This science fiction example is philosophically interesting given it explores the consequences of treating AI as a mere copy instead of as an individual. Furthermore, it explores the moral questions surrounding the treatment of sentient beings when they are not awarded the same rights as humans. The narrative of "Be Right Back" is philosophically important given its exploration of AI, personhood, and moral consideration which we can use to guide our navigation of the future of AI as we tackle the technological advancements of AI and the resulting moral dilemmas thereof.

3.3. Why Science Fiction Should be Consulted as a Guide for AI, Personhood and Moral Consideration

These chosen examples of science fiction tackle the issues surrounding the personhood and moral considerations of AI within the likely near future and the technological singularity. While all three case studies display the negative impacts of denying AI personhood and moral consideration despite their autonomy, sapience, sentience, and perhaps even consciousness, some people are concerned that AI may be granted too much personhood and moral consideration. This alternate view is not often explored in science fiction and is found more in philosophical discussions pertaining to theory of mind and ethics. The concern at play in this view is that of "deception anxiety", i.e., the fear that AI will trick humans into thinking the AI is also human, thus deceiving the user (Dumouchel, 2022:2095). From this deception, the AI will have tricked the human into granting it too much personhood and moral consideration. In general, we are inclined to grant personhood and moral considerations to entities which look like us or are familiar in appearance, and which behave like us (particularly which display signs of suffering and happiness we find familiar). It is unlikely that this fear will be realised as it is uncommon for humans to mistake AI for other humans (*ibid.*).[4]

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[3] I will not be touching on animal rights and the ethics thereof; I have mainly used it here as an analogy for the classification and treatment of AI in comparison to humans.

[4] Even in cases where individuals believe themselves to be in relationships with AI, they do not believe the AI to be human (Dumouchel, 2022:2095). This is evident in the fact that these individuals do not tend to introduce the AI to their friends and family, nor do they typically take the AI out on public dates.

The case studies discussed are of philosophical interest as they explore the possible future of AI, and are of philosophical importance as they offer insights on the morality of our decisions of whether to grant AI personhood and moral consideration. The issues highlighted here are of great importance to society as a whole moving forward in the upcoming years as AI becomes increasingly more sapient, more advanced, and more integrated in society and daily life. In the possible near future, we will be expected to make calls regarding AI in terms of their social, legal, and moral status. The science fiction narratives allow us to explore the implementation of certain principles and ideas by essentially observing them play out in society. This then allows us to weigh up the resulting consequences in ways standard philosophical investigation may not accommodate. It is for these reasons that such science fiction becomes topical and relevant to engage with for all members of society from policymakers to philosophers to everyday individuals. Hence, science fiction ought to be consulted as a guide for the future of AI concerning its personhood and moral consideration.

4. Conclusion

I have provided an introductory account of the connection of science fiction to moral philosophy. The discussion has demonstrated the value that science fiction has in particular for moral philosophy pertaining to issues surrounding AI, personhood, and moral consideration. Through the explorations of the science fiction narratives of the selected case studies, I have illustrated how science fiction can serve as a starting point for theorising about these issues. I have outlined how science fiction lends itself as an "enabling device" to explore and assess, question, and provide possible solutions to the philosophical issues of the future of society, AI ethics, the personhood of AI, and AI–human relations. Science fiction ought to be taken seriously, given its exploration of moral questions. Ultimately, my discussion has highlighted and stressed the importance of science fiction not only to philosophy but to society as a whole as it serves as a potential guide to navigating AI, personhood, and moral consideration in the possible futures.

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Feminism (Also) for Men: Souls, Bodies, and the Question of How to Live

Berno van Zijl

Abstract

This article aims to demonstrate how men who feel confused and irrelevant in feminism classes can engage with feminism on two levels: listening to the voices of women, but also seeing feminism as an opportunity to supplement their own (male) perspectives. It discusses Adriana Cavarero's *In Spite of Plato*, and points out that she emphasises its relevance for women much stronger than its relevance for men – almost to the point where the latter is completely eclipsed. Cavarero criticises the Western philosophical tradition originating with Plato as propagating a genderised soul–body hierarchy, in which the male = the soul, the female = the body, and the former is centralised while the latter is merely defined in terms of its deviation from the former. She proceeds to reread (marginalised) female characters from male-produced texts in order to carve out space for an embodied female subjectivity. While she discusses embodied wisdom with regards to Penelope (Odysseus's wife in *The Odyssey*) and thereby women more generally, she does not emphasise the value of embodiment for men. This article emphasises that the bod(il)y can supplement male subjectivity too and can lead towards a more complete philosophical approach: the abstract intellectualism of the tradition Cavarero criticises is impoverished and cannot satisfactorily address an everyday, situated question such as "How should I live?". Hopefully this will make some of those men in feminism classes feel less confused and irrelevant.

About the author

Berno is a master's student in philosophy writing on sustainable development. While his decision to pursue a career in philosophy started with a love for theoretical, abstract thinking for its own sake, he is becoming increasingly interested in more practical, everyday topics. He believes that thinking is the gift of humankind, but overthinking is its burden. If he is not behind his laptop and a pile of books, you can find him barefoot in the Stellenbosch mountains with his dog or on a stage playing guitar with his friends.

1. Introduction

This article is predominantly aimed at men who find themselves feeling confused and irrelevant in feminism classes. In fact, it was written by a man in that precise context. For men, feminism classes can easily feel like classes only about giving voices to women (or, rather, them taking voices for themselves – as it should be). And it is about this, but not simply about this. It is also about critiquing men's perspectives and offering perspectives that can supplement these, but this is not always emphasised or made explicit. Below is a discussion of a feminist text that, while being directly relevant to men, does not emphasise this fact at all. I aim to emphasise its relevance to men and thereby demonstrate another level on which men can engage with feminism. Hopefully, this will allow some men to feel less irrelevant and confused in feminism classes. Please note that I am not arguing that men should only take from feminism what is directly relevant for themselves and ignore the important activity of women becoming part of the conversation. Both features of feminism are important.

What can men learn from a feminist perspective on the Western philosophical tradition, as exemplified by a thinker like Plato? This article investigates the shortcomings of a philosophical approach that centralises intellectual contemplation and considers how an alternative, in which the value of embodied wisdom and the important relationship between philosophy and everyday life are acknowledged, could supplement the former.

The Italian feminist philosopher, Adriana Cavarero, in her book *In Spite of Plato*, argues that Plato's writings have influenced a male-centric tradition of philosophy in the West that erases the female perspective and voice. She claims that traditionally, the male has been equated with the soul/mind and the female with the bod(il)y, thereby leading to the aim of philosophy to cultivate the soul and renounce the body — to foster eternal, abstract knowledge by transcending the body and its senses, which can only distract by perceiving the world of flux. The result, she argues, is a male-centric symbolic order which is fundamentally disembodied and which leaves no room for female subjectivity, where subjectivity refers to a position of agency or a perspective from which the world is interpreted. The (disembodied) male per-

spective is deemed neutral, and the (embodied) female becomes a mere object defined in terms of her deviation from the male. Thus, she rereads (marginalised) female characters from male-produced texts in order to carve out a space for female subjectivity.

The emphasis of the book very much falls on the development of a female subjectivity. However, Cavarero does highlight the philosophy of sexual difference as one of her theoretical axes and briefly suggests how her work relates to men: "[In] the new philosophical horizon of sexual difference, the basic element of philosophy is a *two*, not a *one* ... . And this two brings into language living and embodied humans, in all the splendor of their finitude" (Cavarero, 1995:6). This article will make explicit that the value of embodiment, highlighted by the space carved out for a female subjectivity, can supplement male subjectivity and lead to a more complete philosophical approach.

Western philosophy — exemplified by thinkers such as Plato and later René Descartes — has been pre-occupied with rationalist, abstract ideas that fail to answer one of the most basic philosophical questions: How should I live? The movement towards a more complete philosophical approach, one that values embodiment, can bring philosophy closer to everyday problems, such as this fundamental question.

The structure of this article is as follows: First, Plato's genderised soul–body hierarchy will be discussed with reference to *The Phaedo* and Aristophane's Love Myth in *The Symposium*. Then Cavarero's feminist rereading of Penelope, the wife of Odysseus from *The Odyssey*, will be recounted. It will be demonstrated that this feminist rereading of ancient texts carves out a space for the female within the male-centric symbolic order, and that the embodied knowledge it exemplifies suggests a way towards a more complete philosophical approach for both women and men.

2. Plato's Soul–Body Hierarchy

Plato's writings are ripe with references to a soul–body distinction in living beings, which is particularly significant for humans. The main reason is the importance of this distinction — in fact, hierarchy, as will be shown later — for philosophy, and philosophy is typically a human endeavour. Plato assigns the soul (or mind; this article does not distinguish between the two)

as belonging to the realm of eternal, abstract entities, which he calls the Forms. The body, on the other hand, is assigned to the realm of ever-changing, concrete matter — the world that is experienced with our senses. This distinction is hierarchised, with the realm of the Forms (and thus the soul) placed above the worldly realm (and thus the body). Plato views philosophy as the pursuit of eternal, abstract knowledge, which is characterised as knowledge of the Forms by moving away from the ever-changing and thus imperfect knowledge stemming from our sense-experiences of the material world. Philosophy is thus the process of ascension (transcendence) from the body to the soul.

Plato's dualist distinction between soul and body is found in Socrates's definition of death in *The Phaedo*. Socrates is imprisoned and awaiting his execution after having been tried and prosecuted for corrupting the youth and impiety. In his discussion about death with his friends visiting him in his cell, he offers the following definition:

> Is [death] anything other than the separation of the soul from the body? … The body is separated from the soul and is just by itself, while the soul, having been separated from the body, is just by itself? Is death anything other than this? (Plato, 2025b:64c)

If soul and body can separate, then they both must be distinct entities within themselves. However, what is also implied is that these two entities interact or combine at a stage and, if death is separation, their combination must be life. Socrates proceeds to assign philosophy to the realm of the soul: "the preoccupation of such a person [a philosopher] is not about the body, but is directed away from it as much as possible, and turned towards the soul" (Plato, 2025b:64e). The reason for this is that "[the body] disturbs the soul" (Plato, 2025b:66a) — Socrates even goes as far as describing it as a "badness" (rendered as "an evil" in some translations, e.g., Plato, 1951:66) with which "the soul is compounded" (Plato, 2025b:66b 5). The body is part of the physical realm where everything is in flux, and the physical senses can only perceive these fleeting entities, i.e., what *appears* to be. What is — reality — consists not of such changing appearances, but rather of the eternal, abstract Forms. The Forms are apart from the world of flux and, as the physical world is perceived

by the senses, the abstract Forms are perceived by the soul. The body can thus only distract the soul by sensing what is temporary, thereby pulling it away from its philosophical pursuit of (abstract, eternal) truth.

Plato believes that the philosopher's goal is pure and complete separation between soul and body, so that the soul can return to where it belongs — the realm of the Forms. That is why Socrates describes engaging with philosophy as a "pursuit of nothing except dying and being dead" (Plato, 2025b:64a). Since death is the definite separation of the soul from the body, philosophers — pursuing eternal, abstract knowledge — strive for a pure, complete separation so that the body will stop distracting the soul with sense information about the temporary. The souls of non-philosophers, whose attention was not fixed towards the eternal but rather on bodily pleasures, do not separate completely at death. The tie between their souls and bodies is strong and, when they die, their bodies weigh down their souls and prevent complete separation. Philosophy is thus the art of practising death, of how to separate purely and completely from the body.

Absolute knowledge can only be known in death. Since life is marked by the union of the soul and body, the body will always distract the soul from pure contemplation with sense-information of the ever-changing. Although the philosopher cultivates the soul and not the body, the body is still there during life. Only once the body dies and the soul is not too attached to the body, can the soul successfully know eternal, abstract truth. Plato therefore posits a metaphysical dualism between soul and body and that philosophy is the pursuit of the former, whereas the latter is a mere hindrance. Thus, a clear hierarchy between soul and body is found in Plato's thought.

3. Male Souls and Female Bodies

Some feminist philosophers, such as Cavarero, argue that Plato's soul–body hierarchy is gendered in that the soul = the male and the body = the female. This can be deduced from the fleeting references made to Xanthippe (Socrates's wife) and Penelope (Odysseus's wife) in the *Phaedo.* Further evidence for the soul–body hierarchy being gendered will be given through a discussion of love as depicted in *The Symposium.*

Socrates does not allow Xanthippe to be present at his final discussion about death, moments prior to his

execution. When Socrates's friends join him in his cell, Xanthippe laments, "your friends will be speaking to you now for the very last time, and you to them" (Plato, 2025b:60a). Consequently, Socrates sends her home. This is significant for two reasons: First, it suggests that the home, instead of philosophical discussion, is the proper sphere for women. Socrates and his friends are about to discuss philosophy, and his wife may not be present, so is sent back to her proper sphere. Moreover, they are about to discuss death — possibly the most important philosophical topic given my discussion above. This relates to the second point: that Xanthippe, a woman, laments the physicality and embodiment of Socrates's imminent death — it is the last time that he and his friends will be and speak together. This indicates Xanthippe's unfamiliarity with philosophy and with the significance of death as the soul escaping the body and returning to where it came from. Xanthippe's ignorance of death and philosophy, and Socrates's sending her home, suggest a gendering of the soul–body hierarchy into the male (soul) and female (body). Women were believed to be too bodily oriented and disengaged from the soul to practise philosophy, and were instead associated with the realm of "bodily distractions".

The brief reference to Penelope in *The Phaedo* further supports this notion. When Socrates's friends lament the fact that he is about to die, Socrates says that they are in effect trying to undo his philosophical pursuits by focusing on his bodily death and overlooking the fact that his lifelong goal is about to materialise. They are performing bad philosophy, since their attention is focused on the physical and ever-changing — the bodily — and is counter-productive to the pursuit of philosophy as pure and complete separation of the soul from the body[1]. Socrates relates this bad philosophy to Penelope's "weaving some web in the opposite direction" (Plato, 2025b:84a). Here, the bodily focus of bad philosophy is assigned to Penelope's role of weaving, which is not only a physical activity that does not require much contemplation, but is also typically assigned to women. Moreover, it is deemed aimless because Pene-

lope unweaves at night what she had woven in the day. Penelope is therefore depicted as a bad philosopher who is too pre-occupied with the body and avoids contemplative activities and, consequently, unfit to separate completely from her body at death.

That Plato's soul–body hierarchy is gendered is more explicit in parts of *The Symposium*. During a symposium on love, in which Socrates and others are present, Aristophanes offers his view of love by recounting a myth (Plato, 2025a:189d–193c) about ancient humans as dual, egg-shaped entities consisting of two people joined together. According to this myth, there were three types of dual humans: with male-male, male-female, and female-female combinations. These dual humans were very strong and wanted to compete with the Gods. Zeus, somewhat threatened, decided to slice them in half in order to weaken them. Love is defined as the longing for individual humans to find their lost halves and to be reunited with them. Individual men originating from male-male entities love males, and those originating from male-female entities are lovers of women. Women originating from male-female entities love men, and those originating from female-female entities love women. According to Aristophanes, heterosexual love leads to mere procreation and child-rearing (Plato, 2025a:191c). But real men, "the very best of boys and youths … [who] are by nature extremely manly … do not, by nature, have an interest in marriage and begetting children" (Plato, 2025a:192a–b). In male homosexual love, they would have "satisfaction from their intercourse" and be able to "return to their activities", such as "civic affairs" (Plato, 2025a:191c–192b).

Moreover, as Socrates recounts Diotima's[2] view on love in *The Symposium*, male homosexual love[3], rather than the human babies of heterosexual love, produce idea babies; they give birth from their souls (Plato, 2025a:209a). In *Theaetetus*, Plato even describes the character Socrates as a midwife for idea babies (Plato 2025c:150b–e). The superiority of idea babies over human babies is evident in that

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[1]Note how despite the "bad philosophising" of these men, Socrates is still willing to engage philosophically with them, whereas he does not with Xantippe, who is sent home.

[2]Yes, she is a woman who Socrates deems wise, but notice that she is not present at the symposium — in fact, no women are, except the servant. This exclusion echoes Xanthippe's not being present at Socrates's final philosophical discussion.

[3]It is also interesting to note that no productive output is identified for female homosexual love. Plato does not even bother to discuss the situation in which men are not present.

everyone would prefer to have such children as these [ideas] rather than the human kind .... Many shrines have already been established for them because they [men with great ideas, like Solon the famous legislator] had such children as these, but this has never yet happened because of human children. (Plato, 2025a:209c–e)

The physical process of child-rearing — ensuring that the "race would continue" (Plato, 2025:191c) — comes second to more intellectual matters like "civic affairs". Since having sexual intercourse with a woman is what leads to the physical, bodily affair of procreation, it suggests that the female body and the concomitant of child-rearing are the culprits that distract men from their intellectual activities.

This supports Cavarero's notion that Plato established a male-centric symbolic order based on a soul–body hierarchy: the soul is identified with maleness and male heterosexual love and is raised above the body, which is identified with femaleness in that heterosexual love begets "lesser" children — human ones — in comparison to the children of the soul — ideas — which is conceived of male heterosexual love.

Plato's writing, exemplified here in *The Phaedo* and *The Symposium*, can thus be read as positing a view of philosophy in which the soul is prioritised over the body and the male is prioritised over the female. In defining death as the separation between the soul and the body, and philosophy as striving for a complete and pure separation by renouncing the body and cultivating the soul, the former is achieved. In praising the birthing of ideas, which results from the intellectual love between men, as a more fulfilling endeavour than begetting human children, which results from the physical love between men and women, the latter is achieved. Let us now consider a critical feminist rereading of Plato's Penelope that lays the groundwork for moving towards a union between soul and body in philosophy for both genders.

4. Rereading Penelope: Towards Embodied Philosophy

Cavarero sets out to displace Plato's gendered soul–body hierarchy. She argues that Plato's work influenced a male-centric era that feigns neutrality, thereby invalidating any female subjectivity, i.e., a position of agency and a perspective from which to interpret. She claims that the West operates within a male symbolic order, originating in Ancient Greece and with Plato as a seminal figure, perpetuated by male mythic figures into the present (Cavarero, 1995:2). This symbolic order claims a central position for the male in which "the roles played by female figures have their meaning in the patriarchal [male-centric] codes that constructed them" (Cavero, 1995:2). Women are thus mere objects of the male gaze. They are excluded from the male centre and marginalised as deviations from men. Consequently, "women find that [they] are the object, not the subject, of the other's thought" (Cavarero, 1995:2). Cavarero's method of displacing the soul–body hierarchy involves rereading female characters in male-produced texts from the perspective of a modern woman, i.e., she adopts a neo-materialist perspective grounded in female embodiment and mediated by personal experiences. She performs a type of "repossession", in which she steals (marginalised) female characters from male-centric texts and gives them a new voice. My focus will be on her rereading of Penelope, one in which her role is transformed into a sort of embodied *metis* — a cunning, embodied reason, used to outwit opponents — that carves out a space for an embodied female subjectivity. However, I will discuss how Cavarero fails to make explicit that the value of a soul–body union is also relevant to men and can thus supplement male subjectivity.

In her rereading of Penelope, Cavarero demonstrates the fissures within Plato's logic by highlighting the partiality of pure intellectualism through discussing the embodied wisdom demonstrated in Penelope's weaving and unweaving. But more significantly, Penelope's (un)weaving counters her prescribed role in the male symbolic order. She weaves and unweaves in order to stave off possible suitors who want to marry her, because her husband, Odysseus, has been at sea for many years. She tells these suitors that she must first complete weaving a funeral cloak for her father-in-law before she can consider a new suitor. She weaves at the cloak during the day and unweaves her work again at night, thereby never completing and never having to remarry. The embodied act of (un)weaving becomes a form of cunning reason that Penelope uses to control her environment. Moreover, while it may seem that Penelope was staying loyal to Odysseus in not wanting

to remarry, it can also be read as an act of freedom, in which Penelope finds a way to remain somewhat independent of male companionship.

Penelope's (un)weaving distances itself from the male symbolic order in temporality and medium. It is "cadenced" and repetitive (Cavarero, 1995:19). It stands in direct contrast with male temporality characterised by "action", in which novelty is pursued at "a tempo of progressing events" (Cavarero, 1995:15). Male temporality is represented by Odysseus and his endless adventures at sea, in pursuit of immortality via a heroic death. This male-centric obsession with immortality is echoed in the discussion of philosophy as pursuing the eternal and foregoing the temporary through complete separation between soul and body at death. From this view, slow, rhythmic, repetitive acts would be characterised as "useless" or "time-wasting". Penelope's cadenced and repetitive, embodied act of (un)weaving, however, resists this characterisation in demonstrating its usefulness for her to control her situation. Although it does not constantly pursue novelty, the repetitiveness of the act is what makes it effective, as (un)weaving too much in a day, or moving from task to task and adding to what must be completed, would be more conspicuous. Moreover, while it is an intellectual decision or manoeuvre, it is with the physical medium of (un)weaving that it materialises, and is also a typically female activity performed from the typical sphere for women within the male symbolic order: the home. She uses her imposed role (staying at home, weaving) to enact control over her situation. Through giving a new voice and a new perspective to Penelope's role, Cavarero demonstrates that Plato's own characterisations of women, within his male-centric philosophical works, contain a rereading that carves out a space for a female, and embodied, subjectivity.

Cavarero points to another fissure in Plato's logic, stemming from his metaphorical use of Penelope in *The Phaedo.* In the metaphor (operating within the male symbolic order and temporality), it is Penelope's *un*weaving that is absurd, as she undoes what she spent her entire day trying to achieve. For a philosopher who spends his life focused on separating the soul from the body, to lament at death and in effect "cling on" to (bodily) life, is like undoing what he spent his entire life trying to achieve. Plato therefore uses Penelope's counter-productive unweaving as an example of "bad philosophising". There is thus an interesting logical inversion at play here, a fault line in Plato's logic which Cavarero presses into a fissure.

If, on Plato's view, Penelope's act of weaving is seen as retying the body and the soul, her *un*weaving effectively "turns the task of philosophy around" (Cavarero, 1995:23). Let us return here to what has been said about philosophy, death, and birth previously. The male symbolic order prioritises dying, with philosophy as the preparation for a "pure death". This theme is also seen in the male obsession with dying a heroic death at sea or in battle, thereby securing one's immortality through the intellectual offspring (ideas) of poets and lyricists. While birth is acknowledged as the means of continuation, Socrates (recounting Diotima's philosophy) assigns priority to birth from the soul — of ideas — over the physical, biological birth of human offspring. This soul–body hierarchy is also genderised, as male-male love leads to intellectual discussion while male-female love leads to procreation and "distraction" from the pursuits of the soul. Whereas philosophy is aimed at untying the soul from the body and thereby focusing on death and dying purely, Penelope's weaving — read as (re)tying the soul and body — emphasises the importance of life and its concomitant embodiment. On Plato's view, the process of birth is understood as a "descent of the soul into the body" (Cavarero, 1995:24) and the aim of philosophy is for the soul to "rise" or return again through death to the realm of the Forms. Death, understood as the return of the soul to the realm of the Forms, becomes a purely abstract notion, separated from life as we know it, which is inevitably embodied. Birth is also abstracted, in that it is aimed for in thought rather than in body. This abstract, eternal, intellectualism of Plato's philosophy and the male symbolic order in general is inverted in Penelope's weaving. The soul is tied to the body; embodied life is not an evil from which to remain untouched on the soul's journey back to abstraction, but rather a source of life and of birth. It emphasises the importance of the bod(il)y and the value of embodied wisdom (*metis*). This rereading of Penelope's role therefore offers an alternative to the male-centric, death-driven, intellectualism of Plato's philosophy: life, physical, bodily life, can be embraced and a proper union and mediation between body and soul can serve as a philosophical task. The body is not an

inherent distraction, but an inevitable medium through which the soul lives, or experiences life.

In highlighting this fissure in Plato's, and accordingly, the Western philosophical tradition's, logic, this possibility of a rereading that undermines this view exposes the feigned neutrality of the male symbolic order. Plato envisioned only a single proper philosophical subject — that of the intellectual male — and claimed for it *the* position from which to interpret the world, thereby implying that any alternative is improper or even distracting. Women and the bod(il)y were thus simply defined in terms of their deviation from the ideal of the intellectual male. However, in giving Penelope a new voice and demonstrating the embodied *metis* displayed in her character, an alternative to this male intellectualism is highlighted and its partiality exposed. Women and the bod(il)y are not simply a "lack of" or deviation from maleness and intellectualism, but rather another perspective that deserves recognition in its own right. However, the significance of the bod(il)y for men is sidelined in Cavarero's chapter on Penelope. Throughout the entire chapter, she discusses Penelope's embodied metis in contrast to male intellectualism. The only time the bod(il)y is somewhat linked to men is towards the end: "The intertweaving of intelligence and the senses is where all humans exist as part of their gender" (Cavarero, 1995:30). But soon afterwards she emphasises female embodiment again: "Having let men go forth to their adventures at sea, they [the women] stay together quietly, exchanging looks and words rooted in the individual wholeness of their existence [body-soul union]" (Cavarero, 1995:30).

What I want to emphasise is that male–female, soul–body distinctions do not have to stand in opposition to one another. Without male-female love there would be no human offspring and therefore no human lives in which the soul could find expression. And the soul is dependent on the body for sensory experience and expression within the world. Most importantly, everyone has a body, and philosophical inquiry should therefore view embodied, situated knowledge as a legitimate form of knowledge. The development (birth) of ideas is important, but it is inextricable from biological birth. I, therefore, read Cavarero's feminist philosophy

not as competing with and attempting to eradicate intellectualism and abstraction, but to re-embody it — to supplement it — and to point to a more complete philosophy for both genders, one aimed at answering the question: "how should I live?".

Cavarero's Penelope works on two different looms: "the first composes the different figures of a feminine [female] symbolic order. The second unties the matted threads of the father's tapestry" (Cavarero: 1995:7). Concerning the first, in demonstrating the value of what was erased in the male symbolic order — the female and the embodied perspectives — a new subjectivity is given its own footing. Unfortunately she does not elaborate on the second. I understand it to refer to undoing the male-centric symbolic order of the Western tradition by exposing its partiality and poverty as it centralises intellectualism, abstraction, and death, thereby weakening its foothold. Yet Cavarero's book emphasises the first loom and appears to sideline the second loom. I wish to emphasise that the goal is not to replace the male-centric symbolic order with a female-centric one, but rather to carve out a space for the latter besides the former, so that a more complete subjectivity can be reached. All men have bodies and all women have souls, all men sense and express, and all women contemplate. Philosophy, and life, is about mediating between these different aspects in order to live fully. My further point is that this not only opens a space for a female subjectivity, but in doing so it opens up to the possibility of pluralism[4], of acknowledging that there are multiple, situated, embodied perspectives that can offer legitimate knowledge.

5. How Should I Live?

The male-centric symbolic tradition's answer to the question "how should I live?" is "turn towards the soul via contemplation of the eternal and abstract while renouncing the (distracting) body". Not only does this demonstrate a singular perspective or subjective position, but in renouncing the body, it ignores and suppresses an important source of (applicable) knowledge. I argue that it therefore impoverishes the question by limiting its subjectivity and ignoring the bod(il)y.

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[4]Note that Cavarero disagrees with this and holds that the basic element of philosophy is a two, not a one, but also not a many (Cavarero, 1995:6).

In the light of the discussion above, the question can be phrased as "how should I, an expression of thought inextricably tied to a physical body with sensory experiences, who is 'thrown'[5] into concrete situations, live?". A perspective that unifies body and soul is better suited to address such a question. Cavarero's feminist rereading highlights the significance of the bod(il)y, but fails to emphasise that it is significant for men too. Such a suggestion of moving towards an embodied philosophy ties into a broader philosophical context. The pragmatist tradition, for example, calls for a move away from purely intellectual endeavours and towards guidance for practical situations. Acknowledging our bodies as an epistemic source highlights our situatedness and brings knowledge back "down to earth" — back to the problems of everyday living. Moving towards an embodied philosophy is therefore not a "descent" into the physical, but an augmentation of the partiality of purely intellectual and abstract philosophising, a movement towards a more complete philosophy.

6. Conclusion

This article has discussed the Western philosophical tradition, through the works of Plato, as male-centred and focused on the soul, i.e., the eternal and abstract. It has recounted Cavarero's rereading of Penelope and how it carves out a space for a female subjectivity, which in turn opens subjectivity to pluralism. Further, it emphasised that Cavarero's feminist reclaiming of the body in the philosophical endeavour offers a broadened perspective not only to women, but men too. This article has argued that the feminist rereading of Plato's work is significant, not only because it carves out a space for female (and other — plural — forms of) subjectivity, but also highlights the shortcomings of the male-centric tradition and the way it impoverishes the question "how should I live?" — although this was not always made explicit by Cavarero herself. It is therefore an example of how men can engage with feminist philosophy on another level. Besides simply reading and listening to women (in philosophy) and feminist philosophy, which men should also do, this article demonstrates how feminist philosophy can give a voice to women, while also edifying male philosophical perspectives. Hopefully, this changes the attitudes of some men who find themselves feeling confused and irrelevant in feminism classes.

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[5]Heidegger's (1962:173–174) notion of *Geworfenheit* ("thrownness") refers to how humans do not choose the historical, social, and economic situation they are born into.

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The strategic role white victimhood narratives play in maintaining white supremacy: An analysis of the Afrikaner "refugee" phenomenon in the US

Francis-Lynne Raper

Abstract

Since early 2025 the Trump administration has granted Afrikaners refugee status and resettlement in the US. At the same time the administration cracked down on most other types of immigration towards the US and has halted refugee admissions. This article argues that white anxiety and victimhood narratives are employed by far-right political actors, Trump, and Afrikaner organisations such as AfriForum and Solidariteit to maintain an infallibility of whiteness and subsequently white supremacy. Charles Mills's work on white supremacy is used to argue that the idea of the white victim in contemporary politics is crucial for securing whiteness as the norm and the privileged position of white people in society. Further, this article illustrates how white victimhood narratives are crucial for protecting white supremacy and that this is the primary reason Afrikaners have been awarded refugee status in the US.

About the author

Francis-Lynne Raper (she/her) will finish her Philosophy Honours degree in 2025 and will start a Masters in Philosophy in 2026. Her fields of interest are political philosophy, ethics, and decolonial philosophy, focusing on issues of immigration, human rights, and international law. Her Honours thesis criticises the current treatment of asylum seekers in Western Europe through what can be described as a critical, democratic, and decolonial approach. In her spare time (if she gives herself any) she plays the bass guitar and violin and enjoys concerning herself with anything film.

1. Introduction

South Africa has long been a cautionary tale for current United States (US) president Donald Trump. In the 1990s, when asked about white people becoming the minority in the US by 2050, Trump vouched that he would never allow the US to become "like South Africa" (Kanno-Youngs, Green, Eligon & Wong, 2025). The current Trump administration has initiated a total crackdown on immigration to the United States, deporting undocumented migrants, revoking the residence statuses of non-US citizens, and halting refugee admission (Wu & Sun, 2025). Despite this, Afrikaner "refugees" who claim to be fleeing persecution in South Africa due to racially targeted farm murders have been welcomed to the US. This article argues that white anxiety and victimhood narratives are exploited by political actors such as Trump, far-right groups, and Afrikaner organisations such as AfriForum and Solidariteit as a way to maintain the infallibility of whiteness and legitimise a white supremacist structuring of society.

First, white supremacy and whiteness will be conceptualised and their maintenance strategies — in which victimhood narratives play a key role — will be discussed. The following section looks at the different ways white supremacy and whiteness have been maintained and are still expressed in the US and its politics. Section 4 provides an overview of the importance and manipulation of a white victimhood narrative for Afrikaner identity. Section 5 analyses and critically discusses the discourse around and treatment of Afrikaner "refugees" in the US. I conclude with a personal reflection on the "Afrikaner-victim" phenomenon as a white South African.

2. White supremacy, whiteness, and white victimhood

This section will be drawing on the influential works of Charles W. Mills and Sarah Ahmed and the ways in which they have been able to outline various structural dimensions of white supremacy and whiteness. The former roughly denotes a global political structure of domination and the latter an identity and orientation that accompanies the dominant position within the white supremacist global hierarchy. Before discussing these terms and their effects in more detail, a brief overview of Mills' and Ahmed's uses of these terms is due.

Mills has written at length about the ways Western political philosophy systematically erases the realities of racism, thereby creating a structural blindness that upholds what he terms "the racial contract" and brings about a white supremacist world order in which some are continuously privileged while others are continuously exploited. Ahmed, in her influential 2007 paper "The Phenomenology of Whiteness", focuses on the phenomenological aspect of whiteness. While Mills conceives of whiteness as a political category denoting the standards and characteristics for those who uphold white supremacy and belong to the hegemonic group raced as "white", Ahmed considers whiteness through the lens of bodily and institutional orientation, arguing that the ability to embody whiteness — this hegemonic position within the white supremacist hierarchy — influences the ways in which people are able to move through the world, both in terms of social recognition and institutional inclusion. Whereas Mills outlines the political, economic, and cultural structures that accompany and maintain white supremacy, Ahmed focuses on the lived effects white supremacy has on the creation of a standard of whiteness, which again affects social recognition and institutional mobility. These theorists are highly foundational to the understanding of the institutional racial hierarchies and their subsequent effects which this essay focuses on, such as international law, immigration law, and socio-political movements that are centred on ethnicity, nationality, or race.

Charles Mills argues in his book *The Racial Contract* (1997) that our global political system is one of white supremacy, brought about by the racial contract and continuously legitimised and enabled by whiteness[1]. For Mills, white supremacy is not an extremist political ideology held only by some, but denotes the global domination of white people over those categorised as "nonwhite" (1997:2). It is a racist political system, rooted in European Enlightenment Humanism, in which only Europeans are regarded as "human", while those deemed

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[1]Mills capitalises "the racial contract" and "whiteness" but this article does not capitalise these terms for the sake of consistent formatting.

[2]A term Mills derives from the liberal "social contract" and which similarly functions descriptively to explain the current political structuring of the world (1997:3).

"nonwhite" are regarded as less-than-human or "sub-persons". The racial contract[2] has historically been, and still is, the set of formal and informal agreements between those considered white to be regarded as full, free, and equal persons morally entitled to certain rights and liberties, while the opposite is the case for those considered "nonwhite", i.e., people of colour. For Mills, whiteness is a political category centred on a certain way of being in which those considered white uphold structural blindness to the realities of white supremacy, consent to white supremacy by not challenging it, and make this the standard for belonging to the hegemonic category of a "full person", thereby reproducing white supremacy and rewriting the racial contract (1997:18). Others similarly note that the racial hierarchy created renders whiteness the norm and naturalises (neo)colonialism, normalises the position of superiority held by white people, justifies the exclusion and deprivation of people of colour, and prioritises white voices, skills, and experiences (Steyn, 2004:45; Van der Westhuizen, 2018:45; Feola, 2021:532).

2.1. The maintenance of white supremacy

For Mills, whiteness legitimises and enables the global white supremacist order, normalising the privileged and central position those considered "white" have and the differential treatment this creates for "nonwhites". On a phenomenological level whiteness organises different "bodies" towards the world in different ways: the white "body" is the place from where the world unfolds, placing certain objects within its reach such as certain rights and opportunities (Ahmed, 2007:150). Spaces are orientated around the "bodies" that inhabit them, and this is how institutions become white-centred. Institutions reflect the "likeness" of the "bodies" that inhabit them, and as such it is those "bodies" that are at home, that are able to be comfortable as they move at ease through a system that has been created around their likeness (Ahmed, 2007:157). "If the world is made white, then the body-at-home is one that can inhabit whiteness" (Ahmed, 2007:153). From this the importance for white states to maintain their whiteness becomes apparent, as institutional whiteness secures the privileged position of being "at home" whiteness provides to those that are able to embody it. Similarly,

Mills argues that the racial contract is continuously re-written, whether implicit or explicit, creating standards for whiteness which in turn maintain and reproduce white supremacy.

One way white supremacy is maintained institutionally is in the application of international law, as Western, predominantly-white states hold disproportional power within the international law regime (Sow, 2022:707). When determining who will be deemed a "refugee", Western states often use their own discretion, excluding refugees of colour (Sow, 2022:700; Tesfai, 2025:11). Racial tiering of immigrants and refugees allows Western states to maintain their dominance and whiteness, while naturalising their efforts through depictions of the global South as illiberal and unstable, undeserving in comparison to white refugees (Sow, 2022:700). This application of international law and the accompanying system of racial tiering became apparent after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as Western politicians and media depicted white Ukrainians as more deserving of asylum because of a shared "likeness" with other Western people (Sow, 2022:698). A journalist in the UK noted that "[t]hey seem so like us ... [t]hat is what makes it so shocking. ... Ukraine is a European country". Ukraine's deputy chief prosecutor stated even more explicitly that the war was especially troubling because those being killed were "European people with blue eyes and blonde hair" (Sow, 2022:699).

2.2. Visibility and victimhood

Through its inheritance, institutionalisation, and reproduction, whiteness becomes invisible to white bodies for whom their whiteness provides a horizon or point from which the world unfolds (Ahmed, 2007:150). As such, whiteness has often been described as being invisible, "so standard and normal that it often goes unseen" (Falkof, 2023:68). Some theorists argue that there has been a shift in the meaning of whiteness in recent years. Langa and Kiguwa argue that, within the context of post-apartheid South Africa, whiteness has moved from being unchallenged and invisible[3] "to a position of visibility, where it is now critiqued, discussed, debated, and sometimes problematised", in other words, no longer being taken for granted (2025:10). Feola too

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[3]Langa & Kiguwa refer to it being invisible and unchallenged to white people. Although this can be contested I believe their general point stands: in post-apartheid South Africa a shift has taken place in which white people have had to re-examine what it means to be white in South Africa (2025:10).

writes that the trend of ethnonationalism in US politics is indicative of a shift in the meaning of whiteness: it has now become "a good to be both celebrated and defended" (2021:530). Some people increasingly experience their whiteness as being under attack, nesting their white identity in victimhood and experiencing feelings of anxiety, loss, and even rage (Feola, 2021:536; Metzl, 2019). Feelings of displacement arise when whiteness can no longer be a sense of pride, when multiculturalism sees the promotion of diversity and successes of those regarded as "outsiders", when some believe they experience "reverse-racism", or when immigration is seen as "excessive" (Sengul, 2022:594; Feola, 2021:536; Falkof, 2023:68). Feola argues that white anxiety about being replaced tends to rise when the white hegemonic power within a state is perceived to be in decline (2021:529). This anxiety centres around the fear that the national "ethnos" will be replaced by "undeserving", "non-white" others, threatening white people's privileged position in society.

According to Mills, one of the ways to "achieve whiteness" is to deny its fallibility, thereby remaining structurally blind to the realities of white supremacy. This perceived infallibility of whiteness is crucial for the legitimisation and preservation of the privileged position of white people. One way whiteness's infallibility is maintained is through the construction of white "victimhood". Victimhood implies innocence, and white anxiety becomes justified through the construction of the white victim, which denies white privilege and its hierarchical position (Steyn, 2004:157). For the idea of the white victim to take shape, whiteness must become "*hyper*-visible" so that "any move towards racial justice or reparation is rewritten as an attack on whites" (Falkof, 2023:68). The idea of the "white victim" furthermore reinstates whiteness by creating a binary in which violence against white people is seen as unnatural or unjustified, as something that is extraordinary, thereby implying the opposite for victims of colour (Falkof, 2023:67).

3. White supremacy and whiteness in the US

The roles played by whiteness and white supremacy in the US cannot be fully understood without also understanding the US's legacy of white settler colonialism. This framework created, as Aziz Rana described it, the "two faces" of American freedom, in which the freedom of white people within the US is predicated on the subordination, displacement, and dispossession of people of colour (Feola, 2021:531). Mills notes how white supremacy in white settler states, such as the US, was accepted as the status quo, and how the global economy continues to be dominated by white capital, thereby privileging white people (1997:27). Mills points out how, in the US, there has been a "growing intransigence and hostility of whites who think they have 'done enough', despite the fact that the country continues to be massively segregated", profits from the racial order in place, and has yet to pay reparations for slavery and discrimination (1997:37).[4]

3.1. The maintenance of whiteness through law

Historically, many have tried to "leverage" their whiteness in the US by conforming to its norms or by requesting to be declared white in order to secure civic rights and liberties that they would otherwise have been denied (Feola, 2021:532; Tinsley, 2022). Since 1790[5], race has been an integral part to US immigration policy, with federal law at the time "limiting naturalisation to free white persons" (Tesfai, 2025:3). Black people only became citizens in 1868, and other racial or ethnic groups did not receive citizenship until 1952, with many attempting to be declared white as a means of gaining access to moral and legal organisations and rights. Alien Land Laws restricted land ownership to white people, and the 1924 Immigration Act limited immigration to those eligible for citizenship, i.e., white people (Tesfai, 2025:3). Perhaps the most well-known examples of racial legislation in the US are the Jim Crow laws and the Black codes. These laws limited access to or excluded Black people from many facets of political, social, and economic life by, for example, restricting their right to vote, their access to education, and their right to

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[4]Mills calculates that the estimated total amount needed in the US to compensate African Americans for their socio-economic position and historical suffering caused by "could take more than the entire wealth of the United States" today (1997:39).

[5]This is not to say that race was not integral to US life or policy prior to 1790, but merely that race became officially enshrined in immigration law in 1790.

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certain types of private property (National Geographic Society, 2025).

More recent policy continues the racial tiering that is embedded within US attitudes towards immigration. Refugees of the Global South are often given humanitarian aid while refugees from the Global North receive resettlement. In its second term, the Trump administration curtailed many forms of migration by people of colour to the US; it has removed the Temporary Protected Status of about 350 000 Venezuelans and Haitians, and is preparing to do the same for Afghans and Cameroonians (Wu & Sun, 2025). Two other groups of people, however, have received the complete opposite treatment: Ukrainian refugees and Afrikaner "refugees". The administration has paused new applications for refugee status from Ukraine but has so far left in place the status of the roughly 240 000 refugees already in the US (Wu & Sun, 2025). Afrikaners are now welcomed into the US while many African refugees of colour that have been cleared and vetted remain in refugee camps waiting for resettlement (Kanno-Youngs, Green, Eligon & Wong, 2025). Another way white South Africans have received preferential treatment has been through the H-2A visa programme, which the US has made available to South African farmers since 1986 (Hadebe, 2025). The programme has provided economic and immigration opportunities for white South African farmworkers, allowing US employers to hire foreign farmworkers for temporary agricultural work. The programme has been highly controversial, with a surge in white South African farmworkers through the programme in recent years. The controversy has been amplified by the Trump administration since 2024, leading to many black American farmworkers being paid significantly less than their white South African counterparts or losing their jobs entirely.

3.2. Contemporary political movements

Feelings of displacement and victimhood have shaped and continue to shape racial politics and anti-immigration movements in the US through ethnonationalism and other far-right movements (Sengul, 2022:596; Feola, 2021:530). According to Thomson[6], ethnonationalism is the strongest predictor of anti-immigration attitudes among white American voters (2020:32). The important characteristics emphasised to determine who is "truly" American are those of ancestry or a (myth thereof), birthplace, language, and shared customs and traditions (Thomson, 2020:34). However, as is apparent in Thomson's conclusion, those who support anti-immigration policies for ethnonationalist reasons do so due to anxiety about a decline in ethnic homogeneity and a change in the nation's current demographics (2020:41). This not only illustrates how white anxiety about being replaced leads to anti-immigration views, but also emphasises the importance of race for the maintenance of the country's whiteness as seen in the concern for its demographics.

Some white US voters believe that the country's openness to immigrants will mean the loss of the nation's cultural identity, while others fear losing demographic majority status (Bagder & Cohn, 2019). Ayasli finds similar reasons for anti-immigration attitudes in the US, highlighting that some theorists believe cultural identity is crucial to how natives[7] respond to groups of immigrants, with those that share culture, religion, and language being accepted more easily (2024:160). Others argue that natives' immigration attitudes are informed by perceived economic self-interest: they welcome those immigrants who they expect will provide "important" services, contribute more to taxes, or appear as non-threatening competitors in the job market — but reject those who threaten their interests (Ayasli, 2024:160). Ayasli notes that cultural and economic reasons can be inconsistent, weighing differently in different contexts, and that political calculations of how immigration will affect a state's balance of powers ought to be considered (2024:159). Ayasli further notes that

> "[w]hen the stakes of politics are high, the expected political party affiliation of immigrants will help natives calculate the costs and/or benefits of admitting immigrants" (Ayasli, 2024:162).

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[6]Using the 2016 American National Election Studies data.

[7]Ayasli uses the term "natives" to refer to US citizens that haves been born in the country, as opposed to those that acquired citizenship at a later point in their life. Although this term can cause issues when considering immigration views of those that became US citizens at a young age I believe the results from Ayasli's study are still useful in determining why US citizens hold certain views on immigration or types of immigrant groups.

3.3. Trump, the far-right, and white victimhood

The far-right is an umbrella term for various right-wing ideologies such as the extreme and radical right, with the populist radical right being the most dominant contemporary ideology (Sengul, 2022:596). Ideas of authoritarianism, nativism[8], and populism are popular within this ideology.[9] Far-right discourses successfully mobilise white anxiety and victimhood narratives by advancing claims of anti-white or "reverse" racism, of a double-standard in expressing cultural pride, or even by creating dangerous conspiracy theories — all while promoting ideas of "cultural superiority and physical strength" (Sengul, 2022:597). Two conspiracy theories which are of particular interest for this article are the theories of "The Great Replacement", and "white genocide". The Great Replacement theory[10] argues that current demographic majorities of Western states — white people — will become a minority at some time in the future (Sedgwick, 2024:549). The idea of "white genocide" is founded on similar fears of white identity being erased due to immigration by people of colour, as well as by policies that promote racial justice or equality (Sengul, 2022:598). Trump's relationship with the far-right groups who advance these conspiracy theories is noteworthy. Alt-right social media figures and far-right platforms such as *The Daily Stormer* and *Stormfront* contributed to Trump's electoral success through public endorsements and financial funding (Barnett, 2017:78). At the same time, they found in Trump someone to articulate many core far-right issues, such as the idea that the US is a "white man's country" (Barnett, 2017:78).

Trump and far-right groups in the US are known for their mobilisation of white victimhood[11] and anxiety. They promote the idea that white people would become the racial minority, that undeserving migrants are "invading" the country, that white people are discriminated against through diversity policies, and that "the

nation risks losing its identity because of openness to foreigners" (Badger & Cohn, 2019; Martin, 2025:255; Majavu, 2022:4; Bhambra, 2017:214). Through such fear-mongering, the idea of a national identity under threat of "others" is cemented (Metzl, 2019). The future of the US becomes one to be feared by white people, one in which they will be replaced and become strangers in their "own" country: they will no longer be at home. It is therefore not surprising that anti-immigration sentiments have gained traction in the US. According to Martin, right-wing media normalises the baseline tenets of the white victimhood narrative, while politicians like Trump play into these concerns to win over voters and gain political capital (2025:257). Similarly, Metzl (2019) writes that mobilisation happens through the normalisation of white victimhood narratives, when white voters are reassured that their anxiety is both valid and should steer their vote.

4. White supremacy and whiteness in South Africa

This section will focus on enclave Afrikaners, a group who have defined themselves through non-governmental organisations like AfriForum and Solidariteit as victims of racism in post-apartheid South Africa (Van der Westhuizen, 2018:47). Historically, white supremacy has played an important role in the formation of both Afrikaner identity and the apartheid system. Throughout history, white people in South Africa have used racial categories to legitimise colonial expansion and exploitation (Majavu, 2022:3). Afrikaners, descendants of the Dutch, competed with the English for possession of the ultimate whiteness and, consequently, ultimate sovereignty (Steyn, 2004:147). Afrikaner identity arose from pride over refusing subordination to the English, forming a white identity rooted in resistance and victimhood (Steyn, 2004:148). Adding to their feelings of

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[8]Nativism here refers to the political ideology which privileges native-born citizens over other types of citizens or residents in a state.

[9]Nativism is its primary concern while populist rhetoric finds its expressions in the belief that the political elite is corrupt, conspiring against "the people" or "native group" (Sengul, 2022:596).

[10]The conspiracy directly derives from Renaud Camus, but the idea has a long history in scholarship to be found in population replacement theories, which all to various degrees and for various reasons argue that some ethnic majority group in a state will be replaced by a different group.

[11]Such mobilisations of white victimhood and anxiety have had at times lead to damaging effects as with the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, 2017, which led to injuries and one death of counterprotesters (Martin, 2025:255; Falkof, 2023:68). Throughout the Charlottesville riots "you will not replace us" and "Jews will not replace us" were popular slogans, referring to the Great Replacement conspiracy theory.

[12]Also commonly referred to as the "Anglo–Boer War" and sometimes, especially in Afrikaans, "The Second War for Freedom" (Porter, 2000:639–640).

victimhood, the Afrikaners were defeated at the hand of the English in the South African War[12] of 1899–1902. This defeat gave rise to an increase in Afrikaner nationalist sentiments which is thought to have played a role in leading the ethnic supremacist Nationalist Party to institute the regime of Apartheid in 1948 (Steyn, 2004:147). Apartheid was a system characterised by the formalisation and intensification of racial segregation, which lasted until its abolition in 1994 (*South African History Online*, 2022). In addition to a rise in Afrikaner nationalism after the war and independence, another motivation for Apartheid was what the Carnegie Commission labelled the "poor white problem"[13] in the 1930s (Falkof, 2023:68; Majavu, 2022:2). Apartheid was a successful affirmative action scheme, and was able to temporarily make invisible the instability of white supremacy (Van der Westhuizen, 2018:46).

The end of apartheid saw a preference for reconciliation rather than Black liberation, and thus the economic position of white South Africans stayed largely unaltered (Steyn, 2018:28). Since then, white South Africans have remained economically secure with annual income of white households having increased significantly in comparison to that of other racial groups in South Africa (Van der Westhuizen, 2018:45). In response to being asked to take responsibility for apartheid, or in reaction to AA policies, some white citizens have become defensive, denying their part in apartheid or isolating themselves from the rest of South African society (Burton, 2018:40). Although they are in the minority, these white South Africans harbour racist and ignorant views, and often seek to protect their privileged position. Afrikaans enclave nationalists, including neo-Afrikaners, are most vocal in their attempt to secure their privilege (Van der Westhuizen, 2018:46). The enclave nationalists look up to the Global North's whiteness, identify themselves through anti-politics, partake in inward migration to class-based territories, and express nostalgia for the "old South Africa" (Steyn, 2018:29; Van der Westhuizen, 2018:47). Their Afrikaner identity is rooted in consumption of products catered towards them, as is most apparent in the power of

organisations like Solidariteit and AfriForum (Van der Westhuizen, 2018:48).

4.1. Victimhood narratives and contemporary Afrikaner identity

In an effort to avoid taking accountability and maintaining the supposed infallibility of whiteness, these Afrikaners distance themselves from the past and the rest of the country by claiming innocence, withdrawing into private spaces, and constructing themselves as victims of AA and the country's general decline in living standards (Steyn, 2018:29). AfriForum and Solidariteit are proficient in using these three tactics to avoid accountability. Solidariteit, or Solidarity Movement, is a trade union turned conglomerate of organisations including educational institutions, private security companies, and news and media channels (Van Zyl–Hermann & Verbuyst, 2022:835). AfriForum, a subsidiary of Solidariteit, describes itself as a civil rights organisation concerned with minority rights, however, it is mostly known for standing up for the rights of Afrikaners through protests, legal actions, social media, and international campaigning (Van Zyl–Hermann & Verbuyst, 2022:835). What is perhaps most important to note is the utility of centring the Afrikaner identity in victimhood. Whiteness becomes an inward-looking process, reproducing itself through white talk when the Afrikaner is cast as the victim — and, with that, as innocent (Langa & Kiguwa, 2025:10; Burton, 2018:40). As Steyn writes, "the victim appropriates innocence" and through this is justified in their feelings and actions, among which villainising those deemed the "victimisers": the ANC government, or at times, Black people in South Africa as a whole (2004:157).

Organisations such as AfriForum and Solidariteit have monetised feelings of white loss and defensiveness in the post-apartheid project (Langa & Kiguwa, 2025:2). They have opposed national efforts at redress by denying Afrikaner complicity in apartheid and by creating a narrative which portrays Afrikaners as victims in modern South Africa (Majavu, 2022:4; Van Zyl–Hermann & Verbuyst, 2022:835). AfriForum has sued politician Julius Malema for singing the protest song "Kill the

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[13]Some Afrikaners were living in poverty and this was seen as threatening the racial hierarchy created, which was predicated on white dominance seeming "natural" through white people's "civilised" way of life (Falkof, 2023:69).

[14]Which was written in the context of armed struggle during apartheid but which is now sung symbolically rather than literally (Langa & Kiguwa, 2025:6).

Boer" ("Kill the Farmer")[14] in 2010 and 2022, arguing that Malema's singing of the song constitutes hate speech and has contributed to the phenomenon of farm murders — a phenomenon which they claim involves the disproportionate and racially motivated killing of white farmers (Langa & Kiguwa, 2025:6). They won the 2010 case but lost the 2022 case, with the court finding that it did not constitute hate speech. There has been no proof that "Kill the Boer" has led to any farm murders, and the Institute for Security Studies has found that farm murder rates are not disproportional to the murder rates of the rest of the country (Burger 2018; Langa & Kiguwa, 2025:7).

These organisations encourage restorative nostalgia, reconstructing history by using nostalgia as if it were truth (such as seen in AfriForum's defence of the use of the old South African flag[15]) They proclaim apocalyptic warnings, rooted in racist beliefs of Black incompetence, that land redistribution or expropriation[16] will be disastrous for the country's economy and food security. Narratives of white anxiety, loss, and victimhood are evident in the white apocalyptic futures of which AfriForum and Solidariteit warn (Langa & Kiguwa, 2025:9). Through these provocations, they defend whiteness against the revelation of its fallibility (Langa & Kiguwa, 2025:2), and turn white guilt and shame into white pride (Majavu, 2022:4).

5. Afrikaner refugees and the US

The US and South Africa both have a longstanding history of white supremacy. Both countries are white settler states in which the white polity was differentiated from people of colour, who were deemed "subpersons", and the state was founded on the extermination and displacement of indigenous peoples (Mills, 1997:28). In both countries, the formation of the state was the result of intra-white conflict, the defeated Afrikaners and Southerners saw themselves as victimised by the liberal English or Northerners, and both groups consequently instituted segregationist policies (Majavu, 2022:5; Steyn, 2004:148). For both countries, "white poverty" was seen as a threat to the existing racial order which had to be eradicated by racist laws, and anxieties about demographically being or becoming the minority are prevalent in both (Falkof, 2023:68; Majavu, 2022:4). Jim Crow laws and apartheid were similar systems of legally encoded segregation, and, during the Cold War, the US supported the South African apartheid government and prioritised anti-communist alliances above human rights (Hadebe, 2025).

5.1. The treatment of Afrikaners upholds white supremacy

The Afrikaner lobby, consisting of AfriForum and Solidariteit[17] have successfully made the "white genocide" of Afrikaners[18] a top talking point both internationally and in the US (Poplak, 2025). Since 2018, the now resigned deputy CEO of AfriForum and head of policy at Solidariteit, Ernst Roets, has travelled to the US to raise awareness for white farm murders, appearing several times on Fox Network's Tucker Carlson's shows. He labelled white farm murders and land reform policies as attempts to "crush" the Afrikaner minority, and has criticised diversity policies which do not allow Afrikaner identity to be celebrated (Van Zyl–Hermann & Verbuyst, 2022:840). Carlson has recently summed up his discussions with Roets by stating that "South Africa is shockingly racist against white people — 'far more than apartheid ever was' to Black people" (Poplak, 2025).

The white victimisation of Afrikaners was further apparent when Trump met with South African president Ramaphosa on the 21 May 2025. Trump showed a

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[15] AfriForum has argued that the display of the old flag of South Africa during farm murder protests should be protected as freedom of expression, however, Langa & Kiguwa argue that the flag seems to idealise and glorify the apartheid era within the farm murder protest contexts, symbolising a desire for the "good old days" (2025:5).

[16] The Natives Land Act of 1913 seized and reallocated 87% of the land in South Africa to white people, yet AfriForum, in arguing against proposed Land Expropriation Without Compensation argues that no land was disposed from Africans (Langa & Kiguwa, 2025:8).

[17] It ought to be noted that Solidariteit and AfriForum are not alone in doing this. Other movements or organisations include Orania, a white separatist town in the Northern Cape province of the country, the Suidlanders, an Afrikaner survivalist group known for popularising the idea of an ongoing "white genocide" in South Africa against Afrikaners they believe is evident through the phenomenon of farm murders, or individuals such as Steve Hofmeyr, who in 2013 campaigned to "raise awareness" for this supposed genocide (Majavu, 2022:4; Falkof, 2023:71).

[18] AfriForum and Solidariteit do not explicitly call the white farm murders a "white genocide", but their campaigning has still contributed to this narrative (Falkof, 2023:72).

[19] The white crosses in reality were part of a visual protest against farm murders, not an actual burial ground (Kanno-Youngs & Green, 2025).

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compilation of videos he claimed demonstrated "white genocide" taking place in South Africa. The footage included scenes of Julius Malema singing *Kill the Boer* at a rally and scores of white crosses supposedly depicting white people murdered on farms.[19] Trump emphasised the race of those killed in the farm murder narrative, often emphasising the absurdity or shock of that particular situation. "These are all white farmers being buried" Trump noted, adding: "if you look at the videos, how does it get any worse?" and "I don't know how you explain that" (2025). Towards the end of the conference, he mentions that he is against the loss of any lives. Yet, his recent policies which deny refugees and immigrants of colour admission or stay in the US, while Afrikaners are welcomed into the country, paint a different picture.

This discourse around and treatment of Afrikaners in the US illustrates the structure of white supremacy both in the US and globally. One example is Carlson's denial of the facts about farm murder rates and the need for AA policies in the country, and his claim that white South Africans now experience more racism than people of colour ever did during apartheid. Another example is how white South Africans are prioritised above black American farmworkers by the H-2A visa programme. The claims of white people are taken more seriously, and Trump's repeated emphasis on the race of the farmers re-affirms white supremacist prioritisation of white people and the naturalisation of whiteness. The rapid acceptance and resettlement of Afrikaner "refugees" — whose racial targeting in the "farm murder" phenomenon has been disproven — while thousands of African refugees are still awaiting their resettlement in the US further highlights the privileging of white people. White Afrikaners are continually being recast as victims, thereby upholding whiteness and white supremacy.

5.2. Why Afrikaners?

Why has the Republican Party and the Trump administration been so inviting to "Afrikaners"? The Trump administration has argued that Afrikaners would be better off in the US than back home, believing they will quickly contribute to the economy, will not challenge national security, and will easily be assimilated. (Kanno-Youngs, *et al.*, 2025). Many of the reasons discussed in Section 3 for anti-immigration sentiment among white Americans might not apply to white South African "refugees"; they are perhaps expected to be culturally compatible, unthreatening to a white ethnos, not economically competitive with white Americans, economic contributors rather than welfare scroungers, and affiliated with Trump or the Republican Party.[20]

However, it is important to address the strategic interest the far-right and Trump have in white Afrikaners for creating a narrative of white victimhood. Far-right groups portray Afrikaners as victims to promote conspiracy theories such as The Great Replacement and "white genocide"[21] and to invalidate a South African government led by the Black majority (Poplak, 2025). Trump is similarly known for mobilising white anxiety and fearmongering, warning that undocumented migration will lead to the "downfall" of the current, "white" US. According to this narrative, the nation is under threat of "undeserving" "others", casting white people as the victims of immigration to the US — an apocalyptic rhetoric which is echoed in the South African context. The future of the US becomes one to be feared by white people, one in which they will be replaced and become strangers in their "own" country. These white victimhood narratives, in their mission to maintain whiteness and white supremacy, inform white voters that their anxiety is valid and that it should determine their vote.

6. Conclusion

It is evident that, in a ploy to maintain the infallibility of whiteness, white victimhood narratives are created in order to appropriate innocence. What we observe in the US and South Africa is a scramble by those trying to secure the privileged position white people have had throughout the countries' histories by producing and reproducing white victimhood narratives. In South Africa, Afrikaner identity continues to be rooted in victimhood for certain groups of Afrikaners who produce such narratives through restorative nostalgia and apocalyptic warnings. In the US, Trump and far-right actors similarly

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[20]These are some reasons I have found that might explain the acceptance of Afrikaner "refugees". I do not claim that these are the sole reasons for their admittance, nor should these reasons be taken as an attempt to naturalise the privileging of white Afrikaners. In fact, the norms of whiteness, as should be apparent by now, underpin these reasons.

[21]The idea of "white genocide" is not restricted to South Africa alone, however, white Afrikaners have through the visibility of white crime victims become the face of global white right-wing movements (Falkof, 2023:71).

mobilise white anxiety through apocalyptic warnings that the nation will be "lost" to immigrants if it does not crack down on various kinds of migration. At the same time, white Americans are made out to be the victim of migration to the US, of AA policies, of conspiracies against them, etc. It is perhaps then not surprising that the Afrikaner — "victim" of farm murders, white genocide, and AA and land redistribution policies — has come to embody the face of this white victimhood narrative. Through political discourse and treatment, these political actors ensure American white voters that their white anxiety is warranted, channelling political support for their movements. Through this process white South Africans claiming refugee status in the US become nothing but pawns, if not active players, in the effort to uphold white supremacy and whiteness.

Over the years in South Africa, I have found a deep sense of estrangement. I think many white South Africans, especially those with loved ones that have gone down the "AfriForum–to–white genocide" pipeline, so to speak, can relate. At times, it feels like we live in two different countries. I live in a country that is divided, has troubling levels of crime, corruption, and inequality, and yet I, perhaps naïvely, remain optimistic. I see how many people in the country are still working towards unity — the dream of the "rainbow nation" — and I believe that, if enough people grant this goal the same ideological significance once held by whiteness, that dream will not be lost. But other white South Africans seem to experience South Africa in an entirely different way, as a country no longer structured "in their image". They no longer feel at home, they believe they are racially targeted and discriminated against, and, above all, they seem to believe, implicitly or explicitly, that their privileged position in the country was, and still is, warranted: they still hold onto their whiteness. When I started writing this article, some of my family members had applied for refugee status as Afrikaners in the US. Since then, they have been accepted and have moved to the US, leaving their lives in South Africa behind. While I wish them the best, it saddens me to see the people I care about turned into pawns for political gain[22]. I think Richard Poplak (2025) said it best:

The forgiveness extended to the white minority at the end of apartheid is one of the most exceptionally human and humane moments of our species' bloody history. By turning their backs on this, by accepting refugee status and claiming the mantle of exceptional victimhood, right-wing Afrikaners have become bit players in MAGA's noisy but empty scam. They leave nothing behind them, except their home.

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[22]Feelings of white anxiety and displacement, but also trauma from having been a victim of violent crime on a farm or the confusion some might feel about their "new" place in the country are mobilised by political actors and organisations. I am not claiming that these feelings are founded or "rational", but I believe these are things that should have been addressed through self-reflection and open-dialogue. Instead, political actors have monetised these feelings for their own gain only deepening their polarising effects and maintenance of white supremacy.

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