

Helen Ngo

The Habits of Racism: A Phenomenology of Racism and Racialized Embodiment
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Reviewed by Rozena Maart, 2020

Rozena Maart was born in District Six, the old slave quarter of the Cape, in South Africa. She writes both fiction and nonfiction and has published across genres; she has won awards for each of her books. She wrote the race chapter for *Sociology: A South African Perspective* (2016), South Africa's first sociology textbook. She was the director of the Centre for Critical Research on Race and Identity from 2012 until 2016 at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, where she is still based. In 2016, she received the William R. Jones lifetime achievement award from Philosophy Born of Struggle for her work in philosophy. In January 2019, Professor Maart was appointed as an International Research Ambassador to the University of Bremen in Germany.

Quote:

"Feminist philosophers will appreciate Ngo's telling and retelling of the doing and undoing of existentialist and pragmatist accounts of racism; her detailing of racism as habit is noteworthy. Ngo takes readers on a journey that examines the features of repetition and routine, and shows scholars precisely why studying the phenomenon of racism as habit is important."

Helen Ngo's *The Habits of Racism: A Phenomenology of Racism and Racialized Embodiment* offers an account of her experience as an Asian woman who grew up in a migrant suburb within a Chinese and Vietnamese refugee community in the United States. The book is composed of an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion and situates itself within the critical philosophy of race discipline, engaging primarily with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of habit to tackle questions of the embodied experience of race and racialization.

In the introduction, the author narrates a childhood exchange between her older sister and herself about a red jade bracelet her sister wore. The author asks her sister why she wears it: "I wear it to remind myself that I'm Asian," she, then 12 or 13, said." Ngo, upon reflection as she narrates this incident, recalls her own guilt at the time, noting that she thought it was much nicer to forget. Although the author does not return to forgetting as an embodied experience of her racialized identity in the first three chapters, she returns to it more generally in the fourth chapter, with the assistance of Jean-Paul Sartre.

In *The Habits of Racism*, the author recounts a series of racialized, embodied experiences while relying on Frantz Fanon, Merleau-Ponty, George Yancy, and Linda Martín Alcoff for the most part, before turning to Alia Al-Saji's work on veiled Muslim women, Heidegger for his work on the uncanny, and Jean-Paul Sartre for his work on the gaze in *Being and Nothingness*. Ngo begins her inquiry as a philosophical one by addressing the phenomenology and experience of racism, and soon we see the philosophical extend to its subgenres, such as existentialism, phenomenology, and pragmatism as they merge into the philosophy of race.

Of note is Ngo's engagement with Yancy's work, especially his "elevator effect," which zooms in on how racialized bodies enter shared spaces with those around them, and how racialization is played out within the elevator where a White woman enters with the assumption that she has entered a danger zone because of a Black man's presence. Ngo quotes Yancy on several occasions since Yancy articulates this effect with great detail, offering his insight and critique simultaneously.

Ngo's first chapter, "Racist Habits: Bodily Gesture, Perception, and Orientation," sets the stage for the remaining chapters since it frames her overall argument. Ngo discusses the problem of racism in terms of *habit*, which she borrows from Merleau-Ponty, who situates it as the acquisition of new bodily signification. She argues that the practice and phenomenon of racism through the concept of *habit* is central to understanding the location of the body--where the body is located in relation to the perpetrator of racism; thus Ngo unpacks the body's experience of racism. In this segment she posits the notion that it is not so much the "I think" but an "I can" that is the thread in the formation of habit. Ngo reads habit as habituation. My reading here is that the continued performance of racist acts, their undisturbed practice and repetition, the manner in which over time and space they become habituated, suggests that the actor of racism settles into her/his act because of repetitive, unquestioned practice. It is this settling, this place of unquestioned, daily, bodily practices, which include a series of physical performances carried out by the perpetrator of racism--the actor, as it were--against the recipient of racism, that forms part of the continuum of habituation. In my own work I steer clear of the term *victim* because I believe it simplifies the many facets of racism, and situates the recipient of racism in a position that often suggests that he/she has no agency nor the ability to address, mock, or problematize the agent of racism.

Ngo takes us on a Husserlian journey in chapter 1 when she brings spatial organization into her text, asserting the significance of how spatial structures are lived in, in both the body and the performance of its lived experience, which then enables her to tackle how the body registering racism, and racism as bodily register, are carried out. It is here where the nuances--the small, silent, many times trivialized performances for which there is often a polite etiquette that actually protects the perpetrator and obscures the impact of the recipient of racism--are revealed. We then see in chapter 2 how Ngo "manages" habitual racism through examples from both her own experience and those of the scholars of critical race theory she cites. From the vendor in Paris who calls out to her in Mandarin, to the examples Ngo takes from scholars working on Whiteness, we see in each scenario the extent to which the body registers racism and is marked by it. Ngo also offers her insights into how being in one's body and being in front of one's body works; these are the elements that particularly mark her text, as they show her ability to delve into the unspoken features of racialized embodiment. Merleau-Ponty comes in very handy here when Ngo addresses resilience as a feature of resistance to signification, and how the racialized body is held in contempt by the agent of racism. It is not always the context of a White-dominated space that features as the scene of the crime in Ngo's book--the latter my choice of words--but spaces where people of color often exist as part of a crowd who soon discover that they/we are racialized even in our anonymity, which Ngo details on several occasions. In chapter 3 we see the uncanniness of racism revealed, as the body that internalizes also takes on anxiety--the anticipation of racism and the silence of the way that it spreads across bodies and within them--often with the belief that resisting its aftermath, its flow, its unwanted presence permeating throughout the body, would make it disappear. We learn that the act of racism gives little consideration to whether the recipient is equipped with scholarly tools to address it. Racism permeates every crevice

of the lived environment because its habituation carries it, whether the bodily agency of the recipient cares to dismantle its operation or not. Ngo then moves to the fourth chapter by focusing on Sartre's Being-object and Merleau-Ponty's Intertwining. Fanon's startling moment of being gazed at and dissected by a White woman and her child in Paris, which he recounts in *Black Skin, White Masks* and has been the focus of many scholars of critical race theory, is used as the basis for the last chapter.

Ngo offers her readers some of the salient features of racialized embodiment that many scholars overlook in an attempt to seek hasty theorizations rather than offer the details up for analysis. The preoccupation with a particular kind of scholarship has seen many aspects of racism more generally and Whiteness more broadly go unnoticed because the act is either normalized or rendered too small a gesture for consideration. Ngo lays bare the anomalies of racism, in a true Fanonian sense, while also embracing Yancy's method of restaging the act by inserting the subject experience within it as researcher, scholar, and critic.

The Habits of Racism: A Phenomenology of Racism and Racialized Embodiment is an interesting read for those working in critical philosophy of race, critical race theory, phenomenology, existentialism, and studies on Whiteness. It offers readers the possibility of unpacking embodiment and tracing the steps of the actor and the recipient of racism, at each instance revealing the obvious as well as the unspoken, silent features of its aftermath that leave some with shame or embarrassment and others with the burden of having to explain it to those for whom racism is simple, known, a habit, part of life and one that we are socialized to believe is part of our normalized world. Feminist philosophers will appreciate Ngo's telling and retelling of the doing and undoing of existentialist and pragmatist accounts of racism; her detailing of racism as habit is noteworthy. Ngo takes readers on a journey that examines the features of repetition and routine, and shows scholars precisely why studying the phenomenon of racism as habit is important.