Black/White as Binary Opposition:

racism, deconstruction and vulnerability to “wild Being”

For Rozena Maart (and Zara)

“I am vulnerable to my own life; but I would not have it any other way, for vulnerability is the

guardian of integrity” – Ann Truitt.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says she thinks of deconstruction “as a radical acceptance of vulnerability”;¹
Jacques Derrida says it is not an enterprise or a project, but a “situation.”² These remarks have confirmed for me a
sense I have had for a while, that deconstruction is not something you do, so much as it is something you find
happening to you, a situation in which you are put in question. I will be describing such a situation – my own in
relation to race – interpreting it in terms of what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls “wild Being.”

Let me explain how I understand this wild Being. Its “wildness” is not something far-out, sublime or exotic.

Think of wildflowers (weeds, as gardeners are liable to call them) as opposed to cultivated “domestic” varieties:

Merleau-Ponty is trying to bring up the question of Being so as to escape humanized categorized versions of it. He
is offering a distinction related to the one Heidegger makes between the ontic (So-sein: being such-and-such) and
the ontological (Sein: Being itself). But wild being is humbler than Heidegger’s Being; it is the excess of Being (Sein)
which is not used up in So-sein, in the organization into categories and identities, and labeled with predicates. It is,
Merleau-Ponty says, the “ground” of predicative Being,³ but it is not a foundation, rather the opposite, for
awareness of it shows up the impossibility of foundation, the ineluctable limits of predication, of finally making

Hereafter cited as PCC.
2 In “Of Colleges and Philosophy” in Postmodernism ICA Documents 4 and 5 (London: ICA, 1986) p. 69 quoted by
3 The Visible and the Invisible, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press,
1968) p. 110. Hereafter cited as VI.
sense of things. The grammatical mood needed to articulate is not the indicative but the interrogative, and yes, we are alerted to it by the experience of being put in question, but along with that we are also participants in it by our own activity of questioning. Interrogation is “the ultimate relation to Being, and an ... ontological organ” (VI p. 121). And so where in Heidegger there is a kind of passivity before the transcendent, for Merleau-Ponty one could say we have it as much as it has us: the questioning is reversible, the distinction between active and passive doesn’t clearly apply. This opening up of Being as glimpsed by Merleau-Ponty makes it possible to grasp that the structures of binary opposition belong to the ontic. Besides active and passive, think of subject–object, knower–known, mind–body: no matter how fundamental these may have seemed – as well as the one which concerns us here, Black – white, (and also, in fact, female – male), – perhaps they can only stay in place as long as one can assume that things are, or can be, transparent to a detached disembodied, a-historical (non-racial? a-sexual?) consciousness. The event (advent) that puts this consciousness in question can be described as a version of the phenomenological *epochè*, i.e. a breaking out of what Husserl called the “natural attitude.”

If nothing positive can be said about this Being, if it is inherently “wild” and as such escapes our attempts to grasp it as *So-sein*, thus undermining even our confidence in subjectivity or agency, what of our apparently inveterate tendency to keep discovering patterns, to try to make sense of things? For the loss of absolute objective truth, together with the illusion of detachment (what Merleau-Ponty called *pensée de survol* – high altitude thinking), far from making things meaningless, precipitates us into a tangle of too many meanings at once. We are willy-nilly in the world, in this country, this history, this body, of this sex, of this race or color etc., caught up in networks to which we find ourselves already contributing. As Merleau-Ponty put it, we are condemned to meaning (*condamnés au sens*).4

Gayatri Spivak tells us:

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“the only things one really deconstructs are things in which one is intimately mired”

(PCC p.135)

and:

“The useful part of deconstruction is in the suggestion that the subject is always centered.

Deconstruction persistently notices that this centering is an effect-structure with indeterminable boundaries that can only be deciphered as determining.”

As a rule I don’t notice what contributes to making me the subject that I am, doing, wanting, saying all this stuff, although it is clear I am always already embedded and embarked, biologically, socially, culturally, historically, and yes, racially. Of course, there are good reasons for this – the natural-attitude: in practice I am too busy focusing on where I am going to keep track of what is producing me. But it does happen that for some reason something interrupts “business as usual” and I am disoriented. The disorientation of deconstruction is radical in the sense that it isn’t a case merely of noticing we have got our bearings wrong, and thus can sort ourselves out in accordance with some stable landmark or by correcting our instruments; we seem to be caught in a different, worse, predicament, mired, as Spivak put it, because, continuing the analogy, we begin to realize the only instruments we have, the only ones there are, or can be, appear to be the very things that generate what we took for landmarks. (This situation is what Derrida seems to be describing when he says everything is “text.”) And we can’t even make a clear distinction between ourselves and what I have called our “instruments.” This is what I mean by deconstruction as something undergone, whether or not we can manage a “radical acceptance of vulnerability.” We may feel wide open, without the protection we thought we had, when we trusted our ability to figure out where we were, what we were. It seems dangerous, and defenses can come up very quickly, but it is also, obviously, an opportunity if we can let ourselves be educated by it.

Let us look then at this dynamic more closely. Whatever it is that interrupts “business as usual” – precipitates us into the epoche, puts us in question – allows the breakthrough of wild Being ... it challenges us, I

want to say, at our very center. Assuming what accomplished this center were patterns outside our cognizance, it’s obviously going to take an upheaval for us to become aware of them. And our awareness is not of them as motivational factors (causes?) but of the upheaval in the effects. As Spivak says, the “indeterminable boundaries” which have produced the centering “can only be deciphered as determining.” In other words, we kind of bump into something which we cannot seem to get around: we discover we are “mired,” stuck.

Binary opposition as described by Saussure and used by Lévi-Strauss seemed to be structurally necessary for the articulation and recognition of meaning. However, in suggesting they are a feature integral to our instruments of orientation I mean to imply there is something not to be captured by them, and at some point they may break down – and we will be confronted with their arbitrary nature, with the realization that one term is defined always and only in opposition to the other of the pair. And when our identity is at stake, e.g. white/black (or male/female), being put in question and being mired come to the same thing. Then what we have to face is that our identity, the center that gives us our sense of being a subject, is an effect, and not a cause; i.e. not a genuine “center” at all. Thus, what has come to concern me, in today’s context, is the question of my identity as white versus Black; as well as female versus male.

In general, though, how do binary oppositions work? As Saussure explained, phonemes are articulated and heard as phonemes only by being distinguished from other phonemes: a single one has no positive meaning on its own. One might imagine the two terms could have equal weight, but in fact it seems there is always one of the pair which is prior. Making sense of things means putting them in order; and this, picking up on Merleau-Ponty’s play on sens as “direction,” as well as “meaning” or “sense” (see fn. 4 above), involves “orientation,” deciding on a center, a priority. Traditional conceptual thought, or metaphysics, as Derrida uses the term, constantly exhibits this pattern, which means, in any binary opposition – remember the list in Pythagoras – one is going to be privileged. According to Derrida, there is always a
“hierarchy, one of the two terms controls the other, (axiologically, logically, etc.), holds the superior position. To deconstruct the opposition is first ... to overthrow (renverser) the hierarchy.”

Before deconstruction comes up, however, there would have to be some way to tell that there is a hierarchy, and, if there is one, to see what holds it in place. Could there be a “real” hierarchy, i.e. somehow an appropriate ordering, or is it always an asymmetrical relationship in which the ascendancy of the one at the expense of the other constitutes a kind of violation? As Gayatri Spivak has noticed when you reverse the direction of the binary opposition, you discover the violence (PCC p. 8). It is going against the natural attitude, so one feels some resistance, but if we become aware of the possibility of this reversal, we cannot help noticing the arbitrary element.

I shall be talking about a moment when I did experience, all at once the opposition, the asymmetry, and a lopsided seesaw pattern in the way the two function. And felt the violence of the hierarchy. For here whiteness and blackness are as it were unequal accomplices. Though it may seem to whites they are self-sufficient, I have come to see it is impossible to specify whiteness (in the North American sense) without reference to blackness. And while both blacks and whites inhabit this structure, i.e. we all experience our identity in its terms, the built-in asymmetry is liable to prevent whites from noticing the violence. Commenting on the way binary oppositions work, Spivak writes (in her introduction to Of Grammatology) of the

“... longing for a center, an authorizing pressure that spawns hierarchized oppositions. The superior term belongs to presence and the logos; the inferior serves to define its status and mark a fall.”

(OG p. lxix)

Thus each needs the other, for there to be that longed-for stability and meaning, and one term is bound to be above the other. What I called the seesaw then will never be evenly balanced, it will always be “top-heavy” – so exchanging positions within the same structure will not affect the pattern of violence (more about that shortly). Something like this applies to the traditional oppositions referred to earlier: active–passive, subject–object, knower–known, mind–

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body, etc. Traditional epistemology has been up and down on the seesaw with all of these, and as we are precipitated into Merleau-Ponty’s wild Being, they will in effect disintegrate as soon as their complicity becomes apparent.

Once there are cracks in the taken-for-granted foundations of knowledge (Kant’s “speculative reason”), it gets harder to feel confident elsewhere, in the realm of “practical reason,” for instance. And the hierarchies governing theory and practice, thinking and feeling, start to look as though they may be subject to the same critique. The appeal to practical reason has a particular poignancy in the case we are concerned with (also the male/female one), for when it is recognized that the terms of the opposition behave in the way I have described, surely one wants to say at once this is unfair, unjust to whoever is on the downside of the seesaw, on the assumption it makes sense to appeal to a prior standard of justice? That is of value as far as it goes (strategically, as Spivak would put it) and it often goes a good way in relieving real distress, but in the long run it would need to rely on some kind of universal standard – and where would such standards come from? One may not have to go as far as Nietzsche and take the desire for “justice” as nothing but an aspect of (or reaction to) the will to power, but it is clear assertion of impartial standards lays claim to a detached (disembodied, etc.?) point of view which in principle cannot be substantiated. And one of the difficulties for both blacks and women is how the cry for justice is sometimes a reaction on the part of the oppressed to being on the losing side of the power struggle, i.e. motivated by ressentiment, the urge of the ones on the downside to replace those on the upside of the seesaw. Nevertheless, such “justice” is not justice in the sense in which Derrida says, “Deconstruction is justice.”

The real problem is that whites (or men), being on the upside of the seesaw, tend not to see the seesaw at all, but, taking for granted a position as if at the center, will naturally identify with the “presence and the logos,” and not realize this identification is pretty much specific to their race or sex. Not only do they not see how this identity confers privileges which are denied to others, they assume their point of view is the standard one, the norm by which other points of view are to be judged deviant and which gives them access to the way things are. Whites (and men) will feel an affinity with objectivity and will want to uphold if not claim to be exemplars of the ideal of universal rationality, namely the detached, disembodied, a-historical consciousness to which race (or sex) is irrelevant. But body, history, race and sex can only seem irrelevant to those who can afford to disregard them, those that is to say, who have enough to eat etc., and the power to direct their lives. Those who are in this position then may not be
aware of being part of the system; if they have any sense of the issue at all, they may see it as the others’ problem, and perhaps talk with greater or lesser approval of the progress “they” are making (overcoming their “unfortunate” handicap!). And while those who are aware of not being “at the center” may feel more or less marginal, they will still tend to want to hold on to the stability only a perceived center can give. It’s not only their identity, such as it is, is also at stake, but besides, to the extent they are aware of being “underprivileged,” they may hope one day they will after all “get there.”

How could wild Being disrupt these categories, if both sides of the seesaw have an investment in keeping them in place? Wild Being is, of course, not predictable or even immediately recognizable. You cannot go out to find examples of it on purpose, it’s more a case of being found out by it. Though I think you can make an effort to be ready for it, this is really a matter of having already been touched by it, and drawing on all your courage to face the unknown, the not yet assimilable. It irrupts, dislocates, bursts forth – Merleau-Ponty writes of éclatement, déhiscence, “a general buckling of my landscape … and … the thought that breaks through the space of my consciousness” (VI 118-9).

And now for the description of my experience …

When I first came to North America I had already been puzzled for a while by what at that time I called “the color bar.” That the U.S. set of categories was new to me did not mean I was “innocent” of racism, exactly, but it did mean I had to learn how it works here. Certain reactions of people around me were noticeable – and unintelligible – to me in a way they wouldn’t be to those who already knew how to take this particular way of classifying human beings for granted. I remember trying to see how it was like and unlike the classism I knew all too well in England,

8 Cf. Zygmund Bauman’s Postmodern Ethics (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1994) p. 216-7, where he describes how the victims of modernity’s unequal exchange system tend to uphold it even more enthusiastically than the privileged, hoping eventually to benefit from it in their turn.

9 As if it were a matter of the servant class whose members could not take off their uniforms, and as we used to say, “lose” their accent. (I have since come to see how the English class system incorporated another version of racism: what mattered was not so much your current economic status as where you came from, who your ancestors were, what was “in the blood.”)
which had taught me my place and also how to “place” other people by distinguishing between accents, manners, etc. I knew my U.S. associates, white and black, were picking up cues invisible to me, and being “white” meant something new, not just that one had been unable to get a tan this year. Exploring U.S. culture, on the lookout for what was different from Europe, I discovered Black literature; I was especially impressed by James Baldwin, I remember, and I began to find in the way he seemed to be wrestling with internalized racism inspiration for handling what I had come to regard as my internalized sexism. Because there were situations in which I felt I had, with an effort, managed to “rise above” being female, it seemed to me that Baldwin’s goal was also to reach the universal (certainly he wanted to overcome bitterness) – to live in a realm where human beings are neither black nor white. And to be color-blind in this way came across as the hope for the future – as sex-blindness on my part seemed at that stage to help me, at least in some of my projects, where I wanted to be counted as merely a member of the species (i.e. a generic hu/man ... I did not yet see this was not an option). But as I read more, learned more, came to know more Black people, I realized that by “universalizing” Baldwin’s struggle, I had been trying to appropriate it, make it not-Black (not seeing that this could only mean, make it white). I had ignored the specificity of his subjectivity, even as I tried to use his work – as it now seems to me – to avoid both my own specificity, and the work it sets me. With hindsight it seems symptomatic I was taking a man as my model. Reading his work (as I now think, wrongly) as an effort to become color-blind, meant I could keep the old center in place: I could see us both aspiring to “universal rationality.” But in fact it was more a case of trying to get to the other side of the binary opposition, as if I imagined he wanted to join those whose situation allows them to ignore race,¹¹ as I had hoped somehow to be counted among those to whom sex seems irrelevant. Because this hierarchical structure, which privileged me, had become integral to my view of the world (my landscape) and so invisible to me, I was as unaware of my own racial identity as I was blind to what it would mean to one on the downside of the racial seesaw – whose Blackness made it possible for me to be white. Of course, I couldn’t see this at first. Something was going to have to

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¹⁰ In I know How Long the Train’s Been Gone, for example.
¹¹ And, of course, color-blindness in “liberal” whites – the (“politically correct”?!) attitude that a person’s color does not make any difference, though it may mean they are not as active as the KKK, is not evidence they have overcome their racism. Rather it is a symptom of their ignorance (like mine when I first arrived in the States), an ignorance only whites can afford.
shake things up, threaten the balance of the flimsy scaffolding holding up the structures I took for granted – the ones I was still uneasily inhabiting with the white men.

Then I heard Audre Lorde. Someone moving freely, confidently through what you thought were solid walls can definitely make you feel stuck. One thing worth noting about being mired is there may come a point when you know it’s true, but you haven’t quite the nerve yet to try pulling your feet out of the slurry; you don’t know what stink you will stir up (and with this stuff you will, believe me!), the lack of solid ground makes you fear moving at all, but it doesn’t feel any better to stay put. This is part of what I mean by vulnerability. (Sometimes I see men in this position with regard to sexism: I recognize parallels with my own tangles with classism, heterosexism, as well as racism).

It wasn’t just being moved by her poetry, it was even more the clarity with which she articulated the specificity of her experience and her vigor in rejecting what the “white fathers” say in favor of what the “Black Mother … whispers in our dreams.”

“The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black Mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel therefore I can be free …”¹²

And when she leaned across the podium, declaiming: “I am a Black, lesbian, feminist warrior poet, doing my work. ARE YOU DOING YOURS?” I heard it as addressed to me. Not that I thought she knew who I was, but the way she laid claim to her Blackness, etc., as the context for her work “broke through the space of my consciousness.” I experienced what Derrida calls “reversal and displacement”: the way I thought things really were, standards I had taken as norms, were overturned. What I had thought was universal became recognizable as the perspective of the white male – when I had to accept the validity of an alternative. The center shifted: hearing

Lorde as Black (as I had not been able to hear Baldwin) meant I had to know myself as white. The subject position I had taken for granted had been displaced, and in the dizzying moment when I felt their reversal, I became aware of binary oppositions (Black/white, male/female) and where I was supposed to fit into them, as well as the violence of those hierarchies which were now being challenged. Merely to notice the Black/white binary opposition here would be disruptive because it shows up what a white person will tend to assume without thinking: namely the perspective from which she sees things is the one that counts (“it’s not a ‘perspective,’ it’s the way things are”). But if whites are white only by contrast with Blacks, and are only dominant if Blacks are subordinate, then there is no basis for taking white as the standard. (As in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, the odds are anyway against the whites having a better take on what’s going on.) The dominance then is displayed as unjustified, as violent, and I, a white, am already implicated in the violence by virtue of occupying the privileged position, the upside of this particular seesaw. Complicated, perhaps, but not mitigated by my being on the downside of the male/female one. Still, my specificity – as a white, educated, middle class, English woman, who has studied (male-identified) philosophy – becomes not an identity which says who/what I am, but just where I find myself: which must be the matrix, as it were, for the work I am to do. As Derrida points out:

“We have to begin some place (quelque part) where we are and ... it [is] impossible to justify one (un) point of departure absolutely. Some place where we are: already in a text where we think we are.” (OG p. 162 – His italics. Translation amended)

One of the things this encounter made me face, then, is how my subject position is an indeed effect-structure determined by these (and other, yet to be deciphered) boundaries. There isn’t any way for me not to be white and female, or for me to unmake my educational and cultural formation (any more than I can change who my parents were, etc.). Claiming to see from a perspective not so determined would be to try to disavow what I have so painfully learned; and in principle there is no way of arriving at an objectivity freed from the limitations of a specific point of view. But to recognize the structures one has been inhabiting leaves one with more questions

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13 This was made clearer for me by discussions with Rozena Maart.
than answers – brings one face to face with wild Being. I know now I can’t know. I know I cannot ever know myself, “place” myself in this wild terrain, which is what I would need to be able to do, to judge how what/where I am limits what/how I see. An epistemological double-bind. It is only when we are in this impossible, inescapable situation – we cannot after all avoid having the starting point that we do (being at “some place where we are”) – that deconstruction happens. Not as a “method” to solve this (insoluble) problem, but as a “transformation of consciousness” (PCC p.20). Somehow, we have to see through the setup we have found ourselves in. And I mean “see through” in three ways at once: first recognizing it is a “setup” and not the way things really are (and there are those who have a vested interest in keeping this quiet); second we see through it, past it, to the not yet categorized, where things are open-ended, where sitting loose to the structures the status of which has been put in question, we can slip into what Geraldine Finn calls “the space-between” which erupts when we are divested of identities and identifications; and finally, acknowledging that while it covers over more than it reveals and cannot be treated as at all reliable, nevertheless this is all we do have to see through, (the set of instruments we are stuck with) so we must take it up and live it, with immense circumspection, as a flawed inheritance we are not free to abandon, for which we may or may not be able to find a new meaning in the future. What it can be is an “enabling epistemological double-bind,” if we recognize it as an “(im)possibility” (OTM p. 308, n. 33) for which no rules or precedents can prepare us. Having no guarantees we are justified, we are continually put in question; every move we make we make in the dark, but we cannot not move: we are faced with “the undecidable in view of which decision must be risked” (OTM p. 156). And so for me, negotiating the double-bind I am in, working with the (im)possibility of my specific situation, as I decipher the boundaries determining it/me, this is the work to which Audre Lorde’s witness has called me.

What I want to convey then is how this experience, which dislocated my sense of what constitutes both my whiteness and my femaleness – i.e. two binary oppositions, in which I am respectively on the upside and the downside – precipitated me into wild Being. Obviously, it didn’t eliminate the social, political and economical differences, as such, but it shifted the sense of who they matter to, who they hurt, and began to teach me, in Spivak’s phrase, how “to unlearn my privilege as my loss” (PCC p. 9). This deconstruction I have gone through has started the process of discovering what has not been accessible to me as long as I hold on to my “natural attitude.”
What has been left out. Or to put it more organically, I am finding seeds of wild Being, like the weeds referred to earlier, sprouting up inside the structures of my identity and its allegiances, and breaking their hold, opening up new possibilities. What Audre Lorde called “the Black mother within each of us, the poet,” I hear as an image for wild Being, the voice not accounted for in the economy of the masculine and the binary opposition. My relation to this voice is not Lorde’s; my effort to heed it is a matter of tuning out other louder voices and letting something new be said from a direction which is unfamiliar. Spivak writes of her own struggle to make space for the silence of the subaltern, which I interpret as her commitment to staying with the vulnerability which allows the opening to wild Being, to being put in question. What matters, especially for those of us on the upside, is to be alert to the echo of the silence inside us, so we can (in Derrida’s phrase) not only “guard the question” but also “hear the Other.”

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Note: This essay forms part of a larger study, “Deconstruction and Wild Being: Merleau-Ponty’s interrogative and ‘wild feminism,’ ” available at https://www2.ccsu.edu/faculty/Godway?p=2