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PERFECT ENEMIES: ANTI-GENDERISM, RACISM AND THE THREAT OF ABSTRACTNESS

Jana Cattien

Abstract: In this paper, I conceptualise the psychic lives of anti-genderism, in both their continuities and their discontinuities with racism and anti-Semitism. At first glance, it is clear that anti-genderism, racism and anti-Semitism fulfil similar psychic needs: providing an ‘Other’ who can pose as obstacle to the fantasy of perfect enjoyment. The presence of this obstacle shields the white nationalist psyche from having to confront the impossibility of what it wants – an unalienated relationship with the German language and nation – and allows it to focus, instead, on the ‘Other’ that allegedly stands in the way of its desire. But the ‘gender’ in anti-genderism is also more than a useful obstacle to perfect enjoyment. It is a ‘perfect enemy’: an enemy who does not have a tangible material presence and can therefore signify entirely at the subject’s command. By constructing a ‘perfect enemy’, I argue, anti-genderism paves the way for the emergence of a new kind of racialised ‘Other’. This ‘Other’ is threatening not in the first instance because of their racialised embodiment, but because they can only appear in abstract, disembodied form.

Keywords: anti-genderism, racism, anti-Semitism, psychoanalysis, Laclau, Hall, Fanon

In 2021, the year of the most recent German national election, Berlin-based newspaper *Tagesspiegel* surveyed the social media content of the six major political parties (Left, Green, SPD, CDU/CSU, FDP, AfD). Compared to all other parties, the tweets and Facebook posts of the far-right wing party AfD (*Alternative fuer Deutschland*) were most likely to contain the word ‘gender’. The conservative CDU came second place. By comparison, in 2017, the Green party still used the word ‘gender’ more than either AfD or CDU. Now, Greens, Left and SPD tend to refrain from using the English term ‘gender’ altogether and have returned instead to the German equivalent *Geschlecht*. This is most likely in response to the discursive appropriation of the word ‘gender’ by right-wing parties.¹

Of all AfD tweets that contained the word ‘gender’, the words that most commonly followed it were: *gaga* (crazy), *wahn* (obsession), *Sternchen* (star),² *studies*, *Sprache* (language) and *gerechte* (neutral or inclusive). *Gendergaga* is in the lead with a total of eighty-eight tweets; *genderwahn* comes second with twenty-eight tweets; *gendersternchen* and *gendergerechte* share third place with ten tweets. The word *Gendergaga* was coined by the *Verein Deutscher Sprache*

1. Inga Barthels et al. ‘Der Genderwahn der AfD’, *Tagesspiegel*, 17 September 2021.

2. A ‘genderstar’ is used to modify the ‘generic masculine’ form of the noun to visibly include non-masculine genders: so rather than *Student*, you would write *Student*innen*.

(VDS), a non-profit organisation dedicated to the project of ‘preserving the German language as a language of culture, economy and science’. The VDS has a specific working group tasked exclusively with resisting the implementation of *Gendersprache* (‘gender language’). *Gendersprache* in this context refers to new gender-inclusive (*gendergerechte*) interventions into the German language, such as replacing the supposedly ‘generic’ masculine form (*Studenten*) with a more inclusive one (*Student*innen* or *Student_innen*).

In June 2021, parliamentary representatives of the AfD submitted a motion to the German Bundestag, asking the government to refrain from making any changes to its use of language that indicate a turn towards *gendergerechte Sprache* – including the so-called *Gendersternchen* (*Student*innen*), colon (*Student:innen*), *BinnenIs* (*StudentInnen*), slash (*Student/innen*) or underscore (*Student_innen*).³ In all cases, the linguistic intervention might either be understood as simply ‘adding’ the feminine form to the base of the noun, or, more radically, as signalling the inclusion of non-binary genders. The AfD objects to both rationales, citing the conservative argument that generic masculine pronouns can encompass ‘all genders’. Moreover, the motion claims, any use of *gendergerechte Sprache* constitutes an ‘unnatural defacement/disfigurement’ (*Verunstaltung*) of the German language. For the 2021 national election, this claim was condensed in slogan-form: we want ‘German’ – not ‘gender’ (*Deutsch statt Gender*).

The choice of the word *Verunstaltung* (defacement, defiguration) in the AfD motion recalls earlier periods in German history in which marginalised groups were labelled ‘unnatural’ elements that allegedly ‘disfigured’ the ‘natural’ German *Volk*. In Nazi Germany, the Jews’ supposed distance from ‘nature’ was a common anti-Semitic trope.⁴ As Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel has shown in her study of the psychic life of Nazism, the Jews’ alienation from ‘nature’ and alleged ‘rootlessness’ represented, for the fascist psyche, an obstacle to the psychic wholeness promised by an uninhibited embrace with ‘Mother Nature’.⁵ As an example of this, Sander Gilman quotes anti-Semitic remarks by the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung about the ‘Jewishness’ of Freudian psychoanalysis: ‘[the Jew] is badly at a loss for that quality in man which roots him to the earth and draws new strength from below’.⁶ In this vein, Jung also paraphrased anti-Semitic comments made by philosopher Ernest Renan, who claimed that the Jews’ ‘nomadic’ nature rendered them utterly dependent on a ‘civilized nation to act as a host for their [cultural] development’ (*Freud, Race and Gender*, p31).

In colonial Germany, eugenicist panics around ‘mixed-race’ children born of relationships between white German colonisers and non-white natives were similarly articulated in terms of the alleged ‘contamination’ of German nature and culture. As Fatima El-Tayeb puts it, ‘[n]othing threatened the “natural order” more than a blurring of the supposedly clear boundaries between the races ... “mixing” between the black and white race was condemned as “unnatural” and disastrous not only for the offspring itself but for all

3. <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/19/309/1930964.pdf>. The motion was subsequently rejected. See <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2021/kw25-de-gendergerechte-sprache-846940>.

4. Stephen Frosh, ‘Psychoanalysis, Colonialism, Racism’, *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 33:3, 2013, pp141-154, p181. (Hereafter *Psychoanalysis, Colonialism, Racism*.)

5. Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, ‘Reflections of a Psychoanalyst upon the Nazi Biocracy and Genocide’, *The International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 17, 1990, pp167-176.

6. Sander Gilman, *Freud, Race and Gender*, Princeton University Press, 1993, p31. (Hereafter *Freud, Race and Gender*.)

mankind'.⁷ By policing the boundaries between 'races', the 'superior' race was to be kept pure from contact with 'inferior' natures, thus helping along 'the "natural" elimination of the inferior and the ruling of the "fittest"' (*Blood Is a Very Special Juice*, p153). Where 'mixed-race' children were born to German citizens, their access to German nationality had to be carefully policed in order to prevent anyone with non-white ancestry from being legally entitled to acquire property in the colonies or even settle in Germany (*Blood Is a Very Special Juice*, p159).

But whilst both the Jew and the 'mixed-race' person were embodied personifications of an 'unnatural' threat to German 'nature', 'gender' points to a more abstract, disembodied kind of threat. Although the term 'gender' might occasionally refer to particular figures – Judith Butler, for example, or other gender scholars – these figures do not embody 'unnaturalness' in the same way as the Jew or the 'mixed-race' person. Rather than referring to a particular group of people, the signifier 'gender' conjures the threat of the 'unnatural' by referring to other, equally abstract, signifiers: 'diversity', 'multiculturalism', 'postmodernism', 'social constructivism', 'globalisation', 'political correctness' etc.⁸ This creates the impression of a diffuse, ominous conspiracy which might temporarily be embodied by particular 'scapegoats', but never comes to settle in any particular place.

My aim in this paper is to conceptualise the psychic lives of contemporary anti-genderism, in both their continuities and their discontinuities with racism and anti-Semitism.⁹ In the first section, I show that anti-genderism, racism and anti-Semitism can be said to fulfil similar psychic needs. Both the 'gender' in anti-genderism and the racialised/Jewish Other are deployed as foils onto which the white nationalist psyche can project repudiated and unwanted elements of itself. These projections are then mobilised to pose as obstacles to an impossible fantasy of perfect enjoyment. The presence of these obstacles shields the psyche from having to confront the impossibility of what it wants – an unalienated relationship with Germany and the German language – and allows it to focus, instead, on the obstacles that allegedly stand in the way of this desire.

In the second section, I suggest that, even though anti-genderism and racism fulfil similar psychic needs, 'gender' is a not just a useful obstacle to the fantasy of perfect enjoyment, but a 'perfect enemy' – an enemy who does not have a tangible material presence and can therefore signify entirely at the subject's command. Drawing on the work of Ernesto Laclau, I argue that 'gender' is a perfect enemy insofar as it is an 'empty signifier' that does not have to disguise the fact that it is a signifier. This is different from Stuart Hall's understanding of race as a 'floating signifier': a signifier that operates successfully only on the condition that it can disguise its being a signifier and can pose, instead, as a descriptive term that merely refers to an underlying racial ontology.

In the final section, I interrogate how the operation of 'gender' as an empty

7. Fatima El-Tayeb, "'Blood Is a Very Special Juice": Racialized Bodies and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century Germany', *International Review of Social History*, 44:57, 1999, pp149-169, p153. (Hereafter *Blood Is a Very Special Juice*.)

8. For an overview of anti-gender rhetoric in Germany and other European countries see for example: Sabine Hark and Paula Villa (eds), *Anti-Genderismus: Sexualität und Geschlecht als Schauplatz Aktueller Politischer Auseinandersetzungen*, Bielefeld, transcript, 2015. (Hereafter *Anti-Genderismus*.); Gabriele Dietze and Julia Roth (eds), *Right-Wing Populism and Gender: European Perspectives and Beyond*, transcript, Bielefeld, 2020. See the 2021 AfD election programme as a recent example of the presumed proximity between 'gender ideology', 'diversity', 'multiculturalism', and 'globalisation': <https://www.afd.de/wahlprogramm/>. (Hereafter *AfD election programme*.)

9. I have made this argument elsewhere in a different form: Jana Cattien, 'Anti-Genderism and White Feminist Reconstructions in Germany', *Signs*, 48:4, 2023. (Hereafter *Anti-Genderism*.)

10. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, 'Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography', *The Professional Geographer*, 54:1, 2002, pp15-24, p16. (Hereafter *Power and Difference*.)

11. In an earlier paper, I argued specifically against an analytic perspective that takes 'race' and 'gender' as analogous concepts: Jana Cattien, 'Against Transracialism: Revisiting the Debate', *Hypatia*, 34:4, 2019, pp713-735.

12. For a more elaborate critique of this tendency in anti-gender scholarship, see *Anti-Genderism*.

13. For a comprehensive study of the German fascist psyche, see Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, Polity, 1987. See also Theodor Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Nevitt Sanford and Daniel Levinson, *The Authoritarian Personality*, Norton, 1950. (Hereafter *Authoritarian Personality*.)

14. For the history of racism and anti-Semitism (and their interconnections) in the German context, see for example: Jana Cattien, 'What is Leitkultur?', *New German Critique*, 48:1, 2021, pp181-209; Fatima El-Tayeb, *Schwarze Deutsche: Der Diskurs um 'Rasse' und nationale Identität 1890-1933*,

signifier reinvigorates the possibilities of racism without invoking embodied racial difference. Anti-genderism, I argue, allows white nationalist groups to conjure an abstract threat that is racialised without, however, being tethered to specific bodily markers of racial difference. Analysing the AfD campaign programme, I show how 'gender' has come to stand for ominous forces of the abstract which threaten to spoil and undermine the anti-genderist's enjoyment of what is familiar and tangible, seemingly right before their eyes: idyllic German 'nature'; familiar language; 'honest', local jobs for local people, and so on. This paves the way for the emergence of a new kind of racialised Other, an Other who is threatening not in the first instance because of their racialised embodiment but because, unlike the figure of the Jew or the 'mixed-race' person, they can only appear in abstract, disembodied form. This modality of racism is less a 'process of abstraction',¹⁰ whereby particular racialised bodies are rendered according to civilisational hierarchies of 'human' and 'less-than-human', but rather, points to the racialisation of *abstractness as such*.

PROJECTION, ENJOYMENT, FANTASY

Although anti-genderism is not an exclusively right-wing phenomenon, for the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the role that anti-gender discourse plays in the white nationalist psyche. For this, it is important to understand that this psyche has found in anti-genderism an outlet for needs and desires that are already well-served, as it were, by racism and anti-Semitism. While I do not want to suggest that 'race' and 'gender' are in any way analogous concepts,¹¹ I want to show that there are important psychic continuities between anti-genderism and racism. Specifically, I argue that the discursive appropriation of 'gender' by anti-genderists fulfils psychic needs that are functionally similar to those served by racism and anti-Semitism, even as anti-genderism also differs from them in important ways. Understanding these similarities, we can better resist the temptation to analytically separate the study of anti-genderism as being about 'gender' not 'race',¹² instead conceptualising anti-genderism as moving into a psychic economy already configured through racism and anti-Semitism.

A familiar way to conceptualise the white nationalist psyche and its outlets is through the idea of 'projection'. Psychic projection onto an already marginalised and derogated 'Other' is appealing because it allows the subject to project thoughts and feelings that it cannot bear to harbour inside itself onto an external object. In the case of anti-Semitism, the Jew's alleged 'alienation from nature' reflects what the fascist psyche most fears or despises about itself: its own feelings of alienation from the very 'nature' with which it wants to be in perfect fusion.¹³ A disturbance within the self is thus projected outwards, onto an external object that can be hated at a safe distance from the self. In most cases, these external objects are already historically and socially primed to carry these feelings (*Psychoanalysis, Colonialism, Racism*);

hatred directed at the Jew or the racialised person has an established archive of anti-Semitism, eugenicism and racism to draw from.¹⁴

Writing in the context of anti-black and colonial racism, Frantz Fanon has described this psychic projection as a process of ‘epidermalization’, whereby the white gaze projects onto the skin of the black subject all that it cannot bear to confront about itself: ‘The white man is convinced that the Negro is a beast ... Face to face with the man who is “different from himself”, he needs to defend himself. In other words, to personify the Other.’¹⁵ Personifying the other, as Fanon puts it, is a way for the psyche to defend itself against the otherness within (*Black Skin, White Masks*, p171). However, this defence mechanism produces its own ambivalence. Whatever is deemed despicable about the other – their ‘animality’, sexuality, etc. – also remains desirable for the self: despicable because it represents repudiated elements of the subject’s own psyche; and desirable because the subject continues, despite itself, to identify with these elements.

At first sight, it already seems clear that anti-gender discourse is governed by a psychic economy of projection similar to that which animates racism and anti-Semitism. As feminist scholars have pointed out, ‘gender’ has become an attractive rallying point for a broad range of paranoid and conspiratorial fantasies – about the EU, globalisation, refugees, Islam, gender-neutral bathrooms, gay marriage, ‘postmodernism’, ‘wokeness’, and so on.¹⁶ Especially when used as an untranslated term in languages in which an equivalent is available, the term ‘gender’ readily lends itself to such projections because it both sounds ‘foreign’ and yet does not refer to anything in particular.¹⁷ Like racist and anti-Semitic stereotypes, it gets its shape and meaning from the fears and anxieties of the subjects for whom it serves as a repository of psychic projection. If these stereotypes cannot be resisted through ‘simple correction of [their] mistakes’, then neither can anti-genderism (*Anti-Genderismus and Rightwing Hegemony*). Indeed, the subject might be compelled by anti-gender rhetoric not *despite* the fact that it misrepresents reality, but precisely because it does and this misrepresentation makes possible the continued enjoyment of a fantasy: were it not for the ominous machinations of ‘gender’, perfection would have already been attained.

In order to understand what makes anti-genderism, racism and anti-Semitism immune to epistemic intervention, we have to account for the role of fantasy in political life. Fantasies, Todd McGowan writes, ‘are resistant to greater knowledge because they concern how people enjoy rather than how they know’.¹⁸ Certain kinds of fantasy objects – such as a ‘pure’ and ‘unspoiled’ nation, race or language – are irresistible because they appear to offer unrestrained enjoyment to the subject. Since an object that promises *perfect* enjoyment is clearly impossible,¹⁹ the only way to hold onto it is to construct an obstacle to the attainment of this object. This allows the subject to hold onto the possibility of attaining an impossible object because it can say to itself that, were it not for the obstacle, perfect enjoyment would have already

Campus Verlag, 2001; Katharina Oguntoye, May Ayim and Dagmar Schultz, *Farbe Bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte*, Orlanda Verlag, 1986; Susan Neiman and Anna-Esther Younes, ‘Antisemitism, Anti-Racism, and the Holocaust in Germany: A discussion between Susan Neiman and Anna-Esther Younes’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 23:3, 2021.

15. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Pluto Press, 1986, p171. (Hereafter *Black Skin, White Masks*.)

16. See for example: Eva von Redecker, ‘Anti-Genderismus and Rightwing Hegemony’, *Radical Philosophy*, 198, 2016. (Hereafter *Anti-Genderismus and Rightwing Hegemony*.); Clare Hemmings, ‘Unnatural Feelings: The Affective Life of Anti-gender Mobilisations’, *Radical Philosophy*, 2:9, 2021; Andrea Maihofer and Franziska Schutzbach, ‘Vom Antifeminismus zum “Anti-Genderismus”’: Eine Zeitdiagnostische Betrachtung am Beispiel Schweiz’, in *Anti-Genderismus*, pp201-218.

17. This chimes with what others have already suggested, about the anti-genderist deployment of ‘gender’ as an ‘empty signifier’. See Birgit Sauer and Stefanie

Mayer, “Gender Ideology” in Austria: Coalitions around an Empty Signifier’, in R. Kuhar and D. Paternotte (eds), *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, pp 23-40.

18. Todd McGowan, ‘The Bedlam of the Lynch Mob: Racism and Enjoying through the Other’, in S. George and D. Hook (eds), *Lacan and Race: Racism, Identity and Psychoanalytic Theory*, Routledge, 2021, pp106-172, p117.

19. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, this impossible perfect object is called *objet petit a*. For Lacan, the impossibility of attaining the *objet a* is what makes desire possible. To the extent that the subject is subjectivised lack, its inability to attain wholeness is not a contingent feature of the world around it, but constitutive of its existence. For a theorisation of white anxiety through the lens of Lacanian theory see Derek Hook, ‘White Anxiety in (Post)Apartheid South Africa’, *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, 25, 2020, pp612-631.

20. On the link between racism and enjoyment see for example: M. Fakhry-Davids, *Internal Racism: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Race and Difference*, Bloomsbury, 2011; Neil Altman, *White Privilege*, Routledge,

been attained. In other words, the obstacle shields the subject from having to confront the idea that perfect enjoyment is forever unattainable – it protects it from being disappointed by its object of desire. What it offers instead is the more palatable idea that perfect enjoyment is *contingently* impossible, due to the presence of the obstacle, rather than necessarily so, because the psyche can never be fully satisfied.

In German anti-gender discourse, the presence of the signifier ‘gender’ allows white nationalist groups to hold onto the idea that an unalienated relationship with the German language is possible – were only ‘gender’ and gender scholars not to stand in the way. This is clearly expressed in the AfD campaign slogan ‘(we want) German not gender’, in which the latter is posited as an obstacle to the full enjoyment of the former. Having declared German ‘to be at the centre of our identity’, the ‘heart of a nation or culture’ (*Kulturnation*), the AfD demands that the protection of German as a ‘national language’ be anchored in the constitution itself (*AfD election programme*, p159). In their view, the main obstacle to this endeavour is the proliferation of *genderdeutsche Sprache* (‘gender-inclusive language’), labelled as a ‘grotesque deformation’ of the German language (*AfD election programme*). Having this obstacle in place allows the fantasy of an unalienated relationship to the German language to be maintained as an impossible promise to their voters: language is not alienating because it can never fill our lack, but because of ‘gender’.

Insofar as racialised Others, Jews, migrants and anyone else not deemed to be part of the nation are already primed to play the role of the ‘obstacle’ that stands in the way of enjoying ‘our’ culture, language and nation,²⁰ the spectre of ‘gender’ clearly fulfils a similar psychic need. It serves not only as a repository of psychic projection for repudiated elements of the white nationalist psyche, but also helps secure the fantasy that the German language can ever fully be ‘ours’ to enjoy. This ‘securing of the fantasy’ takes place both within the psyche and at the level of representation. Since the fantasy of an unalienated relationship with German or Germanness is impossible, it can only ever be represented negatively – that is, through an obstacle presumed to stand in the way of our access to this object.²¹ ‘Gender’ and racialised Others not only sustain the fantasy of perfect enjoyment in the white nationalist psyche; they make it possible for this fantasy to be represented in language.

As Ernesto Laclau shows, this latter aspect is crucial in order to understand how impossible objects can be invoked in political claims, such as those formulated in the AfD campaign. All political claims, he argues, will eventually have to attempt to represent some kind of impossible object: the idea of a perfect community that is forever unattainable but nevertheless necessary in order for political mobilisations towards hegemony to make sense at all. Given the impossibility of this object, it can only ever be represented inadequately – by deploying what Laclau calls ‘empty signifiers’: signifiers without signifieds. A signifier that takes up ‘the representing function’ for an ‘impossible object’ (*Emancipation(s)*, p40) must empty itself of its particular meaning in order to

serve this function, because it cannot represent both, a particular location within the signifying system, and the entirety of the system as such. However, since a signifier cannot empty itself completely without ceasing to be a signifier, it will always fall short of this task. The psychic impossibility of the perfect community is thus reflected in its representational impossibility, and vice versa.

For Laclau, the emergence of empty signifiers that attempt to represent impossible objects is not unique to right-wing or nationalist politics but necessitated by the nature of the political as such. He takes this to be an ontological claim, which cannot, by his own admission, explain why 'one signifier rather than another assumes in different circumstances that signifying function' (*Emancipation(s)*, p40). In the following section, I will attempt to answer this question vis-à-vis anti-gender discourse. If anti-genderism fulfils psychic needs already well-served, as it were, by racism and anti-Semitism, then how can we explain that the signifier 'gender' (and not another signifier) has assumed the role of representing an impossible idea of Germanness?

PERFECT ENEMIES

In the previous section, I argued that racial Others and 'gender' are both configured as obstacles which sustain the impossible fantasy of a perfect enjoyment of Germany and Germanness, both as an object of desire in the psyche and as a political aim that can be represented in language. In this section, I show that even though 'race' and 'gender' can both be conceptualised as 'empty signifiers', they are not empty signifiers in the same way. While embodied racial Others are configured as obstacles to white enjoyment, 'gender' is not just an obstacle but a 'perfect enemy': an enemy who does not have a tangible material presence and can therefore signify entirely at the behest of the subject.

To see how and why this is, let us first consider in more detail how racism names and constructs obstacles to the full enjoyment of 'our' culture, nation or language. It does so by picking out as obstacles groups of people already historically marginalised and 'nominated' by society 'as derogated and disempowered, yet also dangerous threats': non-white people, Jews and colonised subjects (*Psychoanalysis, Colonialism, Racism*, p150). This means that every instance of racist projection, every articulation of a nationalist fantasy sustained through the violent exclusion of racialised Others, can invoke and actualise the long histories of these exclusions without ever having to name them explicitly. Racist vision, Fanon shows, can appear to be wholly rooted in the present even as it draws all its strength and material from an imagined past:

I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered

2020. For Lacanian perspectives see: Sheldon George and Derek Hook (eds), *Lacan and Race: Racism, Identity, and Psychoanalytic Theory*, Routledge, 2021.

21. See Ernesto Laclau, 'Why do empty signifiers matter to politics?', in *Emancipation(s)*, Verso, 1996, pp 36-46. (Hereafter *Emancipation(s)*.)

my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: “Sho’ good eatin’” (*Black Skin, White Masks*, p112).

In Fanon’s account, the figure of the black person as an obstacle to white enjoyment makes accessible for the white colonial subject an entire historical archive of racism, colonialism and slavery. Blackness becomes the means through which this historical archive can be enjoyed as an exotic elsewhere, a temporary visit to the past, even as black people are simultaneously declared as obstacles to white enjoyment. What poses as the putative obstacle to white enjoyment is thus also the very thing that makes possible for racism itself to be enjoyed: the idea that ‘blackness’ is not just a set of ‘ethnic characteristics’ but a gateway to a whole range of cultural and historical attributes presumed to be linked to it in an essential way – ‘tom toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships’.

In saying that he was subjected to an ‘objective examination’, Fanon does not mean that there is indeed an objective lens through which his blackness may be ‘discovered’. Rather, ‘objective examination’ names the dominant discourse that has historically allowed whites to enjoy the spectacle of racial otherness under the guise of a discourse of scientific objectivity which insists that there is nothing for the subject to enjoy – only to ‘examine’ objectively. By configuring blackness as something to be ‘discovered’, the discourse of ‘objective examination’ claims that racial categories merely *refer* to racial differences that can be picked out by impartial empirical observation, rather than being actively involved in constituting and producing these differences. In this way, the enjoyment of racial otherness can be disavowed by pointing to the ‘objective’ existence of racial difference as a scientific ‘fact’, even though this discourse of ‘objectivity’ is precisely what justifies the looking, the ‘discovering’, in the first place.

For Stuart Hall, this is the ‘the trap in racism’: to mistake a signifier (‘blackness’) that we have been enculturated to associate with certain cultural and social features (‘tom-toms’) for a scientific fact that can stand apart from history, culture and society – ‘to allow what is manifestly there, what offers it to us as a symptom of appearance, to stand in the place of what is in fact one of the most profound and deeply complex of the cultural systems’.²² The idea that there is a stable racial ontology which causes the surface appearance of racial difference does not reflect the actual biological reality of race, but rather, its successful operation as a cultural signifier which allows us to believe that such a stable ontology exists. That racial categorisations appear ‘natural’ or ‘obvious’ to our eyes is not because it is indeed so, but because ‘nature’ continues to be one of the dominant modes in which race circulates as a cultural signifier: ‘It is the function of the discourse and race as a signifier, to make these two systems – nature and culture – correspond with one another,

22. Stuart Hall, ‘Race, the Floating Signifier: What More is There to Say About “Race”’, in P. Gilroy and R. Wilson Gilmore (eds), *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, Duke University Press, 2021, pp359-373, p370. (Hereafter *Floating Signifier*.)

in such a way that it is possible to read off the one against the other' (*Floating Signifier*, p367).

For Hall, the idea that visible racial differences are 'caused' by an underlying racial ontology which is not itself visible to the eye is pervasive not because it is true, but because this is how the signifier 'race' operates: by taking 'the stubborn gross physical facts of colour, hair, or bone' (*Floating Signifier*, p368) and configuring them as 'evidence' for the 'genetic' basis of race. Although these physical facts do not warrant any inferences about the biological reality of race, the fact that they appear to exist 'beyond dispute' (*Floating Signifier*, p368) allows us to believe in this biological reality as something equally beyond dispute. This, Hall shows, is a question of 'believing' – it is a leap of faith we are accustomed to make, not a sound inference. Indeed, the function of race as a cultural signifier is precisely to relieve us of the work of having to make any inferences at all. It allows seeing racial categories to feel less like an act of inferential reasoning that we have to perform each time anew, and more like 'reading a text' (*Floating Signifier*, p370) we already know by heart.

At the level of the psyche, 'reading race' offers a sense of comfort and familiarity. It allows us to extend this sense of comfort and familiarity from the domain of what is visually apparent ('racial difference') to the domain of what is invisible ('genes'), thus permitting even the 'untutored, unscientific eye' (*Floating Signifier*, p368) to feel at home in the otherwise unhomely terrain of science. If race as signifier works like a bridge between the 'intangible' domain of 'genes', and the tangible domain of surface appearance, then psychically investing in race through racism becomes a way to expand the imagined domain of tangibility far beyond the reach of what is sensorially available. Racism can thus provide a false sense of order and stability in a world whose workings are otherwise perceived as unstable and impenetrable. It is a defence mechanism against the limits of our own knowledge and understanding – a 'searchlight' that makes us believe we can finally 'penetrate the darkness of reality' and obtain a 'quick and all-comprising orientation' (*Authoritarian Personality*, p310).

Insofar as 'race' appears as 'visually obvious' and 'indisputable' while its ontological basis remains wholly obscure and unstable, racialised people are the kind of object of hate that Adorno describes in *The Authoritarian Personality* as an ideal foil for projection and fantasy: '[the object] must be tangible enough; and yet not too tangible, lest it be exploded by its own realism. It must have a sufficient historical backing and appear as an indisputable element of tradition' (*Authoritarian Personality*, p299f). As Adorno describes it, the object of hate is situated at a precarious dialectical tipping point between tangibility and intangibility. It must have enough tangible content in order that the subject's unwanted and unbearable feelings have something to latch onto: the 'stubborn gross physical facts of colour, hair, or bone'. And yet there must also remain something intangible and mysterious about it in order that the object can become a site for the subject's projection. What is tangible

about the object allows the subject to feel like he has a grip on the world, while what is intangible becomes an opportunity for him to put himself and his own fantasies into the object.

The apparent tangibility of racial difference means that the racist subject can project her fantasies onto the racialised Other whilst holding on to the idea that she is merely tracking a reality which precedes her. It is therefore easy for the subject to disavow her psychic investments in racism by referring to the visual indisputability of racial difference: 'I am not racist, I only say what I observe'. She can continue to psychologically invest in racism by pointing at what is visually beyond dispute without ever having to point at herself as the site of this investment.

As much as Adorno's characterisation of the ideal object of hate fits neatly with Hall and Fanon's analysis of racism, anti-gender discourse appears to be able to provide orientation, order and stability without requiring anything tangible, or visible, in the world to hold onto. In contrast to racial categories, which work by upholding the pretence that there is a link between visible differences in appearance and an underlying racial ontology, using the term 'gender' in linguistic contexts in which an equivalent exists²³ does not even *pretend* to refer to anything that we can see. As such, the comfort it offers is less like that of a 'searchlight' that can generate at least the semblance of illuminating reality, than the comfort of a fantasy that need not even hide the fact that it is phantasmatic.

If we follow Hall and Laclau, then 'race' and 'gender' both qualify as 'empty signifiers' – they are signifiers without signifieds. 'Race' is an empty signifier insofar as it is not tracking an underlying racial ontology, but merely the effects of its own successful operation in the world: 'You can see its effects, you can see it in the faces of the people around you, you can see people pulling the skirts aside as people from another racial group come into the room' (*Floating Signifier*, p363). 'Gender' is an empty signifier because whenever pressed to provide details on what exactly the threat of 'gender ideology' consists of, anti-genderists will not refer to anything tangible in the world, but point to other, equally abstract signifiers like 'postmodernism', 'political correctness', 'multiculturalism', or 'globalisation'.

Yet 'gender' and 'race' are not empty signifiers in the same way. Following Hall, the successful operation of race as an empty signifier requires that its being an empty signifier has to be disguised as part of this operation. 'Race' works as a signifier productive of social and political realities only insofar as it can successfully pose as a descriptive term that merely refers to a stable racial ontology which precedes it. It can operate as an empty signifier only by pretending to be a signifier with a stable signified. By contrast, the 'gender' in anti-genderism is openly and transparently an empty signifier which does not even have to *pretend* to have a signified. Even when 'gender' is associated with particular figures, such as Judith Butler or other gender scholars, it does not take the actual embodied and social existence of these figures as a signified.

23. For anti-gender ideology in other national contexts and in transnational perspective, a 2019 special issue of *Signs* gives a good overview: Angieszka Graff, Ratna Kapur and Suzanne Walters, 'Introduction: Gender and the Rise of the Global Right', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 44:3, 2019, pp541-558. See also Eric Fassin, 'Gender Is/In French', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 27:2, 2016, pp178-197.

Instead, the name 'Butler' is merely another signifier in a proliferating chain of signifiers, held together only by the subject's psychic investment in the idea of an ominous conspiracy which prevents it from attaining perfect enjoyment.

In highlighting the difference between 'race' and 'gender' as empty signifiers, I do not want to deny that the perceived bodily features of gender scholars have been used to flesh out the semiotics of the signifiers 'Butler' or 'Gendergaga' – undoubtedly, Butler being non-binary and Jewish makes them a popular target for anti-genderists.²⁴ My point is that in anti-genderism, these features are not, as with race talk, configured as gateways to a signified, but as an opportunity for the name 'Butler' to become a signifier in its own right. The relationship between 'gender' and 'Butler' is not that of signifier to signified, but that of two signifiers in what Laclau and Mouffe have termed a 'chain of equivalence'.²⁵ In this chain, signifiers like 'political correctness', 'multiculturalism', 'Butler', 'postmodernism' and 'gender' are linked to each other through what they share – here, their association with feminist, queer, anti-racist and decolonial movements. The longer and more established the chain, the more the signifiers in the chain lose their individual specificity and become able to be substituted for each other: 'gender ideology' equals 'political correctness' equals 'postmodernism' equals 'multiculturalism'.

When Adorno described the ideal object of hate, he did not have in mind a chain of signifiers, but a signifier with a signified: an object that is 'tangible enough' and has 'sufficient historical backing'. Yet a few pages later, he foreshadows the emergence of an object of hate much closer to Laclau's concept of an empty signifier. Such an object, he writes, would be able to be 'kept "pure" ... from contamination with reality' (*The Authoritarian Personality*, p310). Referring specifically to the phantasmatic claims involved in anti-Semitism, he elaborates that 'the less anti-Jewish imagery is related to actual experience ... the less it seems to be exposed to disturbance by the dialectics of experience, which it keeps away through its own rigidity' (*The Authoritarian Personality*, p310). In the encounter with this 'pure' object, the subject's experience of the object is nothing but the subject's repudiated experience of itself. There is nothing about the object that can 'disturb' the subject's appropriation of it – it is what Stephen Frosh calls a 'perfect enemy': '[an enemy] who does not exist, who can be reinvented every time to face the subject's renewed wrath' (*Psychoanalysis, Colonialism, Racism*, p211).

I want to suggest that 'gender' has become an important rallying point for white nationalist mobilisations towards an impossible ideal of Germanness because it is a perfect enemy in a way that the racial Other is not. However disingenuously the construction of the racialised Other is tethered to physical manifestations of racial difference, this tethering means that the racist subject can at any moment come into an unwelcome confrontation with the limits of its grasp of the Other. No matter how hard the subject tries to contain the Other within the place carved out for it within her psyche, the Other's complex, embodied subjectivity will always exceed the subject's projections.

24. In 2017, Butler was viciously attacked by anti-genderists in Brazil. For context see Sonia Corrêa, 'Gender Ideology: Tracking its Origins and Meanings in Current Gender Politics', *Engenderings*, 11 December 2019. For recent work on the link between trans-exclusionary feminism and anti-genderism see Alyosxa Tudor, 'Decolonising Trans/Gender Studies: Teaching Race, Sexuality and Migration in Times of the Rise of the Global Right', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 8:2, 2021, pp238-256.

25. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 1985, Verso. (Hereafter *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.)

By contrast, the anti-genderist cannot encounter the limits of his grasp of 'gender' because he never pretended to have a grasp on anyone, or anything, in the first place. His enemy is not a concrete, embodied subject who can escape his grasp but an abstract, disembodied Other whose existence is entirely malleable to his psychic needs.

That 'gender' is a more perfect enemy than racial Others does not mean that racism is less violent or less important than anti-genderism, but simply that anti-genderism might require different strategies of resistance. The fact that the racialised object of hate has at least some tangible content, which is independent from the subject's psychic investment in the object, means that the object retains some traction over the subject. The subject's appropriation of the object as a psychic repository for its projections thus always remains at risk of being exposed by the object itself. There remains, in other words, an irreducible gap between the subject who projects and the object that receives, as it were, the subject's projections. This gap not only makes it impossible for the subject to ever fully appropriate the object for its psychic need; it can also be mobilised as part of an anti-racist political project.

By contrast, anti-genderism cannot be resisted by exposing the limits of the subject's grasp of its object. This is because, in anti-genderism, there is no determinate *object* of hate, only an empty signifier equivalentially linked to other signifiers in a chain of deferred meaning. For Laclau and Mouffe, the presence of such a chain of equivalence indicates that there is a 'logic of simplification' (*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p130) at work in the political space. This logic is psychically appealing because it allows for the creation of political antagonisms of 'us' versus 'them': 'we' are those who are against 'gender', 'political correctness', 'postmodernism', etc.

Despite being hard to resist as a structuring principle of the political space, Laclau and Mouffe insist that a logic of equivalence can easily fall apart, because the political antagonism it generates is inherently unstable. As much as a chain of equivalence creates manifold opportunities for political mobilisation around a group identity, it simultaneously undermines the normative stability of this group identity from within. The anti-genderist chain of equivalence is a case in point: Insofar as being against 'gender ideology' relieves political groups and parties like the AfD from the normative task of having to formulate a set of political values that set it apart from other groups, its members and followers can enjoy through anti-genderism the sense of a political unity that does not require a normative commitment beyond saying that one is against 'gender ideology' too. This makes the group identity that is being offered both psychically appealing, because it does not require much in terms of normative investment, and yet inherently unstable, because it does not have a set of positive normative values to ground it in the political space.

'Gender' as signifier does not have to have tangible content in the way that Adorno demands of the ideal object of hate, because all it needs to do is

be a signifier that groups like the AfD can say they are against. In so doing, it offers all the qualities of a 'perfect enemy': it allows the subject to be against something, and to project onto this something all the repudiated elements of himself, whilst also relieving him off the normative pressure to articulate what he is *for*. This is particularly important – necessary even – when what one is 'for', what one really wants, is impossible and therefore cannot even be represented as a positive normative goal.

With this structure in place, there is no danger that anti-gender discourse be 'exploded by its own realism', as Adorno put it. 'Gender' is identical to the psychic and political need it serves for the subject and, as such, cannot resist the subject. More so than either the figure of the Jew in Adorno's analysis of the authoritarian personality or the racialised person in Hall and Fanon's account of racism, the 'gender' in anti-genderism is phantasmatic to the point where it is completely indifferent to the possibility of being unmasked as a phantasmatic construction of the subject's own making. This explains the resolute indifference of anti-genderists to any attempt by gender scholars to explain how they are misrepresenting 'gender'. The problem is not that 'gender' is misrepresenting some external object, like academic gender studies, which exists apart from the subject. Rather, 'gender' is not referring to any external object at all and can therefore signify entirely at the behest of the subject.

Conceptualising gender as a 'perfect enemy' that fulfils psychic needs similar to those served by racism and yet also differs in its operation from race as a signifier, can help us make sense of the strange irony of German anti-genderism: that the signifier 'gender' is relentlessly deployed by those who want to eradicate it, whilst those in favour of gender-inclusive language tend to use it less and less, preferring instead the German word *Geschlecht* when making political claims that involve gender and gender relations. On the account developed thus far, this is not surprising. That anti-genderists have greater psychic investments in the signifier 'gender' than non-anti-genderists is less a function of their stated beliefs about 'gender' – that it 'distorts' and 'corrupts' German language and culture etc. – than of the privileged role that this signifier has come to play in a larger psychic economy at whose centre resides an impossible fantasy of perfect Germanness. The claim of anti-genderists that they want to eradicate 'gender' could, therefore, not be further from their 'true' desire, which is to *preserve* the perfect enemy that keeps alive their impossible fantasy of a Germany that will never disappoint.

The aim of this section has been to show that anti-genderism constructs 'gender' as a perfect enemy of white nationalist enjoyment – an obstacle that is perfectly malleable to accommodate the subject's psychic needs and fantasies. As I argue in the following section, the emergence of this perfect enemy does not *replace* existing racist ideologies which target concrete groups of racialised Others but *complements* them, by adding to the embodied racial Other the threat of an abstract, disembodied Other. As such, anti-genderism should

not be understood as an ideological configuration that is entirely 'novel' and thus discontinuous from 'older' histories of racism and colonial power, but rather, as a discursive structure which reinvigorates existing racist ideologies by providing them with a perfect enemy – an enemy whose otherness is not embodied by particular figures, but is disembodied and is, therefore, able to be both nowhere in particular and everywhere at once.

THE THREAT OF ABSTRACTNESS

In this final section, I argue that anti-genderism reinvigorates the possibilities of racism without invoking the signifier of 'race' or racial difference. It does this by allowing white nationalist groups to conjure an abstract threat that is racialised without however being tethered to specific bodily markers of racial difference. In the anti-genderist chain of equivalence, the threat of racial Others is sublimated through abstract signifiers like 'globalisation' or 'multiculturalism' – signifiers which suggest the diffuse presence of disembodied racial Others. To illustrate this, I will use as my example some particular features of contemporary anti-Asian racism, examining how 'model minority' discourse relies on the idea of an abstracted, disembodied Asian Other who comes to stand in for globalised human capital as such.

My point is that the racism perpetuated by anti-genderism does not work according to the logic of Hall and Fanon's ontological trap – our tendency to read off an underlying racial ontology from visible differences in appearance. Rather, this racism follows anti-genderism's logic of the perfect enemy: it constructs an enemy who does not even have to appear to have a stable ontological existence in order for us to hate him. As we shall see, this kind of racism offers new possibilities for racist ideologies to flourish, not in spite of, but alongside a liberal commitment to anti-racism. The racialised fear of a perfect enemy can easily be sustained while also adhering to the liberal position that 'racial difference should not matter in our evaluation of someone'. This is because the kind of racism I illuminate below is not actually tethered to the surface appearance of racial difference – it is in fact not tethered to anything concrete or material at all.

In Fanon's analysis of racism, the black person represents an abjected sexuality/animality that the white person both desires and detests. Racialisation here takes the form of ascribing to certain bodies an unruly and 'uncivilised' excess of nature. Following Ruth Wilson Gilmore, these ascribed qualities of the racialised body are then abstracted as inferior positions in a larger hierarchy of civilised-uncivilised, human-inhuman, etc. – what she has called racism as a 'process of abstraction' (*Power and Difference*, p16). As part of this process of abstraction, racial difference comes to take on what Hortense Spillers has called 'mythical prepossession'²⁶: race as a signifier comes to take on so many meanings that it ends up burying racialised people under the weight of those meanings, making it impossible for them 'to come clean'

26. Hortense Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *diacritics*, 17:2, 1987, pp64-81, p65. (Hereafter *Mama's Baby*.)

(*Mama's Baby*, p65). The racialised perfect enemy, I want to suggest, is what emerges when these myths and meanings have seemingly become untethered from racialised embodiment. The existence of this enemy, therefore, no longer requires an embodied racial subject to abstract from, but relies, instead, on the racialisation of abstractness as such.

Crucially, my point is not that the racialised perfect enemy has *replaced* the racialised 'imperfect' – because really existing – enemy. Rather, I want to suggest that anti-genderism and the chain of equivalence it instigates *complement* existing psychic and political economies of racism and racialisation, which are very much coordinated around racial embodiment and the ontological trap. Yet in the context of an election programme, which serves as my case study here, racial difference cannot explicitly be named without violating the foundational pretence of liberal anti-racism: that one ought not to be discriminated against on the basis of a racial difference in appearance. What is condensed in a slogan such as 'German not gender' is a racism that seems disturbingly compatible with liberal anti-racism – a racism that does not need to invoke racial difference at all. 'Gender' in this slogan stands for the perfect enemy who doesn't exist and who can, therefore, stand for all the forces of the abstract that threaten to undermine the white nationalist's enjoyment of 'German'.

To see how these forces of the abstract are racialised without pointing to, or invoking, racial difference, consider again excerpts from the AfD election programme. Here, 'gender ideology' is understood in terms of its commitment to the 'socially constructed' nature of social categories (p154). This commitment is perceived as threatening because it runs counter to the idea that we have unmediated access to concrete biological 'facts' about sex.²⁷ On the 'constructivist' view of social reality, the domains of the 'abstract' and the 'concrete' cannot be kept apart; things that we take to be concrete and immediately apparent are in fact always already mediated by larger 'abstract' structures. Against this, the AfD demands a clear separation between the concrete and the abstract, the former being wholly 'good' and the latter wholly 'bad'. Indeed, in their election campaign programme, all good things are on the side of the concrete and the tangible: domestic flora and fauna, *Heimat*, statues, language, biological sex, white German workers and families. What stands in the way of uninhibited access to this domain is a range of 'abstract' threats: foreign 'invasive' species, decolonisation, globalisation, multiculturalism, and 'gender ideology'.

Alongside 'multiculturalism', 'diversity' and 'globalisation', the signifier 'gender' occupies a central point in the signification of the 'abstract'. In a section of the party programme entitled 'Democracy and Rule of Law', the AfD claims that the German government has been infiltrated by a 'political class whose primary interest is its own power, status and material wealth' – a class that endangers the 'social and cultural future of our people, the strength of our economy and our wealth', instead placing 'multiculturalism,

27. See for example, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, 1990; see also Sabine Hark and Paula Villa, 'Anti-Genderismus-Warum Dieses Buch?', in *Anti-Genderismus*, pp7-14.

diversity, globalisation and so-called gender justice above everything' (*AfD election programme*, p12). Once again, a sphere of concreteness – of the 'our' and the 'us' – is juxtaposed against the threatening arrival of the abstract. By adding the qualification of the 'so-called' (*vermeintlich*) before gender justice, the signifier 'gender' is mediated by an additional level of abstractness. It is a signifier that is untrustworthy not only at the level of what it says, but also at the level of what it doesn't say. Not only is 'gender justice' a politically suspect aim in its own right, but it is also seen as a pretence for an even more ominous agenda allegedly lurking underneath.

If we follow Moishe Postone's analysis of anti-Semitism, then anti-genderism and anti-Semitism are similar in at least this respect: both work to stabilise a clear distinction between the abstract (gender, the Jew) and the concrete (Germany and the German 'race'), with the former posited as an ominous conspiracy that works behind the scenes to prevent full enjoyment of the latter.²⁸ Focussing on the anti-Semitism that was prevalent in Nazi Germany, he argued that Jews became associated not just with the 'evils of capitalism', but more precisely, with the *abstract* evils of capitalism. Postone re-configured the Marxist idea of 'commodity fetishism' to suggest that the 'thingly' appearance of the commodity under capitalism is already the effect of a prior split between 'abstract' value, externalised as money, and 'concrete' use-value. It is only because of this split that the commodity can appear as 'concrete', as somehow separable from money 'as the manifestation of the purely abstract' (*Anti-Semitism and National Socialism*, p109), even though the commodity form already expresses both, value and use-value.

Postone's point is that capitalist social relations can appear as if they governed only the abstract domain of money, when in reality they are already responsible for the very opposition 'between money, as abstract ... and "thingly" nature' (*Anti-Semitism and National Socialism*, p109). To the extent that Jews were associated with 'abstractness', 'intangibility' and the money form (*Anti-Semitism and National Socialism*, p108), they become the material carrier for the 'abstract evils of capitalism' which would remain inaccessible as an object of hate, were it not for anti-Semitism to give them material shape. Anti-Semitism stabilises capitalism by making the abstract dimension of capitalism available for hate and frustration without exposing the underlying capitalist logic that produces the antinomy between the abstract and the concrete in the first place. This is Adorno's point about the tangible intangibility of the figure of the Jew in the register of (anti-)capitalism: 'The Jew's own "alienness" serves as shorthand for the alien nature of society itself, but the materiality of the Jew makes her or him accessible as an object of hate in the way that society [capitalism] in general is not' (*The Authoritarian Personality*, p310).

However, as I suggested above, the 'gender' in anti-gender discourse is situated at a level of intangibility that sets it apart from both Adorno's analysis of anti-Semitism, and from Hall and Fanon's theories of racism, at least insofar as they rely on the materiality, or tangibility, of the Jew and the racialised

28. Moishe Postone, 'Anti-Semitism and National Socialism: Notes on the German Reaction to "Holocaust"', *New German Critique*, 19:1, 1980, pp97-115. (Hereafter *Anti-Semitism and National Socialism*.)

person. With anti-genderism, the 'alien nature of society' is not represented by a concrete, material obstacle to an 'unalienated' enjoyment of society, but by obstacles that are abstract in themselves: 'diversity', 'multiculturalism', 'globalisation', 'gender ideology', etc. Although these obstacles do not point to racial difference in any direct sense, they nevertheless conjure the threat of racial otherness in an indirect way: 'diversity', 'multiculturalism' and 'globalisation', because they stand for the diffuse yet all-encompassing presence of racial Others in our midst; and 'gender ideology', because it is taken as synonymous with 'critical race theory', 'political correctness' and 'wokeness' – all signifiers imagined to stand in the way of an uninhibited flourishing of racism and racist speech.

The indirectness of the racist interpellation means that there does not have to be an embodied racialised subject imagined to be 'behind' say, the threat of 'globalisation' in order for 'globalisation' to signify as a racialised threat. Anti-genderism thus takes racism to the very limit of racialised subjectivation: behind 'globalisation' there is no tangible racial subject with discrete markers of racial difference, but a disembodied, abstract threat of racial otherness which does not have to be seen, or visible, in order to serve as an obstacle to enjoyment in the white nationalist psyche. What is racialised about this obstacle is not a 'racial epidermal schema' (*Black Skin, White Masks*, p112) written onto the body, but neither is it a 'hieroglyphics of the flesh' – the 'zero degree of social conceptualisation' that, for Spillers, comes 'before' the body (*Mama's Baby*, p67). Instead, the 'perfect enemy' points to the maximum degree of social conceptualisation that racialisation assumes when it becomes untethered from perceptible racial difference. Whilst, for Spillers, 'flesh' is a 'primary narrative' (*Mama's Baby*, p67) that *precedes* the social and cultural inscription of meaning onto the racialised body, the 'perfect enemy' takes the logic of inscribing social, cultural and psychic meanings onto a racial Other to the point where it no longer needs for this Other to exist at all. Indeed, the perfect enemy is perfect only as long as it is a pure phantasm of the psyche: neither flesh nor body, just a psychic sanctuary which allows existing racialised fears and fantasies to live on in a place that can be 'kept "pure" ... from contamination with reality' (*The Authoritarian Personality*, p310).

None of this is to deny that racialised populations are at the receiving end of hate for this 'perfect enemy' – they undoubtedly are. My point is not to disavow past and present racist violence that targets the racialised subject in both body and flesh, but to emphasise that hate for the 'perfect enemy' does not require an embodied racial subject to serve as the real or imagined catalyst for this hate. 'Model minority' discourse is a good example of this. As Iyko Day has argued, the labelling of some racialised groups as 'model minorities' shares important features with the logic of anti-Semitism identified by Postone, even as their particular historical manifestation is radically different.²⁹ To the extent that these 'model minorities' are perceived as members of a global and globalised economic elite, who allegedly 'steal' domestic jobs, they too

29. Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism*, Duke University Press, 2016. (Hereafter *Alien Capital*.)

'give human shape to the abstract circuits of capitalism' (*Alien Capital*, p8).

Yet, even as Day takes her theoretical cues from Postone, the modality of racism she identifies is closer to that of the 'perfect enemy' than it is to structures of racialisation which rely predominantly on the embodied, tangible presence of the Jewish or racialised person. Her point is that anti-Asian racism in North America increasingly relies, not on Asian racial embodiment, but precisely on the presumed *disembodied* form of the Asian – the Asian as the personification of that which cannot be represented except in disembodied form.³⁰ Day shows how, in model minority discourse, the Asian comes to represent, not only an idealised manifestation or instance of (human) capital – the trope of the hardworking, educated Asian – but (human) *capital as such*. She illustrates this by discussing a controversy surrounding the 'Asian-looking' face of the scientist originally supposed to feature on a new Canadian dollar bill. What is at stake in this controversy, she argues, is not just what racial group is allowed to 'represent' the national currency, but the presumed association of certain racialised groups with the abstractness of the money form itself.

Even in Germany, where there is a long history of racist and xenophobic rhetoric specifically targeted at so-called 'guest workers' (*Gastarbeiter*), Turkish and other foreign workers that were brought to Germany to compensate for a domestic shortage in labour supply and then rewarded for their work with systematic exclusion, stigmatisation and even forced deportation,³¹ the threat of 'foreign' human capital is increasingly depicted as abstract. Campaign posters like the AfD's, which display a white construction worker pondering whether 'politicians can also lose their job to China?', tether established racist and Orientalist imaginaries to the abstract threat of a globalised economy, which is represented here only by the disembodied signifier 'China'. As with anti-genderism, the threat that is conjured here might be embodied by particular (racialised) faces, against whom violence can be directed, but *an actual or imagined encounter with embodied racial difference* is not required for the (racialised) threat of abstractness to consume the white nationalist psyche.

In the AfD's electoral programme, 'China' is another abstracted signifier which joins the likes of 'gender ideology' and 'globalisation' in representing the threat of abstractness. Similarly, in the section on the environment, the wholesome idyll of 'German nature' is depicted as being under threat from the ominous presence of 'foreign species', which allegedly make opportunistic use of the 'global transport of goods', 'long-distance road systems' and 'international harbours' to 'invade local eco-systems' and disrupt the 'ecological equilibrium'. Furthermore, they claim, it is evident that 'foreign species' not only impact negatively on 'local nature', but also cause 'concrete financial damage and damage to health' (*AfD election programme*, p202; *emphasis mine*).

I cite these passages because they illustrate that the language of abstractness, represented here by adjectives such as 'global', 'long-distance', 'international' and 'foreign', which are juxtaposed against a coveted domain of

30. Anne Anlin Cheng makes a similar argument about the 'abstractness' of Asian female embodiment: 'Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman', *Critical Inquiry*, 44:3, 2018, pp415-446.

31. See for example, Fatma Aydemir, 'Arbeit', in H. Yaghoobifarah and F. Aydemir (eds), *Eure Heimat ist Unser Albtraum*, Ullstein, 2019, pp23-37; Kemal Bozay, Bahar Aslan, Mangitay Orhan and Funda Oezfirat (eds), *Die Haben Gedacht, Wir Waren Das*, Koeln, PapyRossa, 2016; Fatima El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch: Die Konstruktion Des Anderen in der Postmigrantischen Gesellschaft*, Bielefeld, transcript, 2016.

the concrete, the familiar and the local, is not merely deployed as a *euphemism* for racial otherness. Instead, it directly conjures the diffuse presence of a racial Other whose otherness is not tethered to specific embodied features, but precisely to the presumed lack of such features. Although this threat of abstractness might temporarily be embodied by specific racialised figures, its psychic appeal is precisely that it can never finally be represented by anything, or anyone, in particular. This in turn allows the psyche to invest, over and over again, in the manic proliferation and diffusion of ‘evil’ signifiers – seemingly in the search to finally identify the one true source of evil, but fundamentally invested in never actually finding it. For to find it would require letting go of the perfect enemy that doesn’t exist.

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