I Am Black Now: A Phenomenologically Grounded Autoethnography of Becoming *Black* in Berlin †

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Abstract: This essay is an autoethnography of *becoming* Black. It engages my coming to terms with the fact that I have been cornered, as it were, and *forced* to recognise myself as a being who is othered in a racial classification that was not consciously part of my self-identification before I came to study in Berlin. While exploring the phenomenology of Blackness in spaces where I find myself othered, I also draw a comparative outlook from domestic intercultural power relations in my country of origin, Ethiopia, where the ethnic group I belong to, the Amharas, do the othering. I argue, in my sense-making and ethnographic journey, that the ambiguity and intricacy of Blackness has granted me a redemptive stability in navigating the world and in demystifying the *logic* of my oppression as a newly profiled black person in Berlin and the *logic* of my cultural positioning as an oppressor in Ethiopia. The essay, as such, is an invitation for a reflection on the confluence of the two positions.

Prologue

In the summer of 2016, I embarked on a long train ride from Berlin to Vienna, intending to follow rivers, cross mountains, and swiftly live the spirits of small European towns rather than simply fly over them. However, being the only person in the train cabin for half of the journey produced boredom when there was not much for the eyes in the rushing scenery. It was then, in one of the small towns, that I was joined by a gentleman from Senegal who was friendly and fast enough to strike a conversation just before I fell into slumber. He asked, as I did immediately after, *where* I was a local—the city I was born in and my country of nationality. It took us only a few minutes to realise that we had an utter ignorance, awkwardly so, about each other's country. The awkwardness was not so much about the ignorance—we rather openly admitted it as we noted it, but about the bizarre feeling, which consumed both of us in no time, that we were somehow expected to know about each other. I wasn't even sure about the agency—who would expect it and why—even though, unintentionally, I cared.

To spice up our conversation, nevertheless, we turned to the easy problem-solving mechanism of my generation—the Internet. We found out that Dakar, Senegal's capital, is almost a thousand kilometres farther away from Addis Ababa, my own capital, than it is from Berlin. Berlin, to our surprise, is closer to both Dakar and Addis Ababa than the two cities are to each other.

He speaks Wolof, I speak Amharic.
He is a Muslim, I was raised Ethiopian Orthodox Christian and am irreligious now.
He eats Thiebou jenn, and I Injera.
He dances to hip hop, and I to techno.
He works for the Senegalese Embassy in Berlin, I was a student at Freie Universität Berlin.

We could hardly find anything that would enable us to bond, but our conversation was rekindled the moment we started talking about our experiences in Europe. Experience seemed to have come to our rescue and unite us.

Flying to Vienna after several months, I wrote myself a little poem in the air—a farewell of sorts—to a naïve train-travelling self that lingers to this day, despite the fact that I have truly become someone else.

I counted every drop of the rain decanting into my blood
Throbbed from my heart to my body as mud
I flew up to the sky to slumber in the cloud
Attired the mist for my heart's burial shroud
I sat on the wings of a plane to muse
A stone's throw away from my blues
I cleansed the murky sea with tears
I veered off you, my old self, veneers of my soul free
Veered off you the steer you were to become for me
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I would not have anticipated just few years back that my wandering out of my *Lebenswelt*—my "unquestioned, practical, historically conditioned, pretheoretical and familiar world (Desjarlais and Throop 2011, p. 91)—would culminate in an absolute reassessment of my own personhood, subjectivity, place in the planet and a critical appraisal of the *Lebenswelt* itself. In this lifeworld that I happened to be born into, I am the norm. As epitomized by a Marxist student activist (Mekonnen 1969) in his contentious and influential article "On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia", my lifeworld "is not really one nation. It is made up of a dozen nationalities with their own languages, ways of dressing, history, social organization and territorial entity." (ibid., pp. 1–2) In this multi-ethnic country, however, my mother tongue, Amharic, is the most widely spoken

one. My folk costume is the de facto national dress. My physical features and skin pigmentation are the standard from which any divergence is measured. My heritage, the Amhara–Tigrayan and to a lesser extent the Agaw heritage of northern and central modern-day Ethiopia (or what a Temple University professor of history calls the "Ge'ez[1] civilization", Tibebu 1995, p. xxii) is made to shine against the backdrop of the rest, while insisting to impose and universalise itself on it.

Tibebu classifies the scholarly literature on Ethiopia into three paradigms, of which the one he calls the Orientalist Semiticist intellectual tradition "dominated Ethiopianist Studies until recently" (Tibebu 1995, p. xvi). According to this tradition, Ethiopians are seen as "being superior to Black Africans, including the many peoples inside Ethiopia itself, like the Oromo. For they are Christian, literate, civilized, handsome, and sovereign for millennia" (ibid.). In this supremacy myth and privilege of finding oneself as the norm who defines a multi-ethnic country in one's own image and vision, one doesn't have to be confronted by the need to actively recognise the intractable othering[2] configurations of the hegemonising *northern* identity—which I automatically drew my self-image from—in the Ethiopian state. To the delay of my enlightenment on the othering arrangements of this dominant Ge'ez civilization narrative, the segregating ethnogeographical nature of the country further kept the othered-from-within people of the country out of my immediate eyesight. It would take me finding myself in a similar othered position to fully comprehend the extent to and the ways in which my unscrutinised self-image of an Ethiopian is founded in fantasy and is exclusionary and oppressive.

On a continental level, apartheid South Africa crumbled, and Nelson Mandela came to power when the struggle of the colonized world—in its global sense—entered my imagination. I was just turning 11 at South Africa's new beginning. The narratives around Nelson Mandela and his Ethiopian connection was something inescapable even to a young mind who would now have to reimagine the world beyond the Amharic-speaking dominated Ethiopia. Mandela would be selectively quoted over and over again:

> Ethiopia has always held a special place in my own imagination and the prospect of visiting Ethiopia attracted me more strongly than a trip to France, England, and America combined. I felt I would be visiting my own genesis, unearthing the roots of what made me an African. (Mandela 1994, p. 282)

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[1]   Ge'ez can be easily understood as what Latin is to the West. It has not been used as a spoken language for a long while but is considered a precursor to Ethiopia's Semitic languages. It has its own script, which the Semitic languages of Ethiopia and Eritrea (Amharic, Tigrinya, Tigré etc.) have adopted.

[2]   Othering is the construction and identification of the self, or in-group, and the other, or out-group, in mutual, unequal opposition by attributing relative inferiority and/or radical alienness to the other/out-group (Brons 2015).

No one either read to me or told me, for instance, that he also said, just below the above quote, that "contemporary Ethiopia was not a model when it comes to democracy" (ibid.). In this early imagination of mine of the outside world then, there are the Whites, whom people like Mandela have to fight against. These are similar to those the Ethiopian empire triumphed against in the Battle of Adwa,[3] cousins of the *evil* Italian colonisers. And there are the Blacks who had to endure the horrors of apartheid and all the viciousness the Whites seem to be capable of inflicting, as shown on Ethiopian Television. But, there is *us*—who trained Mandela to be a soldier, *us* who gave him a fake passport so that he could travel (Dale 2013), *us* the good ones, *us* the uncolonised ones, *us*!

In line with the *northern* Ethiopian fantasy I mentioned earlier, at home, there was also my uncle—very proud of his ruling class lineage. In the prescriptive marriage advice he gave to his nephews and nieces, there were also people to be avoided because of their "impure blood"—they were descendants of slaves. In my grandmother's description of the chattel slaves her grandfather had bought, those would look "jet-black skinned and wide-nosed." I now know that refers to mostly peoples from southern Ethiopia. "Find a girl," my uncle would say, "find a girl who is from *yebalabat zer*"—descended from the ruling class like his grandparents. "A girl" he would say "a girl!" Heaven forbid I possibly be attracted to my own gender.

The process of my self-image formation as an Amhara who simply identifies as Ethiopian—an unmarked category in the way other ethnic groups of Ethiopia are marked and named at will—was perhaps too comfortable to have a critical outlook on. "To be a 'genuine Ethiopian'", the Marxist student activist Mekonnen writes:

> One has to speak Amharic, to listen to Amharic music, to accept the Amhara–Tigre religion, Orthodox Christianity and to wear the Amhara–Tigre Shamma in international conferences. In some cases to be an "Ethiopian", you will even have to change your name. In short to be an Ethiopian, you will have to wear an Amhara mask (to use Fanon's expression). (Mekonnen 1969, p. 2)

Not only was this self-image too comfortable to be critical of but also the tools that allowed me to systematically scrutinise it were absent until I left Ethiopia. It was after finishing my bachelor's degree in Bangkok, Thailand, and subsequently coming to Berlin, Germany, for a master's degree, and finding myself being someone else's Other, that I gradually realised that my experience of being an Amhara in Ethiopia was also a violent encroachment on the many peoples of Ethiopia, did come from othering

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[3] In the Battle of Adwa, the colonizing Italian troops were decisively defeated, making Ethiopia the only African state to escape Western colonisation other than Liberia.

them from within and is akin to the reverse of my experience as a non-White person in Berlin (although one needs to be careful not to draw a simplistic comparison).

I paused while passing by Hegelplatz at the Humboldt University of Berlin and stared at the statue of Hegel (Figure 1). I was wearing a T-shirt a friend of mine had given me as a present before I came to Berlin. On the T-shirt, the picture of the Obelisk of Axum[4] (Figure 2) was printed. "In the 3rd Century AD, the Persian philosopher Mani described Axum as one of the four greatest kingdoms in the world, along with Rome, China and Persia" (Murphy 2005). A swift puerile desire crossed my mind, being an interlocutor to Hegel. It was not the fact that this man had imagined me "outside the dialectic, outside history itself" (Wright 2004, p. 39) that I wanted to probe, nor the vicious consequences of his dialectic as a colonialist imperative, but the fact that I am the Other no more from without but from within, and the fact that I am becoming the Black in "this antagonistic and aggressive binary between the white self and Black Other that has become the cornerstone for Western theories of subjectivity" (ibid.). I mused how Hegel's case for colonialism and the nation-state might have shaped the scramble for Africa—which Gann and Duignan accuse Ethiopia itself of taking part in (Gann and Duignan 1981, p. 104). In his comparative analysis of the African American movements in the United States of America and the Oromo movements in Ethiopia, sociologist Asafa Jalata asserts that "the Ethiopian empire was created by the alliance of Ethiopian colonialism and European imperialism during the 'scramble' for Africa by enslaving and colonizing Oromos, Sidamas, Somalis, Walayitas, and other ethnonations in the Horn of Africa" (Jalata 2001, p. 4).

Here I stood, and time froze in front of the monument for the most quintessential eurocentrist, as I confronted my own subjectivity, which comes from othering the many peoples of the Ethiopian state. My religious upbringing briefly overrode my current lack of religious beliefs, and I felt some sort of wistful revelation. As I cognised the dual positions I found myself in, I crawled back inside and craved for some redemption. A redeemer from othering and being the Other at once. A miracle that could purge me from othering my own countrymen and women and from "being for other, as described by Hegel." (Fanon 1967, p. 86)

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[4]   UNESCO. Last accessed June 2018. http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/15/.

Figure 1. Statue of Hegel, Berlin. 6 May 2018. Photo by author.

Figure 2. The Obelisk of Axum, Axum. Photo by Ondřej Žváček [5].

Writer and broadcast journalist Susan Saulny, quoting one of America's most widely read scholars, Manning Marble, writes "whiteness is the negation of something else. The something else are Africans who are described by Europeans not by their

religion or nationality but by the colour of their skin. And nowhere in Africa did Africans call themselves 'black'" (Saulny 2001). Black as a racial category was constructed by Europeans with "the forced removal of West Africans to the Western Hemisphere" (Wright 2004, p. 1). One of the early diasporic Black thinkers who theorised counter discourses on the Black subject against the prevailing racist Euro-American anti-Black discourse of the time, Frantz Fanon, notes that "ontology does not allow us to understand the being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (Fanon 1967, p. 89). This relation forged by historical and political forces reverberates to this day, configuring the contemporary world. Race, for anthropologist Yolanda T. Moses, is

> about power relations, and continues to be an ideology to legitimize the dominance of certain groups. Race and its consequence racism are fundamentally part of a global system of structural racial stratification and inequality. (Moses 2015)

So Black is what I am—I declared to myself. It must have all started in that train cabin I mentioned—*discovering* I am Black, with my Senegalese acquaintance, my *brother* in experience, although we can never be friends, we both are Blacks. And now I averred it in front of a monument for Hegel; a man who had never been where my ancestors dwelt, who did not take part in our everyday poetry production, who did not learn our alphabets, who did not hear about the Oromo *Gadaa* system,[6] dare I say, our indigenous democratic socio-political system, and who simply dismissed me as outside his analytic history about two centuries ago.

Frantz Fanon, among many others, was able to construct counterdiscourses within the same dialectic discourses which had been used by the masterminds of anti-Black racism, such as Hegel and Gobineau (Wright 2004, p. 11). Fanon's contribution to race phenomenology is highlighted in his 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks*. Dissecting the works of racialist projects of historical and contemporary White discourses, which defined (defines) the White subject in relation to the Black Other, Fanon shows the contradiction which placed the "Black male as the negation of the white thesis who is then himself negated" (ibid.). Fanon's phenomenology of the black body, Sara Ahmed posits, is better understood "in terms of the bodily and social experience of restriction, uncertainty and blockage" (Ahmed 2007, p. 161).

Despite the fact that "Fanon's counterdiscourses provided useful models for resistance and response," professor of African American Studies Michelle M. Wright (2004, p. 132) notes:

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[6] The *Gadda* System was inscribed by UNESCO in 2016 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Their (re)construction of a gendered agency in nationalist discourse disabled the possibility of a Black female subject at the same time that it enabled the Black male subject who, like his white male counterpart, comes into being through the denial of another's subjectivity—in this case, Black women.

In order for me not to fall into a similar negligence and erasure of the female subject, I will be using both *he* and *she* interchangeably in my writing when addressing both Black and White subjects.

"As long as the black man remains on his home territory," says Fanon, "except for petty internal quarrels, he will not have to experience his being for others. There is in fact a 'being for other', as described by Hegel" (Fanon 1967, p. 86). Suddenly, finding myself as a being for other, quite unprepared, I turned my ethnographic gaze towards my own process of acquiring an identity which had not been necessarily or consciously embodied in my self-identification before inhabiting white spaces. As Müller states (Müller 2016):

> Ethnographic varieties can also be distinguished by the (starting) position of the researcher in relation to the field. 'Not being the phenomenon' (as in ethnological research), 'becoming the phenomenon' (as, for example, in some subculture studies), and 'being the phenomenon' (when exploring one's own culture) . . .

In alignment with Müller's classification, my ethnographic journey can be understood from *discovering* I was Black to leveraging my anthropological practice to the process of *becoming* Black and, finally, to *being* Black consciously and actively.

Phenomenology, according to Desjarlais and Throop (2011), "is the study of things as they appear in our lived experiences." As such, the knowledge produced in this article is an intersubjective construction of my lived experience and that of my informants. However, for the scope of this article, I will mostly focus on my experiences. As per Michael Jackson's (Jackson 1996) suggestion to focus on the *Lebenswelt* rather than on the *Weltanschaungen* in phenomenologically inclined anthropological inquiries, I have treated my own body as a research tool. In addition to that, as modes of appearing in phenomenology are different for different individuals, when implementing phenomenological interviews with my informants, I have interpreted and constructed meanings with them of our lived intersubjective experiences. Therefore, in effect, this research project is grounded in phenomenology.

Sociologist Leon Anderson (Anderson 2006) makes the case for the vital advantages autoethnography provides in qualitative research and proposes his own version, analytic ethnography—against the dominance of evocative autoethnography. In his proposal, he outlines the researcher in analytic autoethnography to be: "(1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in published texts, and (3) committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social

phenomena." (ibid., p. 373) In analysing the experiences of Black bodies in Berlin as a "full member in the research group", therefore, I have relied on diasporic Black identities which "simultaneously incorporate the diversity of Black identities in the diaspora yet also link all those identities to show that they indeed constitute a diaspora rather than an unconnected aggregate of different peoples linked only in name" (Wright 2004, p. 2).

In so doing—towards an understanding of Black phenomenology as experienced and perceived by Black bodies in Berlin—I had a glimpse of fragments of the lives and experiences of Black bodies in the city beyond myself. I was able to deploy participant observation by deliberately withdrawing from the social interactions I engaged in or from the events I was invited to, or sometimes, by simply following my informants around to see how they navigated the city.

As I learned how to be Black, so to speak, I was careful not to see the natural world I was conducting my research in solely based on my newly acquired experience-based knowledge. In other words, I was practicing "*phenomenological epoché*—the act of suspending judgment about the natural world that precedes phenomenological analysis" (Desjarlais and Throop 2011, p. 88). It was impossible, it has to be admitted, to completely remove myself from passing judgment on situations that invited my ethnographic gaze, despite my attempt not to. Did the woman who crossed to the other side of the street, avoiding my informant, do so because she noticed his foreignness or maleness? I am well aware that women do not have the privilege to navigate the city in a way that I, a male person, can do without constant fear of being harassed. By the same token, did the woman who, at a bus stop in the middle of the night, warily passed me and chose to stand on the other side where white boys were standing (who unfortunately were drunk and had been cat-calling every woman passing) do so for the same reason? After all, it was I who stood in solidarity with her when things got a bit out of control. I told myself, "if she had made her assessment of avoiding danger based on bearing rather than colour, that unpleasant situation would have been avoided", but I will never know for sure if my assumption that she assessed her environment based on colour was true.

In all such ambiguities, I have always asked my informants what their interpretation would be. It has to be mentioned, in a curious, agonizing way, that many of my informants have had similar experiences to my own. It was aborting a transaction at an ATM when I arrived—and strangely queueing again behind me—for me. It was a bag-clutching for my Burkinabe informant. It was an entrance door slamming shut for my Kenyan friend by a neighbour who must not have known that he owns an apartment in the building and lives there. It was a failure to extend the common courtesy of stopping an elevator for my Malagasy informant. It was being mistaken for a drug dealer for my Senegalese train acquaintance. It was being offered money repeatedly on gay dating apps for my gay Eritrean friend.

"It is not so much the number of cases seen that matters in phenomenology," states the psychiatrist Karl Jaspers, "but the extent of the inner exploration of the individual case, which needs to be carried to the furthest possible limit" (Jasper 1997, p. 56). It has then become my preoccupation to go beyond my intersubjective construction of meanings with my informants. I started to isolate situations and probe them to the fullest of my capacity. For example, when a white flatmate explained Ethiopia, in the spirit of *whitesplaining* (Ramsey 2015), to my own guests at the dinner table, I had a several-hour-long discussion with him after the guests left in order to affirm or negate my supposition of why that was happening.

Nowhere in Berlin am I as absorbed in the enthrallment of my Blackness and its white fantasy origin as when I stand at the Marx-Engels-Forum and look towards the ongoing construction of the controversy-drenched Humboldt Forum (Figure 3) across the canal. The Humboldt Forum will house Berlin's non-European ethnological collections. The art historian Bénédicte Savoy publicly resigned from its advisory board in 2017, "want[ing] to know how much blood is dripping from each artwork" (Dalley 2018). It leaves one to wonder whether or not the project of imperial fantasy and its manifestation through colonisation has ever finished when one sees this seemingly colonial nostalgia blatantly flaunted. The irony of it all is, of course, to see this colonial nostalgia and the fight to hold on to the very history it is claimed Africa did not have.

Figure 3. Humboldt Forum, Berlin. 28 July 2019. Photo by author.

"The modern white subject, some two hundred years old," writes Wright (2004, p 29), "is exactly as old as the Black Other on which he relies." It makes sense. The White desperately needs me as his binary opposite. Otherwise, why this infantile fixation on my otherness?! I say "infantile" for a reason—because it goes beyond just hoarding other peoples' heritages as colonial domination;

infantile—because I see an arbitrariness to my ascription of Black in White fantasies. In fact, the basis for such a racialised typology has little to do with me. The Ethiopian triumph over Italy, dubbed by Mockler (1984, p. xli) as "the greatest single disaster in European colonial history", for instance, shook racist Europe to the extent that instead of admitting that it was defeated by Black people, it created a myth that Ethiopians were in fact Black Caucasians (Tibebu 1996). Ostensibly then, even I was briefly made White.

The harrowing complexity of this realisation couldn't even leave me be at my university in Berlin, which I had naively thought was a safe space. Leaving aside the fact that the weight of the *crimes* of anthropology disproportionately weigh heavier on me, leaving aside the fact that the programme I attended, Visual and Media Anthropology at Freie Universität Berlin, still has a graded course named "Applied Visual Anthropology in Health in Africa"—as if Africa is a homogenous entity (the course only deals with two countries, namely, Mozambique and the DR Congo) (Frömming 2019), leaving aside the casual and unintentionally patronizing attitude my classmates of European origin exhibit so effortlessly towards their fellow non-European students as if they are trained to do so—which I find just as deplorable as prejudice—the issue of representation would come and expose my anthropology classroom to be simply the reflection of the outside world. A film called *Enjoy Poverty* (Martens 2008) by a Dutch artist named Renzo Martens was being screened at one of my classes. It is Kevin Carter's "The vulture and the little girl" (Wikipedia 2019) all over again. Intense. The filmmaker wants wedding photographers to commodify their poverty. He wants to teach them how photographing raped women, malnourished children, etc. is more profitable than photographing weddings. He asks them whether they would like to earn one dollar a month or a thousand dollars a month. Well, they might answer one dollar a month, who knows—after all, these men are depicted as extremely passive. Martens is seen very frequently in the picture, as some sort of self-absorbed protagonist who seeks to shine against the passivity of these Congolese men.

Martens as quoted in Penney describes his film as "primarily a piece of art" (Penney 2010). Noticing his audacity to depict Congolese men in that familiar colonial nostalgia some white men seem to be yearning for, as well as his reduction of a global structure to a mere personal one, I protested against the curious idea the classroom seemed to have adopted: that the film invites us to see the hypocrisy of the Western world. I saw some of my white friends taking on the burden of explaining because I "was not getting it". I can't possibly be getting it when a decontextualised fetishisation of poverty is "primarily", and I quote, "a piece of art". Perhaps, he should do a film in Brussels as the hypocrisy seems to me rife there. What purpose could this film have, except to make an opportunist White popular, I wondered. How many Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad 1997) would Europe need to face its hypocrisy?

The filmmaker gained fame and made a living out of the film, obviously. So, at whose expense are we really facing our own hypocrisy?

I am Black. I am still learning how to be Black. It is my redemption insofar as this persisting white fantasy depends on it. As long as this white fantasy project and its relentless attempt to inferiorise its others persist, I won't stop being Black. "It's up to you", offers James Baldwin, "as long as you think you're white, there is no hope for you. As long as you think you're white, I'm going to be forced to think I'm black" (Baldwin, in Levine 2014).

I am Black because I still—I must—mourn Patrice Lumumba. He has become my hero. He was the first democratically elected prime minister of Congo. To Jean-Paul Sartre, he was "a meteor in the African firmament" (Witte 2002, p. xxii). Belgian sociologist Ludo De Witte says "the Belgian government of Gaston Eyskens is directly responsible for the assassination of the Congolese prime minister" (ibid.). I don't remember knowing Lumumba when I was in Ethiopia, it was a name like a fleeting autumn leaf—beautiful—one that I must have heard but paid no attention to and which vanished. I didn't have to know about Patrice. I wasn't Black yet.

I yearned for a hero under this white gaze in Berlin, and there he was, shining above the crimes and the inhumanity of Brussels. "It was Belgian advice, Belgian orders, and finally Belgian hands that killed Lumumba" (ibid.). I am Black because I must expose a lost moral legitimacy. The course of the whole continent could have been changed. I must mourn—for I am becoming Black.

One must come to realise one's Blackness under the white gaze; a gaze which oscillates between patronising and hostile. In this gaze, the Black is fixed under the proud and profound unfamiliarity of the White. The White appears to be unsuspecting that her ignorance reflects poorly on her. Her ignorance is crammed by infantile exoticism and fantasy of primitivism of the Other, the Black. The Black is pathologically different outside of the collective unconscious of the White and the Black's continent is homogeneous.

The White has perfected the manners of the ally. He is a plane ticket away to play saviour should disaster hit Africa. He doesn't have to think about Patrice Lumumba or the possibility that the Patrices of the continent, if allowed to exist, could have made his saviour complex unnecessary. The White, she, is the guardian of democracy and human rights. She is not bothered to explain why a democratically elected prime minster would be purposefully removed from the face of the earth by Europe. It is a stifling confrontation. In this confrontation, the Black takes full responsibility for her condition. In this confrontation, Europe's age-old, what I would call parasitic, economic relationship with Africa and its effect on the peoples of Africa is hardly discussed, yet the White is very swift to assume a saviour and expert role in the predicaments of the continent, which, without absolving Africans of agency and culpability, cannot possibly be reckoned with without attending to this historical and

current parasitic relationship that Europe has succeeded in forging. I am becoming Black because I can't afford an ahistorical reading of my condition if I were to make sense of it. The White, he, insists the past is the past, while I am here carrying it for both of us. The White insists the past is the past, while the indelible mark of his Whiteness oozes on the brown faces of indigenous people of the Americas and Australia to this day.

Linköping University's Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson (Hansen and Jonsson 2015) have shown in their book-length contribution to the series *Theory for a Global Age* how the desire to jointly exploit Africa played a key role in the European integration projects that culminated in today's European Union. "Or to be straight, the EU would not have come into existence at this point in time had it not been conceived as a Eurafrican enterprise in which colonialism was Europeanized" (ibid., p. 13). Reading through the accounts of Hansen and Jonsson, how Europeans viewed their colonial project on the continent of Africa to be unending to the point their hubris prevented them from recognising the inevitability of decolonisation that was happening before their eyes after World War II, one cannot help but appreciate the level of delusion Whiteness, in its superiority fantasy, exhibits. Despite the fact that formal colonisation has ended, Hansen and Jonsson bring to our attention the harrowing reality of Europe's colonial project in Africa as a process which has been merely transformed and which continues to evolve, in the concluding chapter of their book: "Ending Colonialism by Securing its Continuation" (ibid., p. 239). A report published by a group of NGOs led by Global Justice Now, Jubilee Debt Coalition and Health Poverty Action (Curtis and Jones 2017), calculates the movement of financial resources in and out of Africa, and in its estimate Africa is a net creditor to the rest of the world. Nobel laureate Joseph E. Stiglitz notes that Western global financial institutions—the IMF and World Bank—have "the feel of the colonial ruler" to them (Stiglitz 2002, p. 40). The New York-based activist and writer Lee Wongraf (Wongraf 2018) demonstrates in her book *Extracting Profit: Imperialism, Neoliberalism and the New Scramble for Africa* how the historically rooted the West's parasitic economic practices in Africa thrive unremittingly today.

> Decades of loans and structural adjustment policies from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank […] have placed an economic stranglehold on African and other Third World nations. […] Using the IMF and World Bank as a battering ram, the neoliberal policy of trade liberalization forced its way across Africa and the rest of the globe, leaving in its wake decimated social programs, a debt crisis, and low wages—that is, conditions favorable for US investment. The last few decades of neoliberal policy have spelled disaster for the vast majority of ordinary Africans. (Wongraf 2018, p. 33)

. . . for Berlin

. . . and the desire for familiarity
The longing for the known
The craving for the sight of accustomed vivacity
Or even the hankering for the dearth of elegance
The particular smell, the smirk, the sourness, the roughness
And the tenderness . . .

August 2016

Berlin! A city where the Black Germans (Afro-Germans) I meet appear to show a feeling of some sort of closeness and an unfamiliar familiarity to me, the outsider, that they don't grant their fellow white Germans. A city where Blackness, stripped of its intricacy, cannons into Africa so fast that the city gazes unseeingly at its hyphenated Berliners who couldn't be anything but Germans when they say "We are not a figment of your imagination or an exotic answer to your desires" (Opitz et al. 1992, p. viii). According to Wright, "Black Germans, despite having been born and raised in Germany and belonging to no other culture or nation, are often read not as German but rather as 'African' (as if a continent of 750 million people and 1000 languages is a homogeneous community)" (Wright 2004, p. 185).

Berlin. I bike usually. Biking through history—East Berlin, West Berlin. I pass its streets east to west, its wide streets whose historical divide is apparent to this day. I see some of its streets refusing to let go of the city's racist past (Sousa 2017). Its nightclubs insist on frustrating me unfailingly when Berliners interrupt my dance to ask if I am "selling something"—the something being drugs. But I love Berlin. Berlin *mein Zuhause*—my home. My home away from home. It, in its own way, feels like home. I know where to go to dance to techno on a Monday afternoon. I have now got used to buses arriving on time. When there was a power cut the other day for the first time in four years, I complained, and the fact that I complained did not feel strange.

Past Wilhelmstraße—and the commemorative plaque of the infamous Berlin Conference (see Figure 4), which made possible the Scramble for Africa—lies my favourite café. There I read an article by the award-winning author on imperialism, (Smith 2019), entitled *Imperialism in a coffee cup*, while sipping my coffee, the taste of which I know too well—the Ethiopian coffee. According to the article, an imaginably small amount of the price I pay for my cup of coffee goes to the farmer in Ethiopia, who Smith calls "super exploited" (ibid.), and whose hard labour cultivated and harvested the coffee beans. A big chunk ends up in the GDP of the country where the coffee is consumed. If a portion of that money ends in public spending in, say, Germany, would that mean that an Ethiopian farmer, who struggles to feed his family,

helps to pay for my bus to arrive on time? Is it inconceivable to think that the German government even might send a cent or two as foreign aid to Ethiopia, I wondered. Richard Dyer, one of the key contributors to the understanding of Whiteness in visual culture, notes the inextricable nexus between the unfair global trade terms and what he calls "racial imagery" when he writes:

> Racial imagery is central to the organization of the modern world. At what cost regions and countries export their goods, whose voices are listened to at international gatherings, who bombs and who is bombed, who gets what jobs, housing, access to health care and education, what cultural activities are subsidized and sold, in what terms they are validated—these are all largely inextricable from racial imagery. (Dyer 1997, p. 1)
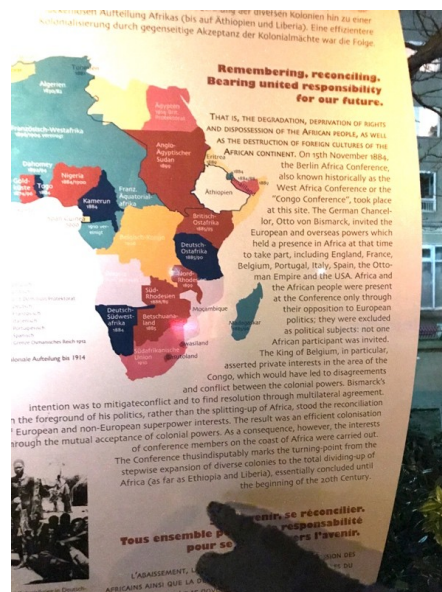

Figure 4. Wilhelmstraße, Berlin. 28 July 2019. Photo by author.

Coffee is one of the major exports of Ethiopia. It also grows mostly in the southern part of the country. If we bring in the dynamics of the north–south relations of the country, it is apparent that a great deal of economic resources lies in the south, while historically political power stayed among the northerners. Professor of History Gebru Tareke exposes the "paternalistic and arrogant Abyssinians" who:

> . . . looked upon and treated the indigenous people as backward, heathen, filthy, deceitful, lazy, and even stupid—stereotypes that European colonialists commonly ascribed to their African subjects. Both literally

and symbolically, southerners became the object of scorn and ridicule.
(Tareke 1991, p. 71)

Once again, while blankly gazing at my unfinished and by now cold coffee, I ruminated, like I did in front of the statue of Hegel, the arduous position I found myself in. I am needed as the binary opposite of someone else's self-definition and justification of economic plunder, in the same way I need the Others of Ethiopia. I yearned for salvation. And I know that many fellow Amharic-speaking Ethiopians, who have no problem dissecting the white man for a similar crime, won't join me in the quest for this salvation. They are content with Amharic being the dominant in a country of more than 80 languages. They are too satisfied that the whole country is moulded in their own image. They are Ethiopians and they insist everyone else is Ethiopian too. Imposition is only bad when a white man does it. And we stopped the white man. We had Christianity before the white man. We know how to write. When we impose, it's nation-building.

The Others of Ethiopia are fixed under my gaze—my cruel gaze. My gaze is suffocating, here I admit it. I did not even know I had it. My gaze is particularly wary of the Oromo, as they outnumber us. I make fun of their accent when they speak Amharic. I don't speak Afan-Oromo, it never crossed my mind to learn it. I never bothered to pronounce Oromo names correctly. Some of them have adopted Amharic names. It is late, but I must be redeemable from this gaze of mine—from this gaze of the collective unconscious of my Amhara-Tigrayan heritage. I must "unbecome" an Amhara and become an Ethiopian, which the Others of the country are imagining, and which truly includes them.

It is not only what superiority fantasies do to the oppressed that must be contended and reflected upon, but also what they do to the oppressor. In their extreme manifestation, their ability to take away the humanity of the ones with the superiority complex and their structural potential to allow the infliction of violence and terror are ghastly. The recent indiscriminate killing of ethnically Gumuz and Sinasha by Amhara chauvinists is a case in point (Endeshaw 2019). The harrowing realisation of the potential of terror and violence of the white superiority fantasy in its paranoiac desperation and its structural capability to slide so easily to barbarism also meant, for me, to be utterly shaken by the inhumanity that could eliminate, for instance, a Trayvon Martin (or the many black teenagers in the United States of America, whom the racist structures of their country seem to have an insatiable desire to kill and maim) from the face of the earth with impunity and still maintain an audacity to question his innocence—for I realise that Martin is me!

The root of the black man's hatred is rage,
and he does not so much hate white men

as simply wants them out of his way,
out of his children's way. (Baldwin, in Peck 2017, p. 60)

The journey of my becoming Black is one of demystification of the White and his stagnated imagination about his Other and of his continued fantasy of supremacy and its apparent tie to global capitalism and to myself. It is also a story of resistance insofar as the White insists that I should be ashamed of what he imagined me to be and because, quite simply put, I am not ashamed of who and what I am. I have become Black. But what exactly is being Black? Is it just declaring one's Blackness? How is it enmeshed in my Ethiopianness and Africanness? These are questions that deserve their own thorough engagement, which I hope to undertake as my being Black for now is a start of another journey.

It is tempting to assume, as some of my informants, either blatantly or by implying it, do, that there is some inherent evilness in Whiteness—no one has matched the crimes done in the name of Whiteness. Becoming Black, for me, also meant to recognise the human capability of compassion in people who happen to be White and "begin to suspect", with James Baldwin, "that white people did not act as they did because they were white, but for some other reason." (Baldwin, in Peck 2017, p. 19) I nodded repeatedly when I came across the poem of Baldwin, as he captured my sentiment fully.

I attest to this:
the world is not white;
it never was white,
cannot be white.
White is a metaphor for power,
and that is simply a way of describing
Chase Manhattan Bank. (ibid., p. 107)
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