1. A Goan village

let's see. when we came in there was a huge number of brits and some rich indians and a few backpackers, still very few tranceheads. so it wasn’t entirely sure whether it would get to be a ‘good party,’ in the sense that the party would survive the morning and thus become magical. i met t- when it was starting to get light. he was sitting at the banyan tree with some japanese guys, and he said, after he’d seen that dark indian trancehead with long hair, isn’t it a coincidence, every time he decides to go party every so often, at that time, it turns out that the people he knows also go there. perfect telepathic timing. a good sign, he said, it’s going to be a great party, i don’t know but i’ve got a feeling, and he decided to take a quarter of a hofmann [LSD]. we smoked some chillum and joints and for sure, the israelis trickled in, they sat next to the bar on the right on two mats (i mean, two mat businesses) waiting patiently, like on new year, [this time] not really for the indians to disappear but for an adequate momentum, enough compatriots and other rave psychotics to claim the party.

The field notes were about an open-air party for tourists at a ground called Dolce Vita, in the Goan village called Anjuna. Goa is known throughout the hip and cosmopolitan world as rave tourism Mecca. But why Anjuna, how did the music attract Europeans there? What’s with the Israelis, and Japanese avoiding Indians? What are ‘tranceheads,’ and why are they watching out for Israelis to turn up at the party? Why do they wait for Indians to leave? What does a ‘magical morning’ consist of? What is a ‘mat business’? How does ‘momentum’ of ravers come about? And why were these notes written down in the first place? Why does a half-Belgian-half-Indian guy go study foreign ravers in some third-world village?

This sort of puzzlement forces a reassessment of what one knows. Anjuna’s music and drugs tourism is legendary and it is probably the only village in the third world that brought forth an own kind of electronic dance music, Goa trance, which is played at outdoor parties across the globe. Goa trance makes a fascinating case study in cultural geography. It appeared shortly after house and techno music established themselves in the UK and other European countries around 1990, but the conditions for Anjuna’s trance scene go back to the early seventies. The coastal village was ‘discovered’ by hippie travellers at a time when there was much interest in the mind-altering qualities of India. Although Goa is generally considered ‘less Indian’ by tourists because of 461 years of Portuguese colonial influence, the hippies eagerly took to its tranquil tropical beaches and tolerant locals. By 1975 Anjuna was a secluded haven for a semi-resident community of hippies who could freely indulge in drugs, nude sunbathing, and all-night full-moon parties.

Music was always central to Anjuna’s tourism, but it was with Goa trance that it boomed. Goa’s festive image long attracted large numbers of domestic tourists too. Charter tourism from the UK and other European countries was consolidated at about the same time that Goa trance became available in large music stores in Europe, in 1995. What began with Goa regulars simulating Anjuna’s parties in their home countries grew into a transnational underground rave/club scene, stretching from Tel Aviv to Stockholm, from Brasilia to Cape Town. The excerpt above describes a key attraction in Anjuna’s music and drugs tourism: sunrise. This is when for many dancers the party only begins, in part because for others-mostly middle-class Indian tourists- it is the time to leave. At this particular party, Dolce Vita was unusually charging an entry fee, hence there were hardly any Indian tourists. In fact, it was probably deliberate policy to limit their number. This is because the hard core of party revellers, who stay in Anjuna for months, would rather there was just them and the local women selling tea at the parties.

In the perception of this hard core, charter tourists and especially domestic tourists lack an affective connection to Goa trance, LSD, personal style, and budget traveling. Ravers like T. are almost obsessed with protocol and with making the party just right. They are quite serious about what Goa means to them: a place to be transformed in. Domestic tourists are not there to transform themselves and are therefore
unwelcome. What the experienced ravers do (unlike the mostly British charter tourists and backpackers) is wait on the mats supplied by the local women, until dawn makes the Indians leave.

I felt this segregation. It was what annoyed and frightened me, and it was what spurred me on. I realize now, some years later, that my thinking on race was at the very least accelerated through the intensities of the ethnographic fieldwork I was doing for my PhD. I wanted to make sense of what I encountered. What I have been trying to find out since then is what sort of theoretical vocabulary is needed to make sense of situations like the above, of racism when it’s not supposed to be there. Race is to be understood in the flesh, in between things, as vague and continually changing. It turns out that making sense of Anjuna needed some new concepts, and a theoretical reconsideration of race itself. So, why Anjuna? To form new concepts.

2. Psychedelic whiteness

It is by observing the event of a party as something fully physical that I could appreciate the segregation of the morning. Nobody likes to talk about it, and hardly anyone has described it in writing. What matters is not the representations of an event, but its actual unfolding. I had to be there, among other bodies, checking what they were doing, what they did with mats and chillums (traditional Indian hash pipes) and trees and the Goa trance flowing through the landscape. I had to find out where they were sitting and dancing, how their appearances differed, why they were looking at each other all the time. What is it that gave ravers’ bodies ‘momentum’? Three conditions: that they were dancing and on drugs—a question of the embodiments of rave tourism; that they cared about looks and who was around them—a question of familiar faces; and that their skin color betrayed where they come from, by and large rich countries such as the UK, Japan, Israel, and Germany—a question of locations. Embodiment, face, and location are three theoretical principles that structure my materialist understanding of race.

A fourth concept that I would like to introduce, and perhaps the most salient one, is viscosity. Viscosity enables a rigorous grasping of social spaces by putting the dynamic physicality of human bodies and their interactions at the forefront of analysis. In basic terms, viscosity pertains to two dimensions of a collective of bodies: its sticking together, and its relative impermeability. At that Dolce Vita party, at 8 a.m. on January 6, 2000, there was a viscosity of predominantly white ravers. They stuck together in time and space because they all saw each other regularly, smoked chillum together, danced to Goa trance, wore flashy clothing, and had money to spend on LSD and Ecstasy. Others, especially domestic tourists, weren’t habituated to all this; they didn’t have the cultural or economic resources to join in. When the sun came up, most Indians felt visible and out of place between so many white bodies. The denser the collective, the more difficult to cut through it: these are the two dimensions of viscosity. There is no downright exclusion; Israeli and Japanese bodies might be more ambivalently white than Germans or Canadians. Still, the net effect is that there is a strong tendency of dancers to be lighter-skinned, tanned, cool-looking. Therefore, the observable fact that the Indians leave is a contingent effect of music, subcultural rules, mutual stereotypes, economic inequality, and differential experiences with drugs.

The problem is why viscosity of white bodies comes about in Anjuna. After all, Goa is popularly known as a former hippie hangout— isn’t it all peace and love, aren’t those backpackers and ravers really into India, is Goa trance not the most cosmopolitan of electronic dance musics? Why would a white microcosm be re-created if the whole point of going to India and Goa is adventure, escape, becoming different? My concept of ‘psychedelic whiteness’ attempts to explain how it is that Euro-American countercultural experimentations with music, drugs, and travel can coexist with the reinstatement of where one is coming from, of who one is. Young whites are in Anjuna seemingly to sample and develop a lifestyle quite different from what they’re used to, but the way they do this betrays the limits of their escape and rebellion; that is, by virtue of being tourists in an exotic place, recognizably different and wealthy in a poor country, they contribute to the inertia of old racial divisions. Studying the parties in Anjuna will pave the way to an understanding of whiteness that stresses its inherent capacity to spread, change itself, and become unexpectedly viscous.

The set of practices of self-transformation that my work focuses on is called psychedelics—in the singular, like ‘economics’ and ‘aesthetics.’ Psychedelics is the hedonistic, sometimes mystical structure of feeling that, as the name implies, was epitomized in the sixties cult of LSD. But I enlarge the term significantly: insofar as whites use the pleasures of drugs, art, ritual, travel, the risky, and the exotic to alter their minds and position in the world as whites, I call them psychedelic. The fact that bodies involved in psychedelics can be Swedish, Israeli, Japanese, Indian, Canadian, or Zimbabwean does not make psychedelics ‘less white’. What is significant is that these bodies are most probably white: whiteness, like all of race, is a
dynamic system of probabilities and contingencies, not a static grid. Hence psychedelics isn’t antithetical to white modernity. On the contrary, to argue for the creativity of whiteness is to show to what extent it can reinvent and reinforce itself. The ethnography will demonstrate how the viscosity of whites can arise from the very fact that they succeed in mutating themselves. Psychedelics shows the many possibilities of whiteness.

Here I need to mention the last theoretical concept of the book, derived mostly from Gilles Deleuze: virtuality. Deleuze produced a long string of concepts that in their sheer intensity and variation innovated philosophy, but it was virtuality that they were all implicating. Very briefly, virtuality refers to the connections that things are potentially capable of. Virtuality is tendency, probability, latency. Without a concept of virtuality, the analysis of whiteness cannot appreciate how it comes to be—and why it seems so difficult to dismantle. Whiteness gathers its strength from being versatile, not from mere ruthless oppression. I attempt to understand whiteness in order to change it.

3. Phenotype matters

Although the human sciences have been ardent in criticizing the inequalities that remain in place because of race, what race actually is often elides analysis and commentary. According to the dominant paradigm, race is necessarily ‘constructed’ through language and culture, so what it is ‘itself’ cannot be known. What then counts, in human geography, cultural studies, anthropology, and sociology, is often the discourse on, media images of, people’s opinions about race, instead of the realities of embodiment, face, and location. Thus Richard Dyer’s White has discussed cinematic representations of whites and shown how whiteness is insubstantial without a profound symbolism of virtue and control. The work of Dyer and others in white studies has been valuable in exposing how whites have historically erased their own racial specificity. Although blacks and reds are colored, that is, deviations from white, whites are just human. Humanity is itself defined on white terms.

My work falls broadly under white studies, but I take issue with the latter’s theoretical basis, what is commonly called social constructionism. Against positivism and realism, social constructionism holds that the meaning of social and even physical phenomena is not given once and for all, but depends on how they are understood in society. In its critical versions, social constructionism studies how different groups struggle over the meanings of phenomena such as whiteness, nation, poverty, and disease. Social constructionism, then, tends to understand these phenomena primarily through their ideas, their ‘representations’ in language and images. Against pure idealism, social constructionists hold that these representations are not mere fictions or fantasies, as they have ‘real effects.’ However, how these effects occur (for example, what impact cinematic depictions of whites have on actual bodies in physical space and time) is usually left unscrutinized.

Deleuzian materialism attempts to grasp the geographies of social/physical reality as constituted only by ‘real effects.’ Whites taking up the dance floor in the morning and somehow managing to dispel Indians again and again in Anjuna is hardly a question of representation. Psychedelics is primarily about what happens to bodies and how it is that these bodies tend to be white, even if these bodies are using ‘representations.’ The first, obvious way that a Deleuzian take on race differs from most research following the constructionist paradigm lies in that it tries to address race as a series of events, not how it is known through discourse or in people’s minds. When analyzed as a system of events, whiteness in Anjuna can be shown to be both creative and constricting. Arguably, only ethnography could establish the conceptual imbrication of psychedelics and viscosity.

It is a commonplace assumption that whites have for a long time been fascinated and transformed by drawing on other people’s cultures and landscapes. These fascinations and transformations have been notably given systematic attention in Edward Said’s Orientalism. Yet the fact that white appropriations of otherness were fuelled by a conscious effort to transcend the constraints of white society—that European exoticism and primitivism, though intertwined with colonial subjugation, also tell of the self-critique and self-transformation of whites—has seldom been put at the centre of theorization. The second way in which my book departs from most theories of race is that whiteness is treated as something positive, not necessarily in dialectical struggle with what it is not. Whiteness is much more than simply the negation of nonwhiteness. Through psychedelics, white racism will need to be conceived as a system involving not just exclusion, but more complex shades of differentiation and interaction prior to any distinction between self and other, West and East.
Usually in the constructionist paradigm, instead of virtuality and creativity, the oppressive and rigid nature of racial boundaries is emphasized. For many theorists of race today, such as Paul Gilroy, race is always already racist because it is fundamentally about drawing a sharp boundary between white and nonwhite. Hence Gilroy's title: *Against Race*. Populations have been ‘othered’ as inferior or evil by white people, a process that was institutionalized and globalized during European imperialism and American slavery, but continues to inform current portrayals of nonwhites in insidious ways. Race is indeed just one contingent way of classifying humans, and from this Gilroy concludes that a future without it is conceivable and desirable.

In contradistinction to this kind of antiracism, and as a third departure from social constructionism, my theorization of race calls not for an abolishing of the idea of race, but its critical reappropriation so as to combat racism more adequately. In this way it joins sociologists working broadly in a Gramscian framework such as David Theo Goldberg and Howard Winant. My recent book *Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race* (2007) gives evidence toward a conception of race as a heterogeneous process of differentiation involving the materiality of bodies and spaces. The ethnographic description and reflection will draw attention to events and constellations in Anjuna that permit, or rather encourage, thinking race in terms of bodies and spaces. Race is a shifting amalgamation of human bodies and their appearance, genetic material, artefacts, landscapes, music, money, language, and states of mind. Racial difference emerges when bodies with certain characteristics become viscous through the ways they connect to their physical and social environment. Race is a *machinic assemblage*, to use a concept of Deleuze and Guattari. Machinic assemblage is an ontological concept and therefore apt for tackling the question ‘What is race?’ Basically, the concept presents constellations, especially biological and sociological constellations, as fully material, machinelike interlockings of multiple varied components, which do not cease to be different from each other while assembled. A machine in the narrow sense works because bolts are bolts and cogs are cogs. Thus, there is order-for example, there is a relatively stable constellation that can be called whiteness—but order is a shifting effect of many little connections and flows. The whiteness of the space and bodies at Dolce Vita was achieved through components such as skin colour, cannabis, tea, sunlight, conversation, trees, entry charge, and dancing skills.

What is more important than distinctions between nature and nurture, innate and environmental, or culture and economy, is how an assemblage functions, how it manages to emerge and persist in its own right. One consequence of thinking race as a machinic assemblage is that the phenotype of bodies cannot be something incidental to how bodies act as visible vehicles for racial differences: *phenotype matters*. This does not mean that every body can be assigned one phenotype, as phenotype is itself continuous and hugely complicated by dress, behaviour and context. This is precisely because of its virtual reservoir of ways to connect to its changing environment. Deleuze has a powerful notion of virtuality that enables conceiving matter such as phenotype as active and full of potentiality, instead of completely curtailed or frozen by ‘discourse.’ It cannot be predicted what phenotype is capable of, as the myriad instantiations of racial difference attest.

My philosophical sources are not restricted to Deleuze and Guattari. Prior to them, feminists such as Elizabeth Grosz and Doreen Massey taught me how to affirm the differential materiality of bodies and places. As in feminism, the theorization of the body presented here is linked to a political and ethical project of reorganizing human differences, so that privilege is not an automatic implication of one’s corporeality or where one comes from. It is not that the dominant constructionist conceptions of race and gender actively prevents this, of course. But it certainly seems that a more rigorous understanding of the material dynamics of privilege based on phenotype—what is race?—can contribute to such a project.

Crucial is also an understanding of *emergence*, which I treat as a subcategory of virtuality. Far from being fixed in either genes or culture, racial difference emerges through a host of processes at different levels of organization. The concept of viscosity, moreover, allows for a fundamentally spatial way of imagining race, as opposed to collapsing it into a disembodied and mental contraption, as tends to be done in some critical race theory. I therefore take issue with the lasting influence of Frantz Fanon on critical race theory. By positing race as primarily a dialectical system of exclusion and recognition (self versus other), and despite of his rich descriptions, Fanon failed to appreciate the fully entangled and effervescence nature of both race and racism. Understanding the complex materiality of race means abandoning his basically Hegelian perspective on human difference, that continues to inspire much of critical theory in general.

Instead of identity politics (black, national, local), the downright negation of whiteness and ‘race’, a celebration of hybridity and anarchy, or a regime of multiculturalism and tolerance, the politics that follows
from Deleuzian materialism begins with the acknowledgement that an escape from whiteness can perversely reinforce it. This is what happens in Anjuna. This is no reason to deny the emancipatory possibilities inhering in racial difference, somewhat like feminism does not deny the energies for change in sexual difference. Whiteness and race need to be understood and proliferated in new ways, not abolished or silenced. In contrast to what is usually expected of bringing phenotype back into the human sciences, we need to assert that a machinic analysis of race cannot be appropriated by eugenics or biological essentialism, while it can definitely contribute to the battle against white supremacy. It was during my encounter with Anjuna that my thinking on race slowly started forming. In fact, rave culture and hippie travel might be the quintessential places to start thinking the strange materiality of race.

Notes

9. Doreen Massey. *Space, Place and Gender*. Cambridge, Polity, 1994 [↩]