

***Torquing Things Out: Race and Classification in  
Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star's Sorting  
Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences***

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*Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*, by Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, 2000. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

In *Sorting Things Out*, Bowker and Star's meditation on technologies of classification, a central chapter pivots around the contradictions of racial classification in apartheid South Africa. Bowker and Star examine the "stubborn refusal of 'race' to fit the desired classification system suborned by its pro-Apartheid designers" (p. 196), and they hold that the contradictions constitutive of racial categorization had a particular effect on the racially subordinated: their life trajectories were wrenched out of alignment, subjected to what Bowker and Star term "torque." In this brief essay, I ask after some of the analytical and moral assumptions embedded in Bowker and Star's articulation of torque, and I ask what torque can and cannot tell us about the lived category of race.

Before I get toward these questions, however, some further explication of Bowker and Star's general argument is required. Bowker and Star argue that the torque twisting the biographies of persons in apartheid South Africa resulted from the fact that racial classification partook of two different sorts of classificatory practice—what they call (following John Taylor) Aristotelian and prototypical. The confusions and cruelties of racial classification in South Africa can be understood in part as resulting from the strategic, persistent, and inconsistent conflation of these two kinds of classificatory frames. Bowker and Star write,

Aristotelian classification works according to a set of binary characteristics that an object being classified either presents or does not present. At each level of classification, enough binary features are adduced to place any member of a given population into one and only one class. (P. 62)

In the case of racial classification in South Africa, the notion that there exist distinct races that can be sorted into discrete human groupings—Europeans, Asiatics, coloreds, and natives/Bantus—depended on just this kind of Aristotelian ideal-typic logic. Coexisting with this was prototypical characterization, which travels from a

singular abstract example by analogy or metaphor toward the individual object to be classified. In the South African case, the assignment of a person to a race by, say, policemen worked not through a series of binary operations cascading down from some analytical empyrean but through a rough notion policemen might have of appropriate racial identity and behavior, emerging from their local experience as it unfolded amid heterogeneous beliefs about what kind of appearance and social associations make people, say, colored or Asian. Bowker and Star argue that everyday classification of race in South Africa partook of both Aristotelian and prototypical modes and that, indeed, Aristotelian accounts of race in South Africa and elsewhere were themselves always already prototypical, as “pure types existed nowhere, and racism existed everywhere” (p. 202).

The incoherence of race as a category has historically led some scholars to argue that understanding race primarily as emanating from classificatory practice is not quite the best way to grasp racialized forms of life. Thus, W. E. B. Du Bois, in contrast to Franz Boas, who was forever trying to figure out what race was and was not, wrote in his 1940 essay “Dusk of Dawn,” “perhaps it is wrong to speak of [race] at all as a concept, rather than as a group of contradictory forces, facts and tendencies” (quoted in Baker 1997, 112). This seems a useful corrective to the attempt to fix race as always and everywhere the same concept, the same cultural construction based on the same phantom biology, as became the common practice of most anthropologists in the Boasian tradition. As Kamala Visweswaran (1998) has argued, this homogenization of race dehistoricizes it and ends up asking “culture” to do the work of the analytically evaporated but politically, economically, and socially durable and heterogeneous reality of “race.”

But, as I think Bowker and Star demonstrate, viewing race as a concept, as a category, certainly need not detour us away from an understanding of how it emerges out of Du Bois’s “contradictory forces, facts and tendencies.” Indeed, I think Bowker and Star’s view of classification as practice; as “situated, collective, and historically specific” (p. 288); and as “material and symbolic” (p. 286) can alert us to how race emerges in particular instances. I take the South African case they explore—in which the race of individuals was often determined by their social associations more than by their putative descent or lineage (which, as Bowker and Star report, was explicitly ruled out of the bureaucratic process of South African race reclassification) (p. 208)—to be rather different from bloodline-obsessed U.S. classifications, with their vacillations between one-drop rules and blood quantum. The dissonances created by the categorical confluences that shape the diversity of racial experience in South Africa and in the United States are distinct from one another—even as I think Bowker and Star can help us see how species of Aristotelian and prototypical confluences texture every case.

In what I read, then, as consistent with Du Bois’s view of race as a “group of contradictory forces,” Bowker and Star introduce the force metaphor of “torque” to describe the process that unfolds when “the ‘time’ of the body and of [its] multiple identities cannot be aligned with the ‘time’ of the classification system” (p. 190). Bowker and Star argue that torsion results when the temporalities of classification and

lived experience slide out of sync. Individual biographies are twisted into tortured shapes that materialize in the negative space that opens up when powerful classification schemes do not line up with the local logic of everyday life. A South African boy born of an Indian father and an African mother, for example, might have been classified at birth as Asian according to a Group Areas Act rule that has children living patrilocally, only to have his classification shift on reaching majority, at which time he would have been expected, according to the Population Registration Act, to follow the station of the parent of lower racial status and become African and to shift his associations accordingly (example from Horrell) (p. 203). As I understand the apartheid logic, the torsion could go still further; it is conceivable that this person could at some point in his future, with some difficulty, have tried to pass as colored by cultivating, say, work and residence associations with the appropriate people and by trying to avoid the street-level classificatory challenge that might have come from a police officer. Bowker and Star argue that the torque that results from a biography like this flows out of the conflation of Aristotelian and prototypical classifications in a circumstance of radical social inequality. As they put it, “The conflation gives a terrible power of ownership of both the formal and the informal to those in power” (p. 204). And they argue that there is no experience of torque for those in power. “The advantaged are those whose place in a set of classification systems is a powerful one and for whom powerful sets of classifications of knowledge appear natural” (p. 225).

This is a very suggestive analysis. In my teaching, I have found it useful in framing the slippages anatomized by Troy Duster (2001) in his discussions of single nucleotide polymorphisms on chips. Single nucleotide polymorphisms for, say, sickle cell, encoded using DNA microarray technology, can be seen as prototypes that get used in practice as pointers toward categories of people who are then treated in Aristotelian terms. Hannah Landecker’s work on the racialization of the HeLa cell line can also be productively fed through Bowker and Star’s analysis. Writing of a genetic polymorphism appearing in HeLa lines that became identified through a series of confusions and confluences with “Blackness,” Landecker (2000) wrote that G6PD Type A acquired

a simplified essentialized status as a “black gene,” as if the register of race went from skin to cell to enzyme to gene. This marker, taken from the context of population genetics and used as an identifying test for contamination in cell culture, lost all the subtleties and complications of a gene frequency within population and became, instead, an absolute indicator of difference. (P. 63)

Here, we have one torque atop another. Race torques population torques gene.

This trajectory puts me in mind of Donna Haraway’s (1994) analysis of twentieth-century biological kinship categories in “Universal Donors in a Vampire Culture,” in which Haraway argued that race, population, and genome have been successive historical frames for the biologization of human difference. Haraway’s typology, which she delivered in the form of a chart, acts as a map of torsions between such moments as, say, the 1950 United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

statement that race is not a biological category and the frankly racist contemporaneous characterizations of African apes. Haraway's analytical grid reveals a set of links that tie categories, people, and political economies together with varying degrees of "tension, knottiness . . . bundling, and thickness"—to borrow a catalog of kinds of filiations from Bowker and Star (p. 315).

Bowker and Star's formulation of torque bears a family resemblance to Andrew Pickering's (1993) mangle of practice. The torque and the mangle have in common a keen interest in time, in temporal unfoldings of ontologies and epistemologies. Where it seems to me the two differ, however, is in the value Pickering and Bowker and Star attach to their respective motions. In spite of the rather violent meanings of the word *mangle*, Pickering's mangle is more or less a benign process, as it shifts subjects, objects, and agents through dynamics of resistance and accommodation; we hear less from Pickering about whether the mangle can cut, tear, crush, or destroy such formations as human intentionality, something Pickering was often concerned to preserve in his posthumanist humanist analysis. *Torque*, in the hands of Bowker and Star, is by contrast given a fairly negative meaning—and, indeed, moral charge. Bowker and Star write, "The architecture of classification schemes is simultaneously a moral and an informatic one" (p. 324), and they maintain that in many cases classification systems are tools of power used to constrain and contain people who do not fit into dominant categories of privilege. Bowker and Star's clear ethical position on the often oppressive power of classification is nicely consistent with their larger argument. It is only responsible for them, according to their own contentions, to be explicit about the moral and political investments of the meta-classification scheme animating their analysis of classification schemes.

Bowker and Star are not suggesting that there can be a world in which there are not disjunctures between classification schemes and experience; indeed, they write that "any given classification provides surfaces of resistances, blocks against certain agendas, and smooth roads for others" (p. 324). Moreover, people deploy multiple classificatory schemes as they participate in diverse communities of practice. Bowker and Star use the figure of the cyborg and the new mestiza to discuss those who reside between categories, in borderlands, as boundary subjects, to rescue a notion of disjuncture as positive, as productive of new worlds, and they valorize, in one of their examples, a "braided identity" (p. 306) as a kind of positively charged alternative to torqued identity. One question that we might press them on, however, is, Can we always tell the difference between torquing and braiding? Do a number of torques, mapped as threads between classificatory frames and bodies, add up to a braid? How can this transmute a negative into a positive? This needs some further spelling out.

I want to lean on the moral valences assigned to torque just a bit more. Let me do this by wheeling in an argument made by historian Hillel Schwartz (1992) in his "Torque: The New Kinaesthetic of the Twentieth Century." In this piece, Schwartz argued that attitudes toward physical movement in dance, heavier-than-air flight, penmanship, and many other domains shifted in the early portion of the past century—with a new aesthetics of kinetics emerging, one that centered on acknowledging

gravity and on integrating its force into new definitions of grace. This aesthetic became a kind of transepistemic formation, installed in many different arenas of social life. In the modern dance of Isadora Duncan, for example—and in contrast to the ballet she was concerned to overturn—the torsion of the torso in response to the heaviness of the body generated a new fleet of movements. In flight, the straightforward motion of gliders was replaced by the spin of airplanes outfitted with wing-warping levers operated from the control center of their apparati. In penmanship, the movement of the hand across the page was seen ideally to flow from an individual's unique balance point, which, in the best of cases, aligned with his or her inner state. In these various domains, according to Schwartz, torque became celebrated as the signal of natural movement; it was not seen as an agonized twisting.

What to do with this contrast between torque as negative and torque as positive? It might be useful to note that the torque of which Schwartz was writing emanates from within a person, while the torque of Bowker and Star results from a person being twisted between his or her lived experience and a powerful frame of imposed reference. In the dynamics Schwartz analyzed, torque became naturalized through and alongside its interiorization. In the stories of Bowker and Star, torque is tortured and enforced; the absence of torque—as an easy correspondence between inner state and outer power—is, according to their argument, the quality that is naturalized. We might ask where this leaves Bowker and Star for assessing and siting the contradictions that make up dominant categories such as whiteness.

What does all this talk of torque mean, finally, for race and classification? I think it asks us to consider the source from which power flows. Schwartz's argument acknowledges the constructedness of the "nature" of torque but does not always follow the politics of this construction. At one point, we learn from his argument that modern dancers were inspired to their newly "natural" movements by early-twentieth-century European notions of the "primitive"; we might ask for more about the colonial relationships and politics of representation that underwrote the "nature" that was installed in the new kinaesthetic. A Foucaultian attention to the ways that a torque from within was linked to a set of racial formations—and classification schemes—from without might help us go more sharply after the naturalization of torque as a positive value. And Bowker and Star could provide a welcome assistance here. But we might also look at the wholeness and integrity of the self that are sometimes implied in Bowker and Star's notion of torque and ask whether it would be useful to complicate the steady biography they tend toward as a condition of stability. It might be worth thinking further about the relation between the torque and the braid, perhaps looking at the pair stereoscopically. After all, Du Bois felt that race was not always to be deplored as a mode of filiation, that the double consciousness afforded by the racialized position from which he wrote and spoke could be both a restriction and a resource. The forked torques, the tongue-twisting, shape-shifting force fields of race, emerge at the junctures of such multiplicity. Sorting things out—especially things like race—as Bowker and Star edge us toward doing, must take into account the shifting schemes, means, and meanings of such constitutively contradictory classification.

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