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## FEMINIST PHENOMENOLOGY

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To speak of *feminist phenomenology*, or of how feminist philosophers have appropriated phenomenological methods and sources, is to speak in the plural. It is therefore important to begin by noting that I will not offer a survey of what feminist phenomenology has been or a definition of what it should be. Rather, my interest is both in how phenomenology, as a variegated movement, has been useful to feminism and how feminist phenomenologies offer a corrective—or, more precisely, a *critical reconfiguration*—of phenomenology. This reconfiguration sheds light on the social-political possibilities of a movement that might have seemed, on the surface, to be only about description.

There are multiple ways in which one could broach how phenomenology has influenced feminist theory. One could speak of sources, figures, or themes. Feminists have drawn on the works of Edmund Husserl, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon and extensively on the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (and this is only a partial list). And phenomenologists have, arguably from the start, been engaged in feminist questions. One has only to think of Edith Stein (Calcagno 2007) or Simone de Beauvoir (2010 [1949]), to recall that phenomenological approaches to feminist concerns—even when not explicitly labelled “feminist”—are not limited to the current generation of phenomenologists. Moreover, phenomenology addresses dimensions of experience—such as embodiment (see Chapter 15 in this volume), affectivity, perception, temporality, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity—to name but a few thematic threads that have also been of import to feminists.

What feminist phenomenologies add to this list is a sensitivity to how oppression, power, and privilege may form the horizon wherein these dimensions are *differentially* structured—the social-historical context wherein experience is situated and historicized. Feminist phenomenologies provide, then, not simply an additional theme, but a different and arguably deeper way of *thematizing* and contextualizing phenomenology’s classical foci—shifting and redefining these foci in the process. Feminist phenomenology shows how the political already structures experience at the lived, “prereflective” level of felt embodiment. And this is not only when experience is self-reflectively or personally ascribed. It points to how the social mediates how I feel and perceive, as well as what I can do—embodied agency—and who I am—identity.

In my view, this means that the richness of phenomenology is best seen when it is understood not simply as tradition, but as method. And this phenomenological method

is one that has itself changed over time—that has been revised and reconfigured through multiple appropriations and critiques, including critical race, queer, and feminist ones. To give only a few examples of such appropriations and critiques, I point the reader to: Alcoff (2006); Ahmed (2006); Bartky (1990); Gordon (1995); Heinämaa (2003); Salamon (2010); Weiss (1999); Yancy (2008); and Young (2005). There have also been a number of important special issues and volumes on feminist phenomenology in the last two decades: Fisher and Embree (2000); Heinämaa and Rodemeyer (2010); Schües, Olkowski, and Fielding (2011); Simms and Stawarska (2014); and Zeiler and Käll (2014).

This is to say that phenomenology has the structure of what Husserl and, following him, Merleau-Ponty call *institution* (Husserl 1970 [1954]; Merleau-Ponty 1964b [1960] and 2010 [2003]). It is not a static given, a mere set of texts, or a pre-defined formula. Phenomenological method is a movement that is also tendency and change, a way of being oriented in the world, a style of thinking or way of perceiving. This style should be understood to be dynamic, both weighted by its past and transformed by it, improvising in response to its historical and social situation. Here, I do not mean to divide textual interpretation from “application,” but to point to the ways in which phenomenology is a continual taking up and reinvention.

In what follows, I begin with this question of method, as an avenue to elucidating phenomenology’s relation to lived experience and to its normative—although not uncontested—assumptions. Because of the introductory nature of this essay, my appeal to sources remains selective. I draw on phenomenology’s past, especially on Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir, and Fanon, and on contemporary feminist phenomenologists. But there are many phenomenologists (Binswanger, Minkowski, Patočka, Schutz, Stein, and of course Heidegger) and some entangled intra-phenomenological debates to which I cannot do justice. Because my interest lies in understanding how phenomenology *becomes feminist*, I focus on bringing to light the critical, ethical and political possibilities of what I will call “critical phenomenology.”

### Phenomenology as Method

It is perhaps commonplace to begin a discussion of phenomenology with an account of the “phenomenological reduction.” In its simplest form, the reduction is about “putting into brackets” attitudes to the world, in particular causal-scientific and naturalistic ones. To “bracket” is neither to affirm nor to nullify, but to suspend an attitude, in order to bring into focus its constitutive activity and the web of meaning it has instituted. However, the attitude that most weighs in experience, and that is the most difficult to bracket, is the “natural attitude.”

When he introduced the concept of the “natural attitude,” Husserl meant to designate not simply a way of conceiving the world, but also a way of living and perceiving the world that takes that world and the objects within it to be “out there,” defined apart from consciousness. In other words, this is an attitude of naïve realism toward the world (Husserl 1998 [1976]). This attitude is “natural” both in being the basis upon which other attitudes—theoretical and practical—build, and also in becoming habitual, its operations forgotten, so that it is implicitly and unreflectively lived. To say that this attitude is “natural” is not to endorse it, then, but to indicate that it remains lived-through and is not grasped *as an attitude*, that it is invisible to us since we perceive according to it. This is to say that it has been *naturalized*.

More generally, what the phenomenological reduction allows us to see and to interrogate are the naturalizing tendencies within experience. What it reveals are the threads of meaning-making that weave together experience. To paraphrase Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, the reduction "loosens" and hence makes visible these intentional threads, but, it should be added, it does not undo them (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]: lxxvii). In its classical Husserlian form, to carry out this kind of "reduction" is to reveal the constituting role of consciousness as the source of sense-giving—as the condition of possibility of there being meaning. It is because it forms the condition of possibility for sense to appear that consciousness—or subjectivity—is revealed to be "transcendental subjectivity." This does not mean that consciousness transcends experience but that it grounds experience—that it makes possible an experience of *something*, which is to say, the appearance of sense to consciousness (or what phenomenology calls "intentionality").

As one reads Husserl more closely, however, transcendental subjectivity is revealed to be not so much a source-point as a *flow* that is paradoxically both constituted through, and constituting of, time (Husserl 1991 [1966]). As one attends to time more concretely, time-consciousness is shown to be more than a formal, linear schema. Rather it is an affectively entangled flow, in which later events make a difference for how earlier ones are retained or fade away (Husserl 2001 [1966]). Moreover, the perceptual field is an *affective relief*; it is a field of contextual contrast, where the relative pull of affections motivates the sensing body to turn toward, and perceive, them (Husserl 2001 [1966]: 216/168). I would add that this affective relief is neither an abstract map that is the same for all bodies, nor is it given once and for all. It is a tissue with variable contours, viscosity and texture, a furrowed terrain in which some bodies move with ease and others get bogged down in ruts. This *differentially* lived and perceived space—sedimented and materialized over time—can be described as a *lifeworld of habitualities*, since it has been shaped through, and in turn shapes, bodily habits. Such habits stem not only from my singular interactions with the world but from my social and historical location and my intersubjective milieu, the others (human or otherwise) with whom I have lived.

Thus the affective map of lived space reflects back to bodies their (differentially socialized) habitualities, the system of their possible actions in the world. The practical significances of things (e.g., a pen to be written with) mirror to my lived body its habitually acquired capacities (in this instance, being-handed, able to write, having acquired a language and literacy in a particular script, etc.). These capacities are felt in my body in terms of possible movement and sensing (by means of the sensory, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive awareness that my body has of itself, a self-awareness that is not yet conceptual or reflective). Husserl calls this bodily feeling of practical possibility the "I can" (Husserl 1989 [1952]: 270/258); for example, the feeling that "I can write" with that pen. Transcendental subjectivity thus appears to be receptive and embodied, affectively embedded in the world and responsive to it (Husserl 1989 [1952]; Welton 2000). As Merleau-Ponty describes it, perception is a dialogue of the lived body with the world (2012 [1945]: 134).

Phenomenology listens in on this dialogue, not simply to record what is said, but to lend an ear to what is not said—the silent relations and differences that structure the meaning of what is said. More specifically, phenomenology is a way of attending to experience, to reveal not only its sense, but also the dimensions that generate sense. Such are the *structuring* and normative dimensions that make meaning, but that do not themselves appear as sense. Drawing on the later Merleau-Ponty, this is not to treat

experience as an object—something to be viewed under a microscope or held between forceps—but to accompany experience in its temporal becoming and in the workings of its constitutive dimensions (Merleau-Ponty 1968 [1964]: 101, 128).

In this sense, the phenomenological reduction differs in its scope and depth among phenomenological authors. It differs in what it puts into brackets, what naturalizing tendencies it questions, and what it is thus able to reveal. Here the significance of *feminist, critical race, and queer phenomenologies* comes to view. At stake is not simply a shift in what is being described. Rather, these are critical and creative reconfigurations of phenomenology that deepen and actualize the promise of its method. Before turning to this point in the next two sections, I want to address more explicitly the limitations that feminist critics have found in phenomenology.

With few exceptions (Heinämaa 2003 and Weiss 2008), feminists have historically been wary of the Husserlian line in phenomenology and have more extensively appropriated, in critically careful and innovative ways, that of Merleau-Ponty (for an explanation see Oksala 2006: 231; see also Olkowski and Weiss 2006; cf. Butler 1989 for caution with respect to Merleau-Ponty). I have argued elsewhere that, while feminist readers are right to be hesitant about some aspects of Husserlian phenomenology, his fine-grained analyses of embodiment, temporality, affectivity and sensing offer sites for productive recuperation (Al-Saji 2010). The brief sketch I gave above shows how transcendental subjectivity can be fleshed out temporally, affectively, and in bodily terms. These dimensions are essential to the constitutive work of transcendental subjectivity, not secondary afterthoughts.

While my sketch responds to a long-standing feminist concern that the subject of Husserlian phenomenology is a disembodied pure ego, it does not obviate all worries. For it is one thing to admit an embodied consciousness, quite another to take historicity, habitualities, and social positionality—thus gendering and racialization—to *structure* intentional activity at the transcendental, and not simply empirical level. For instance, Husserl may admit that transcendental subjectivity has a lifeworld of habitualities (as shown above). But the concrete forms that these habits take can still be seen to belong to the empirical ego; this would allow the transcendental ego to be conceived universally, with details filled in locally (see Fisher 2000: 30–31). Categories of “identity” would thus be relegated as characteristics of the “empirical ego.” The phenomenological reduction would seem to go both too far—in assuming that we can separate out what is empirical from what is transcendental in the mixture of experience—and yet also not far enough, in ignoring the structuring role of characteristics deemed empirical and contingent. In this vein, the structures of inner time-consciousness might appear as generally founding of experience, yet filled in differently for different gendered and racialized subjects. But what if gendering and racialization make a difference in *how* time is experienced—a difference in the very structure of temporal experience and not simply in its coloration or content (Al-Saji 2013)?

Here we find the knot of the dilemma: this dilemma, I think, is tied up with how phenomenology conceives the commonality of the field of sense. The problem is not simply that phenomenology has often assumed a philosophy of the subject, even when that subject has been an embodied and intercorporeally situated consciousness (cf. Oksala 2006). Phenomenology can arguably account for the meaning-making powers of the world: as sedimented, intersubjective meanings to be re-activated (Husserl 1970 [1954]), as affective relief (Husserl 2001 [1966]), as institution (Merleau-Ponty 2010 [2003]), and as *flesh* (Merleau-Ponty 1968 [1964]).

But what phenomenology presupposes, even when the subject is decentered, is a common horizon of intelligibility—a perceptual world within which “something” appears and can eventually be recognized, that is to say, made sense of. That “there is sense” appears to be the condition of possibility of phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]: 309), its primordial “faith” so to speak (2012 [1945]: 359). As Merleau-Ponty says, we are “condemned to sense” (2012 [1945]: lxxxvi, 173). This does not mean that everything makes sense at once: every thematization (i.e., occasion of making determinate sense of something) has as its background an indeterminate horizon that includes the implicit habituality and opacity of one’s perceiving and feeling body, as well as the inexhaustible inner and outer horizons of things. While elements of the perceptual field, of which we are a part, can be made explicit, the field as a whole cannot be exhausted nor completely given. And it is this indeterminacy and incompleteness that makes us feel that the perceptual world is real, *always already* there behind our backs.

Perception thus contains an implicit trust, or hope, that through a teleological process of perceptual adjustment and correction, a back-and-forth dialogue with the world, what was experienced as lack can come to expression (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]: 155). There are at least two ways of understanding this teleology of perception. On the one hand, it can be understood to rely on *optimal* bodily attitudes—ways of moving and sensing that allow the practical and perceptual significances of the world to be *better* grasped (a kind of optimal “I can”). Take, for instance, the focusing distance through which a particular object can be better seen, or the weight of touch that allows the textures of a certain surface to be felt (2012 [1945]: 316). On the other hand, this teleology can be understood as an open-ended improvisation or synchronization, through which both sensing and sensible—body and world—take dynamic form, and in which neither preexists their relation (Al-Saji 2008). Since this second option discards the prejudice of an objective in-itself world, multiple “solutions” to the problem of expression may be possible, and different ways in which sense can appear. Here the commonality of the field of sense cannot be assumed, though it can become an epistemic and ethical task.

The first option risks re-naturalizing ways of perceiving—judged optimal—that correspond to certain cultivated capacities and habitualities. These often reside in particular privileged forms of embodiment and are made possible by the colonization of material, social, and economic resources. Forms of behavior that are adapted to, or geared into, current social norms will best succeed on this picture. But the second option is not without its risks. For the improvisation of perception does not take place apart from the normativity of the social world. Indeed, both sensory world and sensing body are already weighted by differential historical and social ways of being. The sensory world is already social and the body is a historical being (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]: 174). What risks being re-naturalized, here, is the radical “alterity” of forms of life. Otherness is de-contextualized and reified into bodies, as if that experience of difference were not also a function of differential positioning on the social map and its constitutive, normative exclusions.

Two examples from critical race and feminist phenomenologies can show what is at stake. In her well-known essay “Throwing Like a Girl,” Iris Marion Young shows how “feminine” movements are often restrictive: they are lived in terms of a self-inhibited “I cannot” that is superimposed upon the practical possibilities of a general “human” — but in fact male—“I can” (2005: 37). To leave the analysis there would be to re-naturalize feminine embodiment as inhibited intentionality, as “Other.” What needs to be shown, and what Young shows, are the ways in which one learns to move *like a girl* in a social

world pervaded by a Western phallogentric gaze and violence that which structure habituation (i.e., what habits one acquires or is dissuaded from acquiring), body image, and affect (Young 2005: 44–45).

A second example can be found in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967 [1952]), and takes us back to the analysis of temporal experience. Differences in rhythm and sensibility—in bodily, musical and poetic expression—are often taken to belong to blackness and are made into innate bodily forms. This elides how such expressions of “*Négritude*” point to a multiplicity of experiences, situated in a history of slavery, racism and colonization, and formed both in suffering and in resistance to them (Fanon 1967 [1952]: 122–129).

Once the social and the political—once historicity, domination and oppression—are taken to structure perceptual and affective experience all the way down, an incommensurability is introduced into experience that challenges the commonality of the field of sense upon which the recognition of meaning relies. Sociality and historicity differentially structure the very forms of expression that perceptual sense and practical possibility take. Sociality and historicity are not merely added onto meaning-making relations as an extra layer of sense. What does phenomenology need to become in order to do justice to such knotted and entangled experience?

### Lived Experience and Pathologies of the Social

The problem of phenomenology as feminist methodology was clearly exposed in a debate between Joan Scott and Linda Martín Alcoff on the status of lived experience for feminist theory (Alcoff 2000 and 2014; Scott 1992). While Scott's critique was levelled at histories of difference, her claim—that “the project of making experience visible precludes analysis of the workings of [the ideological] system and of its historicity; instead it reproduces its terms” (1992: 25)—is an objection often repeated against phenomenology. The claim is that hitherto marginalized and unheard experience is foregrounded in its immediacy at the cost of eliding its social conditions. I would agree with Scott that taking experience as an unproblematized and uncontested foundation for knowledge risks re-naturalizing the oppressive structures that make that experience possible.

However, as Alcoff rightly notes in response to Scott, posing experience and theory, phenomenology and critique, as mutually exclusive terms is a false opposition—one that the practice of feminist phenomenology undercuts (2000: 45–47; 2014: 456). It should be clear from my account thus far that the experience at stake in phenomenological description is neither naïve, nor unproblematized; it is not a “clear datum,” as Alcoff points out (2000: 48). Experience is an ambiguous and dense knot of relations, a temporally entangled and non-linear flow that calls for methodological reflection, precisely for phenomenology. The “immediacy” of experience is hence not as straightforward as the term implies. “Immediacy” is a way of describing the “prereflective” self-awareness of experience, the sense in which every experience is *lived-through*, from within, prior to reflection (Zahavi 1999). But “immediacy” also points to the thickness of lived experience—how I cannot detach from it while also living through it, how it cannot be made into an object to be surveyed and grasped—and the ways in which there always remains an excess that has not been made sense of, a core of “non-sense,” implicit and opaque. It is in this sense that “the most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction,” as Merleau-Ponty says (2012 [1945]: lxxvii). This is not to abandon the reduction (Heinämaa 2002), but to take it to be an always renewed effort,



questioning and hesitating, without end. Moreover, phenomenological “sense” is not a discrete and static content. Rather it is relational, temporal and processual, more orientation and style than thing (to recall the multiple meanings of the French word “sens”; see also Ahmed 2006). I have been careful to discuss “meaning” broadly in this essay, allowing sense to be perceptual, practical and affective—to be kinaesthetically, visually, haptically, aurally and linguistically worked out in the relation between lived body and world, avoiding divisions into preconceptual and conceptual contents.

While giving a “phenomenology of *x*” is sometimes used loosely to mean describing *what it is like* to experience or be *x*, in the first person, this is not all that phenomenology as method must do. Phenomenology both makes experience (partially) explicit and discloses that which is structuring of, which makes a difference in, experience. It gestures toward that which is only indirectly and laterally given in experience—the invisible norms *according to which* meaning appears. Such normativity—of perception, for instance—is historically instituted and socially situated, but it is forgotten as norm and its work remains invisible. Examples of perceptual norms include the dimensionality of depth—which opens up the experience of space as voluminosity and envelopment—and the spatial level that orients and anchors the visual field (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]: 259–279). Merleau-Ponty describes these perceptual norms as invisibles of the visible; they *make visible* but are not themselves visible (1964a [1964] and 1968 [1964]). Particularly suggestive is the example of a color, which when it becomes the color of the lighting, is transformed through its own duration to serve as a “neutral” level according to which we see (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]: 322–324). Lighting is invisible, ubiquitous, forgotten in its particularity, but inflects and *differentially* makes visible the rest of the field (Merleau-Ponty 1968 [1964]: 218, 237). As Helen Fielding (2006) has argued, this neutrality of lighting should be questioned. The color and level of lighting cannot be assumed to be perceptual constants. Rather, they point to a social-historical horizon and the racial logics and technologies that take white light to be a neutral and “colourless” hue, optimal for distinguishing bodies, since it optimally distinguishes the features of *white* bodies (Fielding 2006: 87).

Moreover, I would argue that the voluminosity opened up by depth is not a neutral space, a structural invariant that can be configured and encoded differently through the possible actions of different bodies (cf. Fisher 2000: 29–30). Extending a point made by Young, the voluminosity of space is often experienced in “feminine” embodiment as a splitting or “double spatiality,” where “here” and “there” are discontinuous (Young 2005: 40–41). “There” does not hold open practical possibilities for *my* body, even while it conjures up a virtual body (not mine) capable of living in it and acting upon it. This closure of the “there” and enclosure in my “here” are felt in my body (hesitantly, as “I cannot”). Understanding this as a limitation of a generalized, seamless, and freely traversed space would be an idealization. This is not merely a question of limited or truncated possibility, but a different sense of possibility that belongs to a *differently structured space*.

To introduce more complexity into this phenomenological account, gender cannot be understood to be the only denominator according to which the spatial world is differentiated, nor is there one single denominator. The spatiality of bodies, racialized as white, is often felt to be “ontologically expansive,” to use Shannon Sullivan’s term (2006: 10). The space that these bodies project is smooth and open, “available for them to move in and out of as they wish” (Sullivan 2006: 10)—a space where they are free to act, with leeway to improvise and play, and where their actions, moreover, can have traction. In contrast, racialized bodies are policed and hampered in their

movements and migrations, internalizing these borders to some degree. Their lived space is permeated by differential viscosities and currents, places where they may get bogged down in stereotypes, atmospheres saturated with bodily suffering, past and present, and fissures weighted by violence and historicity.

Hence, if the first step of phenomenology is to bracket naturalizing tendencies within experience, then the description of *what it is like* must not only be contextualized, but its normative assumptions must also be historicized and its exclusions made visible. This means extending, indeed radicalizing, the scope of the phenomenological reduction to the naturalization of social oppression in experience; and this is what I have called “critical phenomenology.” Referring back to the commonality of the field of sense, it might be objected that some omission or forgetting will always accompany the institution of the field and is part of its historically contingent development. It is in this sense that the phenomenological reduction was always incomplete for Merleau-Ponty (2012 [1945]: lxxvii). In the figure-ground structuring of the visual field, that which remains in the background frames, orients and relationally defines what is figured. That the background remains tacit, that it is not explicitly made sense of, precludes neither its affective sway nor its relational power.

But this is not the sense of normative exclusion or elision that I mean. To be precise, there are two forms of exclusion upon which the normativity of the perceptual field might be built, but that I would describe as *pathologies of the social* (to paraphrase Fanon 1967 [1952]: 10). What I mean to point to is not the structure of institution as such, but the pathological recalcitrance of institutions of oppression—racial and colonial formations, as well as sexual and gendering oppressions—in how they manage relationality, in their dependence on, forgetfulness of, and domination of others.

In the first exclusion, what is forgotten is not only one’s dependence on a social-historical horizon and on a cultural and linguistic milieu, but also on the materiality, time and bodies of others (e.g., maternal and carer bodies)—on the sociality that has accompanied and supported the development of one’s perception. It is this invisible “weight of the past” that institutes a particular way of perceiving as normative (Merleau-Ponty 2010 [2003]). But at the same time, there is a second exclusion: the exclusion of the non-familiar and “alien” other (e.g., the racialized other), whose difference may be represented as exotic or threatening, but whose abjection plays a constitutive role in how one comes to see. This corresponds to the structural elision of other ways of being and perceiving that do not “make sense” within the instituted field of sense. As I have argued elsewhere (Al-Saji 2014), the first exclusion institutes the level according to which I perceive based on the appropriation of the flesh of others to whom my attachment is rendered invisible (Frye 1983; Lugones 1996). The second means that even excluded others are obliquely and structurally inscribed within the perceptual field, as its “constitutive outside” (to use Judith Butler’s term, 1993). The “radical difference” of the other cannot be understood to mean absolute separation in this case, as if others were new lands to be discovered. Rather, those defined as “alien” are already relied on assumed within the workings of perception, even as they are relegated to its intolerable and unrecognized margins.

Institutions of oppression thus manage relational difference by subsuming it into homogeneous identity, into the sphere of the ego, on the one hand, and by abjecting it as inassimilable non-sense, radical alterity, on the other. These two forms of exclusion work together. This means that institutions of oppression suffer from an “affective ankylosis,” to use Fanon’s diagnosis (1967 [1952]: 121), a rigidity or lack of receptivity to otherness.



In the final section, I argue that phenomenology has generally addressed the first form of exclusion more adequately than the second, and I explore where in phenomenology we might find the means to remedy this.

### Critical Phenomenology and Hesitation

My question is, then, how to prevent phenomenology from becoming another “epistemology of ignorance” (Mills 2007), from re-naturalizing oppression to the perceptual and affective realms that it describes. Here the incompleteness of the phenomenological reduction can be redeployed as recommencement and hesitation. While it is possible to read Husserl as searching for a foundationalism that provides certainty, what we learn when we attend to his method is the need to renew, each time, the bracketing operation. I don’t think this is a failure on Husserl’s part. The phenomenological reduction is not a formula whose outcome can become a stable acquisition; we miss the import of the reduction if we take it to define a teleology. Instead, phenomenology should be understood as an effort of *re-orientation*, a conversion of perception, a way of attending differently (Ahmed 2006; Merleau-Ponty 1964a [1964] and 1968 [1964]; Oliver 2001; Ratcliffe 2012).

As Merleau-Ponty saw, the incompleteness of the phenomenological reduction can also be its virtue. This is not only because the experiences to which phenomenologists attend are singular and multiple, requiring a unique effort each time; nor simply because this effort unwinds in its performance, as naturalizing tendencies seep in. It is also because phenomenology seeks to hold together—and make palpable—both my belonging to the world and my estrangement from it; to dwell in the experience that it is seeking to describe; to keep it alive while excavating its structures. It is hence not simply an epistemological, even ontological, project, but also an affective one. This affect has often been described, following Eugen Fink, as “wonder” in the face of the world (cited in Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]: lxxvii), but it can also be anxiety (Sartre 1960 [1936]: 103; see also Carr 1999: 127–128), nausea or despair (Fanon 1967 [1952]: 112, 140).

This discomfort or unease—this hesitation—deepens with critical phenomenologies, where the phenomenological reduction serves not only to reveal one’s ties to the social world, but also the exclusions that structure one’s positionality and with which one may be complicit (Beauvoir 2010 [1949]; Fanon 1967 [1952]; Al-Saji 2014). The two forms of exclusion that I describe above can hence motivate two different critical orientations. First, a recuperative orientation: a revaluation and disclosure of both the structures of perception and their material, bodily, and temporal grounds. Both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty have addressed the structures of perception, not merely through static but also through genetic phenomenological accounts; that is, they have shown how sense arises within experience and not merely how sense is possible (Husserl 2001 [1966]; Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945] and 1968 [1964]). But this is not yet to address the generativity or relational dependency of perception (Steinbock 1995). The work of critically uncovering the debt of perception to other bodies, especially maternal and carer bodies, has been largely carried out by feminist theorists (whether or not they would call themselves phenomenologists). Luce Irigaray’s critique of Merleau-Ponty’s elision of the maternal body is a case in point (1993 [1984] and 2004).

The second exclusion can motivate a different critical orientation, however, one that has not always been easy for phenomenology to negotiate; for the second exclusion calls for a thick intersectional approach. By this, I do not mean simply adding together

axes of identity, as attributes in a list, to give an encumbered subject. I mean, rather, analyzing how gendering and racialization, for instance, are interlocking oppressions that may sometimes reinforce, sometimes occlude, and sometimes instrumentalize one another (see Chapters 10, 28, and 29 in this volume). That these cannot be understood as “pure” axes or attributes, and that they need to be known contextually and locally, leads me to suggest that feminist phenomenology might not always be primarily a phenomenology of gender (contra Oksala 2006). Or, less controversially, that if feminist phenomenology comes to experience with a predefined category of “gender,” then it risks missing the thick nexus of experience where *gendering* occurs in unrecognizable and entangled ways—where it cannot be thought without an understanding of its coloniality, its reliance on racialization, and its exclusion of other ways of being gendered.

Here we come full circle. For what is required of feminist phenomenology is not only structural analysis but also richly textured and fine-grained description—which listens, checks, and questions (Ortega 2006)—description so attentive that it can become transformative. By dwelling in and mining the affective tissue of intersubjective life, bodily experience can become the source of phenomenological questioning (Fanon 1967 [1952]: 232). Hence the practice of phenomenology as seen in the texts of critical phenomenologists of oppression, such as Beauvoir and Fanon: creating possibility by articulating experience anew, interrupting its naturalizing tendencies and making that experience hesitate. This is not the paralyzing hesitancy of “feminine” habits that Young described, but a hesitation that makes time for experience to be disclosed and re-oriented (Al-Saji 2014). I said, above, that phenomenology listens in on the dialogue of body and world. I should add that it participates in this dialogue, by making it audible and by opening up other ways for bodies to respond, locally and without predetermining what that response may be.

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### Further Reading

- Alcoff, Linda Martín (2000) “Phenomenology, Post-structuralism, and Feminist Theory on the Concept of Experience,” in Linda Fisher and Lester Embree (Eds.) *Feminist Phenomenology*, Dordrecht: Kluwer.
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- Weiss, Gail (2008) *Refiguring the Ordinary*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Young, Iris Marion (2005) *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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### Related Topics

Embodiment and feminist philosophy (Chapter 15); materiality: sex, gender, and what lies beneath (Chapter 16); psychoanalysis, subjectivity and feminism (Chapter 19); critical race theory, intersectionality, and feminist philosophy (Chapter 29).

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