The Activeness and Adaptability of Whiteness: Expanding Phenomenology's Account of Racial Identity

Phenomenology has been used numerous times in discussions of race. Yet despite the value of the approach—and the well-known phenomenologies of race done by Fanon, Gordon, Macey, Alcoff, and others—phenomenology has only rarely been used to dissect ‘whiteness.’ Much of the scholarly work on whiteness discusses it as an ideology, a product of social relations, or a set of institutionalized practices.[[1]](#endnote-1) Similarly, most of the work that examines race from a phenomenological perspective does not focus on the experience of whites, but instead discusses racial embodiment more broadly construed. Following the example of Sara Ahmed, I argue that it is illustrative to approach white experience from the perspective of phenomenology.[[2]](#endnote-2) My objective in doing this is not to validate the perspectives of whites who deny their own privilege, but to explain why whiteness is so difficult to ‘pin down’ and how it came by its particularly ‘sticky’ quality that makes it so hard to undermine. As I shall show, these facets of whiteness stem from the fact that whiteness—inasmuch as it is a perceivable phenomenon—has a flexible character because it is the product of a dialogical interaction between the subject and the world. Whiteness is not fixed, but can appear in many ways such that even being able to see it as harmful does not ensure one’s willingness to do something about it. The question this poses for the study of whiteness is why so many whites, even after being given evidence that racism works through the society they are a part of, nevertheless refuse to see whiteness. The claim that whiteness operates invisibly does not fully explain this phenomenon, as nothing in that theory necessitates that whites react with aversion when their privilege is pointed out. That whiteness is difficult for whites to see does not mean they will resist seeing it when its presence is revealed. The lived aspect of the white experience of whiteness needs to be explained in more detail if we are to understand this phenomenon. Just as Linda Martin Alcoff resists the claim that “race is no more real than phlogiston or witchcraft”[[3]](#endnote-3) we need to resist the conclusion that whiteness is experienced simply as something invisible.

To explore the nature of whiteness, I will begin by reviewing the phenomenologies of race carried out by Sarah Ahmed and Linda Martin Alcoff. As I will show, while Ahmed and Alcoff make important observations about how race, and whiteness in particular, orients us within the world, they both focus on the subject’s role in creating race, overlooking the active role of the world. I will argue that a better account of racial prejudice can be given if we accept that, even in the phenomenological perspective, there are contingent yet real processes through which the world contributes to the construction of race. To prove this point, I will draw from the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty the concept of horizons and the fact that, through our perception, we are always called to complete the world. While both Ahmed and Alcoff draw from the work of Merleau-Ponty, they underplay the implications of these ideas. I argue that by incorporating these neglected aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, a significantly different phenomenological understanding of whiteness results. Using this new conception of whiteness, I will discuss the work of other theorists of whiteness, such as Garner, Mahoney, and Applebaum. My principle claim is that we can understand how whiteness can be described in so many—sometimes conflicting—terms if we understand that whiteness both constructs the world and is a construction found within the world.

**Phenomenologies of Race**

For this paper, I will focus on Linda Martin Alcoff’s “Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment” and Sarah Ahmed’s “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” referring to other works as needed. Both of these papers give strong, though somewhat different, accounts of how racial experiences are produced, and by exploring these accounts first I will be in a better position to elaborate my own theory. In addition, as Ahmed’s essay is one of the few phenomenological accounts of whiteness, my view picks up in part where hers leaves off. While the specifics of Ahmed’s and Alcoff’s theories differ, they both highlight two of the same points: that phenomenology is an important method for investigating race, and that race orients us within the world. I will begin by explaining each of these points, emphasizing the similarities and differences between Alcoff and Ahmed.

Both Sarah Ahmed and Linda Martin Alcoff begin their phenomenologies of race with a discussion of why it is important to use phenomenology. Ahmed, for instance, discusses the danger that theorists of whiteness constantly wrestle with—that the examination of whiteness will reify whiteness into a fixed, stable object. Citing the concerns of Dyer, Fine, Weiss, and Powell, she asks “Could whiteness studies produce an attachment to whiteness by holding it in place as an object?”[[4]](#endnote-4) Ahmed believes a provisional solution to this problem can be found through phenomenology, which, instead of looking at the effect that the critique of whiteness has on whiteness, looks at how whiteness becomes fixed in the process of becoming ‘worldly.’ This solution does not prevent whiteness from becoming reified, but sees that reification as the result of the production of whiteness rather than of the critique of it. Phenomenology is useful for its ability to describe “what whiteness is doing” rather than “what we are doing to whiteness.”[[5]](#endnote-5) In addition, Ahmed notes, phenomenology is valuable for its ability to craft a return to the body in order to see how the body ‘takes up’ space. By viewing whiteness using a phenomenological method, she claims that we can understand how whiteness, inasmuch as it creates the world we experience, leads to certain bodies becoming more noticeable than others.[[6]](#endnote-6) It is this phenomenon that ensures privilege for white bodies is the norm. Ahmed’s account of how white bodies function is not discoverable when whiteness is treated as an ideology or social institution. By contrast, Alcoff says the value of phenomenology lies in its ability to present race as lived, thus resisting both a facile nominalism that presents race as a phantasm and a liberal universalism that claims there is an absolute truth about race. The problem faced by a nominalist account of race is that it cannot explain the extraordinary power that race has over public life. While race may not map on to any natural kinds, many aspects of social life are affected by it. As Alcoff says, “Race may not correlate with clinal variations, but it persistently correlates with a statistically overwhelming significance in wage levels, employment levels, poverty levels, and the likelihood of incarceration.”[[7]](#endnote-7) To stop an analysis of race with the statement that race is a fiction leaves unexplained how race affects so many parts of our lives. Similarly, liberal universalism runs into trouble when it tries to provide a coherent typology to race, as no explanation of racial categories is able to fully categorize the human species without paradox. Alcoff illustrates this when she points out how visible difference—the beginning point for a typology of race, according to Cornel West and David Theo Goldberg[[8]](#endnote-8)—has consistently failed to explain differences in behavior, moral capacity, intelligence, and cultural achievement.[[9]](#endnote-9) The only consistent perspective from which to begin an analysis of race is one which treats race as “socially constructed, historically malleable, culturally contextual, and produced through learned perceptual practice,”[[10]](#endnote-10) while one of the most effective ways of carrying out such an analysis is by looking at the everyday micro-processes that lead to the formation of the subject. This, Alcoff states, is the phenomenological perspective.

In addition to showing how race is ‘lived,’ both Ahmed and Alcoff agree that phenomenology reveals how race orients one in the world. According to Ahmed, this means that one’s whiteness unfolds the world, or that it puts certain objects within reach while keeping others out of it. Drawing from Husserl, Ahmed says that one is oriented through the position one occupies within the world, and one both shapes and is shaped by the world one encounters.[[11]](#endnote-11) Whiteness situates one in the world, putting certain objects within reach, and enabling certain actions while preventing others. Ahmed is clear that by ‘object’ she does not refer simply to physical things, but also to “styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, habits.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Yet as an orientation, whiteness is not immediately obvious. We don’t notice it as it ‘lags behind’ the action. What this means is that whiteness enables our focusing on certain objects while always remaining on the periphery of our consciousness, much the same way that we often do not think about our height despite the fact that it can be the difference between seeing a flight of stairs as a simple jaunt or as a massive obstacle. Similarly, whiteness affects how we see the world as it directs us in it, and we become so accustomed to the way we normally see the world that we forget how our perceptions are constantly being influenced by our unique position. In saying this, Ahmed draws from Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the habit body, a theory which says that we act using a corporeal schema, and that this schema remains unseen while at the same time it directs our bodies to relate to the world in a customary way.[[13]](#endnote-13) As Ahmed says, “White bodies are habitual insofar as they ‘trail behind’ actions: they do not get ‘stressed’ in their encounters with objects or others, as their whiteness ‘goes unnoticed’.”[[14]](#endnote-14) An example of how whiteness can orient us yet lag behind comes from Tim Wise, who points out how many of the biographies of Andrew Jackson ignore or paint as minor moral lapses the myriad offenses against indigenous peoples and peoples of African descent. As Wise puts it, “Anything that makes us feel proud can be said, facts notwithstanding. Anything that reminds us of the not-so-noble pursuits of our forefathers…gets dumped down the national memory hole.”[[15]](#endnote-15) Whiteness oriented Jackson’s biographers towards his life in such a way that the actions Jackson took towards non-whites became less noteworthy. That so many examples of this can be found within classrooms and history books is not due to the fact that many whites have strongly felt and conscious animus against non-whites, but that the discrimination against non-whites manifests itself on the level of everyday habits as well as overt decisions.

Alcoff argues that it is our perceptual practices which are primarily responsible for creating a racial orientation. The body is a “dynamic material domain, not just because it can be ‘seen’ differently, but because the materiality of the body is, as Grosz puts it, volatile…”[[16]](#endnote-16) Thus perceiving the body is not just a matter of grouping extant visible differences according to different rules, but a matter of creating the field of visible difference in countless ways. Or, as Alcoff puts this, “the process by which human bodies are differentiated and categorized by type is a process preceded by racism.”[[17]](#endnote-17) While nominalists of race are correct that we are culturally trained to pick out certain visible differences over others[[18]](#endnote-18), it is also true that what is ‘real’ or ‘material’ is produced by cultural biases. An important counterpart to this theory is that these culturally-affected perceptual practices often go unnoticed such that we don’t realize the contingent nature of our perceptions. This allows whiteness to affect our encounter with the world without us recognizing its influence.[[19]](#endnote-19) Specifically, this happens through the development of habits that relieve us of the necessity of always interpreting every piece of sensory data that we receive. We become accustomed to passing over certain pieces of sensory data because we come to believe that we already know what they indicate. Merleau-Ponty points out how blind men become so familiar with certain pressures of their walking sticks on their hands that they no longer need to pause to consider what they mean, but by virtue of the habits they have formed already *know* what they mean.[[20]](#endnote-20) One’s perceptions can become racialized when the perceptual habits that individuals use to understand the world are affected by their culture, as a racist culture can train people to see the world through a racist lens. Because perceptions can be given a racial meaning we can experience race as something real despite the fact that it is not related to anything external. As Alcoff says,

This is why *race* must work through visible markers on the body, even if those visible markers are *made* visible through learned processes. Visible difference, which is materially present even if its meanings are not, can be used to signify or provide purported access to a subjectivity through observable, “natural” attitudes…[[21]](#endnote-21)

By tracing race back to visible difference; making these visible differences signify differences in behavior, intelligence, emotional composition, etc.;while remaining ignorant about how perception constitutes visible difference; race gains a feeling of immutability.

The idea that whiteness orients us in the world explains how white privilege can function without being noticed, as whiteness becomes part of the formation of the world rather than an experience one has within a neutral, objective world. Yet Ahmed’s and Alcoff’s accounts don’t fully explain other aspects of the racial experience. The white desire to always locate racism elsewhere seems almost willful inasmuch as many whites continually try to relocate responsibility even after significant biases are revealed. Additionally, whiteness does not just enable whites to do or see things in a way that that non-whites cannot. There is a vicious side to whiteness that can be seen in the practices whites have used towards black bodies throughout history. The phenomena of Southern slaveholders, the KKK, and numerous police forces throughout the United States illustrate how whiteness does not just manifest itself as privilege, but as a legitimate form of terror for non-whites.[[22]](#endnote-22) If whiteness is simply an orientation, how do we explain the active role whiteness seems to play not just in positioning whites within the world, but in attacking other racial groups? Whiteness does not simply create a privileged world for whites—it is also involved in degrading non-whites; subverting movements for social justice; and setting up institutions of hierarchy, oppression, and incarceration. The extent to which whites target non-whites for discriminatory treatment does not seem to be plausibly explained by tracing whiteness to a habit-body. The account of whiteness as orientation needs to be supplemented with an account of how whiteness operates within the world as well. As George Yancy says in *Look, a White*, “The importance of whiteness as a structural evil should not be reduced to a set of troublesome habits.”[[23]](#endnote-23) Though this paper does not treat whiteness structurally, I believe that phenomenology does reveal a wickedness to whiteness.

Before going further, it is necessary to discuss each author’s account of the production of whiteness.[[24]](#endnote-24) Ahmed argues that whiteness forms because of the spatial proximity of white bodies, a proximity which for Ahmed produces a form of directionality. The spatial proximity of white bodies does not correspond to perceived space, but is a function of their encounter with one another. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed describes the directionality whiteness shares as being ‘oriented around’, saying “To be oriented around something is not so much to take up that thing as to be taken up by something, such that one might even become what it is that is ‘around.’”[[25]](#endnote-25) She goes on to say that this does not naturalize any characteristics or orientations; instead, “things are shaped by their proximity to other things, whereby this proximity itself is inherited in the sense that it is the condition of our arrival into the world.”[[26]](#endnote-26) White bodies, by virtue of their being in contact, come to be seen as alike, and in doing so view bodies in another place as foreign. Ahmed is clear that it is not the space which causes whiteness any more than it is the bodies which express an innate whiteness. Rather, it is the context of the white bodies in a shared space which “develops” whiteness as a habitual way of doing things. Or, as Ahmed says, “In the case of race, we would say that bodies come to be seen as ‘alike’, as for instance ‘sharing whiteness’ as a ‘characteristic,’ as an effect of such proximities, where certain ‘things’ are already ‘in place’… Whiteness is inherited through the very placement of things.”[[27]](#endnote-27) By contrast, Alcoff describes race primarily as an experience, or a consciousness, formed through habitual perceptual practices. Her numerous examples—including Jack Kerouac’s encounter with a Denver street,[[28]](#endnote-28) Richard Rodriguez’s difficulty displaying ambition,[[29]](#endnote-29) and a graduate student of Alcoff’s discomfort teaching race theory[[30]](#endnote-30)—all emphasize race as something ‘felt’. Alcoff highlights the affective yet contingent dimension of race, which she traces back to the “structure of contemporary perception.”[[31]](#endnote-31) Our “body image,”[[32]](#endnote-32) in certain contexts, makes us feel race as both ‘real’ and ‘material’. For Alcoff, it is necessary to give these visible differences a material reality to keep race from becoming an “epiphenomenon of culture.”[[33]](#endnote-33) The racial prejudice in our society is, for Alcoff, an unfortunate consequence of how our perceptual processes produce race as an experience (which is subsequently naturalized). As Alcoff puts it in *Visible Identities*, “…racial consciousness works through learned practices and habits of visual discrimination and visible marks on the body.”[[34]](#endnote-34)

I agree with Ahmed and Alcoff that phenomenology provides a lived yet non-foundational account of race, and that whiteness operates as an orientation. For several reasons, however, I believe both accounts are unfinished. First, the notion of proximity fails to fully account for how whiteness forms and is passed along. If the claim is that one becomes oriented in similar ways as the bodies one encounters, then should not black bodies that are surrounded by whites become oriented in a similar way? While there is doubtless some truth to the claim that proximity yields shared habits, whiteness cannot simply be a product of this. White bodies and black bodies, even when they are in constant contact, will still be treated differently by society, and such dissimilar treatment seems likely to affect one’s development. Fanon says that a black man, when surrounded by whites, does not begin to take after whites but “encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema.”[[35]](#endnote-35) Despite his proximity, he is still isolated. If Ahmed’s claim is that it is only when similar bodies are grouped alongside one another that whiteness develops, this raises the question of how and why white skin color becomes the bodily characteristic which society focuses on. What led to skin color, of all the characteristics that people in proximity share, having its singular importance? Additionally, Ahmed’s explanation of whiteness as the product of proximity also does not explain the resilient quality of race as a form of privilege and hierarchy. Previous forms of privilege that could similarly be said to be the product of regular encounters (such as family name, one’s place of origin, and one’s religious affiliation) have all become less important as markers of status over time, while race is in some ways as salient today as it was in the past. Though people of many different races are living in closer proximity than ever before, the category of race seems to have not lost its prominence. Based on her discussions in *Queer Phenomenology*,Ahmed’s likely reply to these objections would be that there are “historical and racial dimensions” to the orientation of whiteness[[36]](#endnote-36) that get passed down along familial lines because of the proximity and contact that people who are related have.[[37]](#endnote-37) While this may go a ways towards explaining some of these objections, it still seems an unsatisfactory answer to the resilience of whiteness. More than the inertia of shared orientations seems to be at work.

Similarly, Alcoff’s focus on the body schema and racialized perceptual habits ignores the contributions the world makes to the experience of whiteness. Within Alcoff’s account, the world gives a context to the body schema and helps creates different racial experiences. Or, as Alcoff puts it, a black teacher discussing race in the classroom feels their race because “[Their] lived self is effectively dislodged when an already outlined but very different self appears to be operating in the same exact location.”[[38]](#endnote-38) Let’s focus on the notion of context operative in that example. The ‘world’ of the classroom discussing race brings into relief a sense of self already sketched out within the subject. One becomes aware of one’s body in a very different way than they were before, but this awareness of one’s raced body is traced back to a body image that the world reveals. This ‘making visible’ of a subjective orientation is one of the two ways that Alcoff describes the dialogical relationship between the subject and world. The other is contained in her claim that perceptual practices are “learned,”[[39]](#endnote-39) or that we are not born with any necessary orientation towards the world but develop one over time. Thus, the context provided by the world is one which both forms the body images that subjects work with and then throws these images into relief in the right circumstances. The question here is whether it is right to say whiteness is primarily something the subject adds to experience. The world is never absent from Alcoff’s account, but its contribution is indirect. It doesn’t add to the experience of whiteness itself, only to how the body image produces the experience of whiteness. I believe that this ignores how the world is tailored towards the production of whiteness, and how we contribute to such tailoring.

**Merleau-Ponty and the Horizons of the World**

I have tried to illustrate thus far that, while Alcoff’s and Ahmed’s work regarding the production of race is important, they nonetheless underemphasize the way in which the world directly and actively contributes to the experience of whiteness. Whiteness is seen primarily as an orientation taken by the subject which is produced through a number of factors. My claim is that the context of the world does not just produce racial perceptions by helping to create and then draw out racial body images contained within the subject, but also by contributing directly to the experience of whiteness. Whiteness is congealed not just into the habits and schemas the subject uses to approach the world, but into the ways in which the world beckons to the subject. The basis for this claim comes from Merleau-Ponty’s claim—made throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception*—that perception is a joint act of the world and the body. “External perception and the perception of one’s own body vary in conjunction because they are the two facets of one and the same act,”[[40]](#endnote-40) he says. Though neither Ahmed nor Alcoff ignore this fact (they each emphasize that race is “non-foundationalist”[[41]](#endnote-41) and constructed[[42]](#endnote-42)), do their accounts of how racial perception is a joint act properly explain the world’s role? To answer this question it is necessary to go back to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “horizon,” which is brought in to illustrate problems with non-phenomenological accounts of perception. Instead of positing either a transcendental world or subject, Merleau-Ponty says that both the perceived world and the perceiving subject originate from the act of perception. Prior to this act, there is no difference between the world and the subject, only an indeterminate “phenomenal field”[[43]](#endnote-43) lacking delineation. In every act of perception, two forces produce what is seen. The first is the subject’s gaze, which ‘anchors’ itself on the object and allows the subject to ‘plunge’ into it in such way that the object will reveal part of itself to the subject.[[44]](#endnote-44) The second is the horizon, which is the background of the object being explored. As Merleau-Ponty puts it,

the horizon, then, is what guarantees the identity of the object throughout the exploration; it is the correlative of the impending power which my gaze retains over the objects which it has just surveyed, and which it already has over the fresh details which it is about to discover.[[45]](#endnote-45)

The use of the term “correlative” is revealing, for it suggests that the indeterminate horizon is doing just as much work producing the object being perceived as the subject’s gaze.

Put within the context of race, this implies that the perception of race is just as much the product of the world as the orientation the subject has to it. The horizon orients objects for us as much as our body schema does, and just like our body schema remains out of sight as we focus on the object in front of us.[[46]](#endnote-46) This mutual exchange is true not just for our perceptions of objects, but of subjects too. After describing how our bodily orientation produces external experience, Merleau-Ponty says “Conversely, a certain form of external experience implies and produces a certain consciousness of one’s own body.”[[47]](#endnote-47) There are worldly schemas that produce our experience of our body, though not in any deterministic or causal way. Instead, the perceptual field is like “a surface in contact with the world, a permanent rootedness in it, and…the world ceaselessly assails and beleaguers subjectivity as waves wash round a wreck on the shore.”[[48]](#endnote-48) The important question for this project is whether Ahmed’s and Alcoff’s descriptions are detailed enough to capture the role Merleau-Ponty gives to the world in his account. Both Ahmed and Alcoff claim that the world helps to form one’s racial body schema. This is certainly true, and fits with Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, but Merleau-Ponty is clear that the horizons of the world play a role in every act of perception, not just in producing the subject’s gaze. The body image, like the gaze, orients the subject, and as such cannot play the role horizons play in perception. Neither is it enough to say that the world provides a context that draws out an already outlined body schema. This fails to provide the horizons of the world with a power “correlative” to that of the gaze, nor does it capture the active role the world plays in ‘assailing and beleaguering’ subjectivity. For these criteria to be met, there must be schemas of whiteness implicit in the world that compare with the body schemas found in the subject, and the experience of whiteness must be a collaborative encounter between the two of them. I believe this is the best reading of Merleau-Ponty’s claim that objects in the world “call” to us.[[49]](#endnote-49) Fred Evans illustrates this point well in *The Multivoiced Body*, saying

Perception is never a state; it is always an ongoing activity with momentary resting places. When we perceive an object, we draw together the meaning diffused throughout it; at the same time, the object solicits and draws together our intentions in its direction...Both subjects and objects are what they are in relation to the horizon, and the horizon cannot be a horizon without objects as their foreground and without subjects having a perspective upon those objects.[[50]](#endnote-50)

I want to emphasize, like Alcoff and Ahmed, that this account of whiteness in no way naturalizes it. Saying that race is congealed into the horizons of the world does not give race any necessary material reality, since materiality is an outcome of the act of perception. Nor does it make race a part of the indeterminate phenomenal field that precedes perception, since nothing can be said about that field prior to the act of perception. Like the body schemas Ahmed and Alcoff discuss, the horizons of the world are changeable and open. In sum,the act of perception creates a dynamic situation, whereby perceivers and perceived find themselves constantly shifting in relation to one another and with regard to the world as a whole. It is this dynamism which gives whiteness its enduring and resilient quality, as it is constantly destroyed and recreated anew in our ongoing interactions in the world.

There are several significant consequences of understanding whiteness in this way. First, it puts me at odds with a couple of the claims that Ahmed makes in her phenomenology, such as her claims that whiteness is not a “reachable object”[[51]](#endnote-51) or an “ontological force”[[52]](#endnote-52) in the world. As I argue above, there is a pre-objective and non-foundational form of whiteness found in the horizons of the world. It appears in the way the natural and social world are organized such that certain horizons appear behind the things being perceived. These horizons call forth and complete the already partially completed orientations the body has to the world. Though the schemas of whiteness found in the horizons of the world are not themselves reachable objects or ontological forces, whiteness itself can be perceived as either depending on how the horizons of the world are completed. This is what I take Merleau-Ponty to mean when he says the social world forms either through the way “an intention, a thought, or a project can detach themselves from the personal subject and become visible outside him…”[[53]](#endnote-53) or through the annexation of natural objects into a world of cultural meaning.[[54]](#endnote-54) Whiteness can be made into an object or force depending on how the indeterminate field is taken up and completed in the act of perception. White skin can play an active role in the world, affecting how resources are distributed, the relationships one has with others, and the degree to which one supports or engages in practices that target other races. That race is a reachable object seems clear from the fact that people do focus on their race and how well they are ‘performing’ it (through their clothes, their language, their mannerisms, and so forth). And inasmuch as whiteness operates not just through individuals, but through institutions, practices, and policies,[[55]](#endnote-55) it seems clear we should not view whiteness simply as a property of subjects (i.e. their habit body) but as an ontological force within the perceived world that can be seen when the subject-object dialogue is carried out in the right way. That whiteness can be an ontological force also puts me at odds with Alcoff, who stops her phenomenology with the claim that race is a culturally contingent perception that results from our perceptual practices. It plays no direct, active role in the world, although it can lead to others having a destabilized body image.[[56]](#endnote-56) If we see whiteness, qua ontological force, as the result of a dialogical interaction with the world, then we are reducing it to neither. The force of whiteness is not wholly cultural, nor is it natural. It is the product of both the subject and the world through their engagement with one another.

I believe this phenomenological account of whiteness is preferable to one that sees race primarily an orientation towards the world because it allows for more dialogue with other perspectives on whiteness. In my account, whiteness is not primarily the product of the body image, but the joint product of the body image and horizons of the world in every act of perception. This makes room for non-subjective accounts of race such as those found in the work of Arnold Farr (who argues that racism functions through ideologies and a racialized ‘social consciousness’)[[57]](#endnote-57), Steve Garner (who sees white supremacy in juridico-political, economic, and metaphysical domains) [[58]](#endnote-58), and Chris Cuomo (who sees cracks in the “systems and ideologies” of white supremacy).[[59]](#endnote-59) The pre-objective forms of the ideologies, laws, and systems such theorists study create horizons that are more inclined to produce ‘white’ perceptions when they encounter the white body schema. Yet none of these things produce whiteness alone, as the subject contributes to every perception of whiteness. Lewis Gordon reveals the connection between institutional white supremacy and phenomenology in *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, saying

We call [institutional bad faith] weak simply because it expresses itself in the system of beliefs manifested by people in their everyday activities, their folkways and mores, and because such a system’s maintenance and perpetuation depend on a collectivity of choices that may or may not be efforts to hide from responsibility.[[60]](#endnote-60)

We are never entirely determined by behaviors, habits, and institutions, but we come across them as a limitation which seemingly affects our freedom. This is why giving institutional accounts of racism is important even if it doesn’t show how race forms in perception; they reveal problems with our current system which we can address.[[61]](#endnote-61)

Additionally, my phenomenology of race provides a more comprehensive account of what whiteness is. It is not just an orientation that leads to certain experiences, but a way in which congealed habits found within both the indeterminate subject and world meet to produce perceptions. Whiteness, as we come across it, is a product of how we are oriented towards the world and how the world orients us in *every* act of perception. There is significant value in this more comprehensive understanding, for it helps answer questions about race which scholars have been debating. For example, Robert Benasconi asks why blacks became invisible to white society in the public realm.[[62]](#endnote-62) While leaving the ultimate answer to that question open, Bernasconi provides a provisional answer in saying that the invisibility of blacks could “protect [whites] from encountering a point of view that conflicted with their own self-understanding.”[[63]](#endnote-63) There are certainly good reasons for believing this to be the case, but I believe a more comprehensive answer can be given if we expand Bernasconi’s analysis to show how institutions, systems, beliefs, etc. (in their pre-objective form as horizons) were themselves directly involved in obscuring blacks. They, too, resisted being constituted as non-white. By giving the world an active role in every act of perception, we are better able to account for the thoroughness with which whiteness was able to dominate the world.

**The Different Aspects of Whiteness**

To sum up what I have said so far, there are numerous, overlapping ways whiteness gets produced. First, there are ways in which the world and the subject form each other, such that no orientations or schemas are permanent but yet some do persist over time. Second, in each act of perception there are ways the subject’s orientation is activated to produce racialized experiences. Both of these are recognized and described by Ahmed and Alcoff, albeit in different ways. The final way whiteness gets produced is through the world’s contribution, via its horizons, to each act of perception. The point of laying all this out is to clarify a possible ambiguity in the essay thus far, which is whether it is the subject or whiteness itself which produces ‘white’ perceptions. The answer is that the pre-objective subject (the oriented body) and pre-objective world (horizons), through their encounter, both produce them. The world, via its pre-objective ‘white’ horizons, plays a direct role in producing whiteness, and depending on the subject-world encounter whiteness can appear in many different ways. Whiteness is thus both active and adaptable. A good description of how this works can be found in the work of Michael Monahan, who sees ‘epistemologies of ignorance’ as operative in the production of whiteness.[[64]](#endnote-64)

To further illustrate this point, I want to discuss some of the ways whiteness can be seen as active and adaptable. In order to focus my discussion, I will concentrate on how white individuals experience whiteness. This requires seeing whiteness not just as an orientation, but also as a potential appearance in the world. That whiteness can and does appear in the world should be clear when we combine what Merleau-Ponty says with the analyses of whiteness given by other scholars. The openness of our perceptions means it is theoretically possible for whiteness to be completely absent from our perceptions, or it can appear in a variety of ways. In saying that whiteness can appear in different ways, I am not just saying that its visible appearance changes, as it is possible to perceive whiteness as an affective, economic, or political force, among many other things. For instance, Judith Butler brings in affectivity in her discussion of how Rodney King’s gestures created a sense of paranoia amongst the white police officers and jurors[[65]](#endnote-65); Peggy McIntosh perceives whiteness at work in economics inasmuch as she believes her white skin color can be counted upon to help her when making purchases;[[66]](#endnote-66) and Anna Stubblefield illustrates how whiteness plays a role in politics through the rules by which those in power declare the ‘feeble-minded’ to be racially impure.[[67]](#endnote-67) Inasmuch as whiteness can be seen in the world, we do not just want to understand how whiteness relates the subject to the world, but also how whiteness creates the world, and itself, through the process of perception. What is needed is a more comprehensive account of how whiteness creates the world, situates subjects within it, and how it lets itself appear.

To begin, let’s look at how whiteness normally completes the world such that it does not appear to itself. This I call the occlusive side of whiteness. Since whiteness can appear in the world, it seems inadequate to say that whiteness simply orients one in the world, as that elides over the fact that whiteness is directly subverting its appearance. Whiteness does not just lag behind, remaining just out of view, but leaps ahead too; it actively subverts attempts to grasp it, recognize it, or name it. There is a whole machinery at work in whiteness dedicated to the production of elisions, subversions, and inoculations to prevent the discovery of whiteness. White claims that racism is irrelevant or unimportant because “we’re all just human” or that “it has nothing to do with me,” the attachment of whiteness to jokes (such as how whites dance and dress), and a whole culture built around the non-recognition of whites as a group, indicate more than a passive orientation in the world, but an active resistance to encountering whiteness as it functions as well. In essence, whiteness does not just provide a basic orientation, but directly steers whites through a virtual minefield of possible situations in which they might be required to recognize themselves, and in doing so it occludes itself from view. It does this not just by creating a white subject unwilling to recognize their whiteness, but a world for that white subject where whiteness is prevented from appearing. Shannon Sullivan articulates this point well in saying

It instead is that, due to the constitutive role of habit, in a raced and racist world one’s race indeed has the status of ontology…[T]he face that people are not always consciously aware of the racial characteristics of the racial characteristics of their lived experience—or, in the case of many white people, never becomes consciously aware of their race—does not mean that human existence in a raced world is pre-racial or race neutral.[[68]](#endnote-68)

Sullivan also indicates that “habit cannot be separated from its environment” inasmuch as habits and the world influence each other.[[69]](#endnote-69) The only addition I would make to Sullivan’s account of occlusion is that it is not just subjects who have habits, but the world as well. The way in which perception pulls together and gives definition to objects, the language used to describe what is seen, and the position the white subject feels they occupy, all contribute to the obliteration of whiteness from the lived world. Malcolm X provides an example of this at the end of his autobiography when he points to the white individuals who want to join his organization. While commending their wish to address racism, he believes such actions are indicative of an unwillingness to confront their whiteness, saying “I have these very deep feelings that these whites who want to join black organizations are really just taking the escapist way to salve their consciences.”[[70]](#endnote-70) While the whites Malcolm refers to see racism as a problem, they do not see how their whiteness contributes to it—their perceptual practices hid it from view.

Occlusion is how whiteness functions on an everyday level. But as perceptions can be completed in many ways, it is possible to make whiteness a perceived phenomenon. Whiteness is not destined to always remain in the background, just as one can become aware of how one’s embodiment affects one’s perceptions. A white individual can, with difficulty, see the workings of whiteness in her or his own life, or can be thrown back on his or her own race by catching themselves inadvertently doing or thinking something racist. When this happens, one does not simply see another part of the system of whiteness, but rather whiteness as a phenomenon becomes visible differently. The entirety of whiteness is schematized alternatively, as the subject and world conspire to complete whiteness in another way. Whiteness qua invisible is destroyed, and whiteness qua visible is produced. When whiteness is confronted, willingly or not, it is often revealed in two ways—as malignant towards the world (and non-whites in particular) and as autoimmune towards itself. What this means is that whites who see whiteness often understand the harm it causes, but are unwilling to see how their own whiteness contributes to that harm. Beginning with malignancy, if one manages to cast off the shadows hiding whiteness from view, the primary expression of whiteness in regards to other races is as a malevolency, or an evil that strives for control and oppression. Steve Garner’s examination of the systematic functioning of whiteness characterizes it as a type of terrorism, or an exertion of power over others[[71]](#endnote-71), while Charles Mills identifies six dimensions (such as economics and the somatic) in which whiteness expresses its supremacy.[[72]](#endnote-72) Both thinkers do an excellent job showing how whiteness acts as malignant towards non-whites, with Garner going talking about how institutional practices like housing loans and income give power over blacks to whites,[[73]](#endnote-73) and Mills discussing how politics marginalizes the concerns of minorities by treating issues of race as apolitical.[[74]](#endnote-74) Such critiques are important as they show how whiteness constructs oppressive worlds, systems, and environments, maintaining its supremacy by dominating and leeching off of others. What must be kept in mind during such critiques is that the ability to see and understand whiteness as Garner and Mills do requires that one’s perceptual practices, as well as the world’s horizons, be amenable to doing so. Just pointing to how the political or economic system privileges whites over blacks is insufficient to demonstrate whiteness if one is incapable of perceiving the system as a vehicle for whiteness. Joy Simmons makes this point in her essay “My White Self” where she discusses the anxiety she feels seeing black men on the street, saying

This is because when I see, I see through a historical-racial schema that has already coded the black male body as a site of danger. Let me be clear about this: I do not see these black male bodies *as if* they are dangerous. To me, as I walked towards the street corner, these men *were* the *embodiment* of danger as such. I do not have to wait and see what they will do before I judge them to be this or that way. I already *know*.[[75]](#endnote-75)

Revealing white supremacy must begin at the point when the world and subject are produced.

Yet even if this is done there is another obstacle, for many who are able to see whiteness as a problem still refuse to see themselves as contributors to it. This appearance of whiteness, which often accompanies the perception of whiteness as malignant, I call autoimmunity. In revealing its malignancy, whiteness often attacks its own presence in the vicinity of the white subject who sees it, the result being that whiteness is only ever revealed to be malignant somewhere else. Autoimmunity is not occlusion, as the former aims at the alleviation of recognition whereas the latter aims at the prevention of it. Autoimmunity attacks the presence of whiteness not to reach a point of racial equality, but to displace or relocate the problem of whiteness to a position of absence from the immediate world the white subject occupies. Robert Jensen illustrates autoimmunity in his book *The Heart of Whiteness* by relating how, at the end of a *Frontline* program that examined the cultural biases that blacks face on a daily basis, Diane Sawyer smiled towards the camera and told a lighthearted joke. Jensen says “Such is television news; everything has to end on an upbeat note. But there was something depraved about the ending…Isn’t there something sick about a white person delivering an indictment of white supremacy and then smiling? That’s white privilege too.”[[76]](#endnote-76) Diane Sawyer, while perfectly ready to admit that whiteness exists and is a problem, used humor to deflect the problem of whiteness away from her and her viewers. She was not willing to recognize that the problem was in the space she occupied. For her, it was there, on the street, where the news segment took place. In destroying the presence of whiteness in the immediate vicinity, what autoimmunity attacks is the bodily sensation of whiteness that even those who admit the problem of whiteness are often unaware of. Whites are kept from “feeling” their whiteness by producing the problem of whiteness as perpetually abstract. They feel no urgency to end the problem of whiteness as it is, for them, primarily a theoretical issue. Autoimmunity keeps whites from recognizing that the problem of whiteness is at work everywhere. Barbara Applebaum demonstrates this, saying

What I realized is that [my students] needed a concept of responsibility that differs from the blame/fault/causality model they were working with. They needed a model of responsibility that will help them to expose the subtle ways that whiteness works through them and that encourages a willingness to explore the blocks that inhibit the acknowledgement and thoughtful analysis of white complicity.[[77]](#endnote-77)

These different existences of whiteness are not different parts of whiteness, but rather whiteness in its different aspects. When manifested as autoimmunity, whiteness is not trying to destroy a part of itself, but the entirety of itself inasmuch as it is a phenomenon that can be “lived”.

In closing, let me echo the concerns Ahmed discussed at the beginning of her essay about the danger of critique holding whiteness in place. This is a danger because in holding it in place we will miss how whiteness escapes our critique, circles around, and uses our critique to perpetuate itself. Critique must be adaptive, as once a critique is made it becomes part of the dialogue through which the subject and object complete the world, allowing whiteness the opportunity to react to it. That whiteness can adapt in response to critique, and use such critiques to prevent true change, is a risk that must be perpetually guarded against. Phenomenology can help with this, as it does not try to describe what whiteness is, but only how it appears. Treating whiteness as dynamic, and approaching the task of critique with that in mind, is perhaps the only way to ensure that our response to the evils of whiteness will be as resilient as whiteness has proven itself to be.

1. Excellent examples of the first can be found in Charles Mills, “Non-Cartesian Sums,” in *Blackness Visible* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Arnold Farr, “Whiteness Visible,” in *What White Looks Like*, ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2004); and Chris Cuomo, “White and Cracking Up,” in *White on White/Black on* Black, ed. George Yancy (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005). Examples of the second can be found in Martha Mahoney, “The Social Construction of Whiteness” in *Critical White Studies* ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stephanic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997) and Steve Garner, *Whiteness: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2007). An example of the third can be found in Anna Stubblefield, “’Beyond the Pale,’” *Hypatia* 22 (2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Sarah Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory*, 8 (2007): 150 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Linda Martin Alcoff, “Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment” in *Race* Ed. Robert Bernasconi (Blackwell; Malden, 2001), 267 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 149 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 150 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 150 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Alcoff, “Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 269 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Cultures: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993) and Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Alcoff, “Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 269 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 271 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 152 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 154 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 164 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 156 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Tim Wise, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*, (Brooklyn: Softskull Press, 2008), 68 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Alcoff, “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 272 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 272 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 275 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 275 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 176 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Alcoff, “Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 279 [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. I should note that, while I am using spectacular (in the sense of being spectacle) examples to make my point, I do not wish to imply that it is only groups like the KKK that manifest whiteness as terror. Such terror can be manifested on a more systematic and everyday level as well, as others have noted (for one example, see Zeus Leonardo, *Race, Whiteness, Education* [New York: Routledge, 2009], 85-88.) [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. George Yancy, *Look a White!* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Alcoff’s article is on how race, not whiteness is produced. That said, it is clear that her account of how race is produced includes whiteness, inasmuch as she goes over several examples drawn from the experiences of whites. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, (London: Duke University Press, 2006), 116 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 124 [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Alcoff, “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 274 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 278 [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 280 [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 275 [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 274 [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 279. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 196 [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 1952), 91. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 110 [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 123 [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Alcoff, “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 280 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 275 [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 237 [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Alcoff, “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 272 [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 152 [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 62 [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., 78 [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., 78 [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 79 [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., 238-9 [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid., 240-1 [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., 423 [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Fred Evans, *Multivoiced Body: Society and Communication in the Age of Diversity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 98-99 [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 154 [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid., 159 [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 406 [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid., 412 [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Many intellectuals and activists have noted the racial bias inherent within institutions like prisons, college admissions practices, and policies regarding voting. For examples, see Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), Patricia William’s column “The Latest Affirmative Action Decision Isn’t Just About Race” (*The Nation*, May 19, 2014, http://www.thenation.com/article/latest-affirmative-action-decision-isnt-just-about-race/), and Gary Younge’s column “On the Voting Rights Act, the colour-blind have been led by the blind” (*The Guardian*, June 25, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/25/voting-rights-act-supreme-court). [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Alcoff, “Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 274-5 [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Arnold Farr, “Whiteness Visible: Enlightenment Racism and the Structure of Racialized Consciousness” in *What White Looks Like*, ed. George Yancy pg 154 [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Steve Garner, *Whiteness: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 24 [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Chris Cuomo, “White and Cracking Up” in *White on White/Black on Black*, ed. George Yancy, pg 30 [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1995), 47 [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Gordon talks about authenticity and good faith not as a state, but a form of constant’self-recovery’ through which one’s bad faith is revealed. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism,* 60-61. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Robert Bernasconi “The Invisibility of Racial Minorities in the Public Realm of Appearances” in *Race* ed. Bernasconi (Blackwell; Malden, 2001), 286. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid., 295 [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Michael Monahan, “The Concept of Prilege: A Critical Appraisal” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 2014 33(1), 79 [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Butler, “Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia” in *Reading Rodney King: Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Goodings-William (Routledge; New York, 1993), 16 [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies” in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* ed. Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic (Temple University Press; Philadelphia, 1997), 293. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Anna Stubblefield, “’Beyond the Pale’: Tainted Whiteness, Cognitive Disability, and Eugenic Steralization” in *Hypatia: A Journal of Femninist Philosophy*, 22 (2007), 178-9 [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 32 [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid., 2 [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: as told to Alex Haley* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964), 383 [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Steve Garner, *Whiteness: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 14 [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Charles Mills, “White Supremacy” in *A Companion to African-American Philosophy*, ed. Tommy Lott and John Pittman (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 269 [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Garner, *Whiteness: An Introduction*, 16-17 [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Mills, “White Supremacy,” 272 [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Joy Simmons, “My White Self” in *APA Newsletters* (Vol 06, No 2; 2007), 3 [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Robert Jensen, *The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism, and White Privilege* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2005), 11 [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Barbara Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good: White Complicity, White Moral Responsibility, and Social Justice Pedagogy* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)