

# APA Newsletters

Volume 02, Number 2

Spring 2003

## NEWSLETTER ON ASIAN AND ASIAN-AMERICAN PHILOSOPHERS AND PHILOSOPHY

ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY: OTHER BORDERS  
AND OTHER BODIES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF RACE

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION, CRAIG K. IHARA & DAVID HAEKWON KIM

### ARTICLES

GARY Y. OKIHIRO

"Safeguarding Democracy: Asian Americans and War"

RONALD R. SUNDSTROM

"Falling into the Olongapo River"

GARY MAR

"What Does Asian American Studies Have to Do with Philosophy?"

DAVID HAEKWON KIM

"Orientalism and America Enlarged"

EMILY S. LEE

"The Meaning of the Visible Differences of the Body"

TOMMY LOTT

"The Role of the Body in Asian-Pacific-American Panethnic Identity"



guarantees. It stands as a caution that in times of distress the shield of military necessity and national security must not be used to protect governmental actions from close scrutiny and accountability. It stands as a caution that in times of international hostility and antagonisms our institutions, legislative, executive and judicial, must be prepared to exercise their authority to protect all citizens from the petty fears and prejudices that are so easily aroused.<sup>19</sup>

What does Asian American studies have to do with philosophy? I have suggested three answers. First, in facing the disciplinary differences between Asian and Asian American studies, philosophers can come to grips with the Orientalist underpinnings of our conception of Western philosophy. Facing the fact that Orientalism in philosophy has historically supported colonialism and domination, Western philosophers would be better positioned to undertake the critical and timely self-reflection that could be a countervailing voice of reason in the current rhetoric about “crusades” and defeating Asian “axes of evil.”

Secondly, Asian American studies is a resource for expanding critical race theory beyond the usual Black/White paradigm. A critical examination of the Model Minority stereotype, for example, illustrates how all racisms are relational and inter-related. The long name of the committee under which this essay is sponsored testifies to the fact that the struggle against Orientalism, racism, and marginalization is both against and within the categories of Asian and Asian American philosophy. The naming and inclusion of Asian American philosophers and philosophies within an APA committee is itself a significant first step towards de-orientalizing philosophy.

Finally, the struggle of Asian American communities for their civil rights has resulted in an America that is more democratic for all Americans. A culturally competent philosophy that countenances the unduly neglected history of Asian American struggles — against discriminatory immigration laws, for equal protection under the law, and for reparations for violations of civil liberties — could be a timely and critical part of the “homeland defense” of democracy.

## Endnotes

1. David H. Kim, “Asian American Philosophers: Absence, Politics, and Identity” in Vrinda Dalmiya and Xinyan Jian, eds., *The American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Spring 2002): 25-28.
2. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
3. For a most nuanced discussion of Orientalisms, see Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991) and *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1996).
4. For more discussion see Sucheta Mazumdar, “Asian Studies and Asian American Studies: Re-Thinking Roots,” in *Asian Americans: Comparative and Global Perspectives*, edited by Shirley Hune, Hyung-Chan Kim, Stephen Fugita, and Amy Ling (Washington: Washington State University Press, 1991).
5. See Glenn Omatsu’s insightful article, “The ‘Four Prisons’ and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s.” In *Asian American Studies: A Reader*, edited by Jean Wu and Min Song. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000, pp. 164-196.
6. Shirley Hune, “Opening the American Mind and Body: The Role of Asian American Studies,” *Change*, Nov/Dec 1989.
7. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).
8. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1840).

9. Bertrand Russell, “Chinese and Western Civilizations Contrasted,” from *The Problem of China* (1922) excerpted in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell* (1903-1959), edited by Robert E. Egner and Lester E. Denonn (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967): 552.

10. See Gary Okihiro’s insightful “Is Yellow Black or White?,” Chapter 2 of *Margins and Mainstream: Asians in American History* (Washington: Washington State University Press, 1994).

11. See, for example, Stacey Lee, *Unraveling the ‘Model Minority’ Stereotype: Listening to Asian American Youth*, (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia, 1996).

12. A recent issue of the *Amerasia Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2002), has a useful collection of articles by Mae Ngai, “The Legacy of Vincent Chin: A Twentieth Anniversary Commemoration,” Renee Tajima-Peña, “Fast Forward to History” on the award-winning documentary film *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1988), Jean Wu, “Teaching *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*—1991 and 2001,” Lisa Yun, “Domestic Terrorism: The Ideology of Division and the Power of Naming,” and Helen Zia’s “Eulogy for Mrs. Lily Chin (1920-2002).”

13. A careful examination of the language of this controversy is Dana Takagi’s *The Retreat from Race: Asian-American Admissions and Racial Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993).

14. Elaine Kim, “Home is Where the Han Is: A Korean American Perspective on the Los Angeles Upheavals.” In *Asian American Studies: A Reader*, edited by Jean Wu and Min Song. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000, pp. 270-289.

15. FBI Transcript FBI/004868-004950 dated March 7, 1999, which is available at [www.wenholee.org](http://www.wenholee.org).

16. Wen Ho Lee and Helen Zia, *My Country Versus Me: The First-Hand Account by the Los Alamos Scientist Who Was Falsely Accused of Being a Spy* (New York: Hyperion, 2001).

17. See the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium website at [www.NAPALC.org](http://www.NAPALC.org) under Anti-Asian Violence/Current Issues/Post September 11th Attacks.

18. Quoted in Roger Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993): 3-4.

19. Quoted in Roger Daniels, *op. cit.*, 100.

---

## Orientalism and America Enlarged

David Haekwon Kim

University of San Francisco

### Introduction: America as Accident

The distance between Europe and Cathay (China), going in a *westward* direction, was once believed to be the span of the Atlantic Ocean. Although it is well-known that Columbus set sail to lay hold of the Eastern side of Asia, it is worth dwelling on this commonplace for just a moment. Far from his point of departure and certainly from his imagined destination, Columbus came ashore in the Americas. But he believed the land to be South Asia – hence the early name “West Indies.” The so-called discovery of America, then, was an accident, an accident borne of Cathay fever and a colossal cartographical error. As we also know, though it fails to affect philosophy with due force, moral horrors followed upon this alleged discovery of a westerly route to Asia – genocide, displacement, slavery, coolie servitude, Jim Crow and lynchings.

In what follows, I discuss the completion of Columbus’ mission in the form of America’s imperial traversal of the Pacific and thereby America’s colonizing encounter with Asia. I will focus less on, say, gunboats setting course across the Pacific as Columbus did the Atlantic, than on the expansion of America itself, as a network of material and power relations, stretching out across this final ocean to occupy a formidable presence in Asia. This narrative is offered to complement and

fill out recent attempts by philosophers of race to reform or transform political philosophy. I begin with some general points about political narratives, then consider two contemporary Pacific gestalts, and conclude with some thoughts on American orientalism.

### Reformulating Our Narratives – Once and Then Again

The history of Western moral and political philosophy is replete with broad sociohistorical portraits or images, not just arguments, in attempts to advance or criticize philosophical positions. Philosophical arguments envision, presuppose, gain salience from, and more generally, are permeated and oriented by sociohistorical portraits. Think, for example, of the work done by rough societal characterizations in Plato's *Republic*, Hobbes' *Leviathan*, Rousseau's *Discourses*, Kant's *Anthropology*, and of course the work of Hegel and the immense Continental tradition that followed in his wake, from Marx to Heidegger to Foucault. American Pragmatists, like James and Dewey, were of course well-known not simply for their integration of argument and portraiture but their philosophical rationales for such integration. And various philosophers contend that some such portrait lies deeply embedded in the moral and political philosophy of the analytic tradition in general and, consequently, that its universalist or even merely culturally generalizable claims amount to disguised particularisms with attendant sociohistorical portraits.

This cursory review is offered simply to remind us that sociohistorical portraiture or imagery has played both substantive and contextual roles in philosophy. Political philosophy in particular aims to explain the basic structure of society and to clarify the normative features of social arrangements, both at an appropriately abstract level. Sociohistorical portraits then offer information and, more importantly, perspectival considerations that aid in the formulation of these abstract structural explanations and normative accounts. In addition, political philosophy, like ethics, admits of applied analysis, even if no one uses the expression "applied political philosophy." Sociohistorical portraits will clearly play a substantial role in such analyses. For example, Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* is aptly subtitled, *A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*.

One crucial element of these rough and ready portraits is the interrelated set of narratives of race-, culture-, and nation-building. In much of philosophy from the modern period onward, notions of race have been put to racist theoretical ends, or they have simply been ignored and take up a shadowy presence in characterizations of culture- and nation-building. Recently, however, some philosophers of race have followed the feminist model of centering gender in sociohistorical narratives and thereby the conceptual backdrop of arguments proper. Charles Mills, for example, has argued that when we foreground racial subordination and Western imperialism in standard narratives of culture- and nation-building, the overall portraits and the arguments with which they are thickly meshed must be significantly revised or altogether rejected. In the process of such revision or rejection, he argues that we will find the concept of white supremacy to be a powerful analytical lens through which we can identify configuring principles of the body politic. One of the chilling conclusions derived by Mills, and others working in Africana, indigenous, and generally third world theoretical traditions, is that racial subordination seems not to be a matter of akrasia on the part of historical and extant political structures so much as haunting conformity to their organizing principles.<sup>1</sup>

I endorse much of this revisionist work, and won't defend it here. More interesting for my purposes is how the classic sociohistorical portraits or images get transformed by such anti-racist critiques and how various components of such critiques are integrated with each other. Much attention has been paid to how American and European culture- and nation-building have been inextricably tied to anti-black racism. One popular trope used to consolidate these ideas is Paul Gilroy's notion of a Black Atlantic. This trope weaves together Atlantic cultures in a way that foregrounds the underside of American and European industrialization and nation-building: the forced transport and enslavement of Africans formed the basis of early American and European development.<sup>2</sup> When we include considerations from indigenous and Latin American philosophies, the portrait is fuller still because European and American nation-building also involved the genocidal displacement of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. These Black Atlantic, American Indian, and Latin American critiques of the classic political narratives are largely about events in early American modernity and their legacy. What has not yet been fully articulated in this critique "from below" is the rise to racial prominence of Asians and Pacific Islanders in late American modernity, beginning roughly in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when America began its slow ascent to global hegemony. Philosophy may one day transform its classic, and we might say "colorblind," sociohistorical portraits in light of the current consensus that has already been built at its theoretical (and political) margins. But even theoretical margins can have their own margins. Therefore, an account of Pacific racialization in late American modernity would contribute to a still fuller reformulation of our theoretical resources.

My discussion below of two gestalts is an attempt to aid in the task of sociohistorical reconstruction by focusing on the other great ocean. I will elaborate on Pacific racialization in American culture- and nation-building, in particular the racially configured enlargement of America in various respects beyond its California border.

### Two Gestalts

It's early January in Chicago, and, ahhh, wouldn't it be nice to sip a Banana Daiquiri on a sparkling beach with pure blue waters swirling about your feet? It would be lovelier still if you could enjoy this sort of R&R some place *different*, some place with *culture*. Whatever locations come to mind, it would take considerable effort, if this is even the right way to put it, *not* to think of Hawaii. There, you get not only sun and fun, but the opportunity to dine with a view to a volcano, tap to the beat of fire dancers, merge into a sea of diverse Asian and Pacific Islander faces, have an island beauty hoop your neck with a ring of flowers, and partake of a luau in a floral-printed shirt. Of course, this is a completely ordinary fantasy of Hawaii, and this Pacific state would be economically devastated without the tourism founded upon it.

But consider as well our ritual remembrance of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, both a spectacle of vulnerability and the moral door through which the U.S. entered WWII. Annually, December 7, the "Day of Infamy," is an occasion for patriotic meditation. The attack was so brazen and unexpected, over 2000 soldiers lost their lives, and the Pacific fleet was left very nearly crippled. And this was but the first episode in a remarkably vicious conflict whose savagery was unparalleled in concurrent U.S. combat in Germany and Italy. Historian John Dower has characterized the Pacific theater of WWII as a "War without Mercy" due in large part to the distinctly racialized animus permeating battlefield, command center, and civilian populace.<sup>3</sup> Arguably, the ritual of December

7 has a latent teleology that makes it more meaningful nationally than the heavily commercialized 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Specifically, remembrance is prelude to glorious judgment: America emancipated Europe and Asia from fascism, and so the nations of Atlantic and Pacific alike are yoked with a moral debt to their liberator.

We have here Hawaii as gestalt. On the one hand, it is a uniquely exotic state. On the other, it is a site of patriotic solemnity. It can take up a position as an alluring satellite to American culture, and it can supply bedrock upon which nationalist culture and sentiment are squarely built. Both other and familiar, Hawaii is caught in the grips of vacillating perspective. Importantly, neither exoticism nor patriotism would be intelligible without reference to Asians and Pacific Islanders, as culturally foreign denizens or enemies.

There is another and a very different kind of gestalt to consider. A typical occurrence on December 7 is a marathon of black and white war movies shown on television. They often show footage (narrated by that oddly familiar mid-century documentarian voice) of the battles of Midway, Guadalcanal, Okinawa, and Guam, and of the tragedy of the Bataan death march in the Philippines. These documentaries never clarify the importance of something that Americans now, as many decades ago, would find mostly insignificant, namely the fact that some of these islands and many neighboring ones have been for decades under U.S. formal jurisdiction or *de facto* control. Although Hawaii is culturally remote from the U.S. in the way described, it is formally or legally a state of the U.S., and in this sense perfectly constitutive of the country. Consequently, the patriotic ritual, described above, adds to and indeed presupposes, rather than facilitates, this type of inclusion within America's formal political borders. The annexation process began just prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, around the time of the Spanish-American War in 1898, the dawn of America as empire. And as a result of the Spanish-American War, the first U.S. war in Asia, America added to its legal holdings through its acquisition of the former colonies of Spain: the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico.

Well past WWII, however, Guam, other Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa (interesting name, no?), the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico hold the status of unincorporated territories. This status is problematic because it entails little of the self-rule of an autonomous nation, like Japan, and little of the benefits of an annexed state, like Hawaii. Guam, for example, was governed by the Department of the Navy until WWII, and now continues to have limited self-rule. For nearly a century, it has been retained as a crucial military bulwark in the outer perimeter of the U.S. security system. Although varying in legal and power relations with the U.S., a range of nations – including South Korea, Okinawa, the Philippines for nearly a century, Guam, and a range of islands formerly called Oceania (like many of the islands that appear in the WWII documentaries) – form a military rim around the Asian mainland, in particular China, and serve as the first line of defense on America's Pacific frontier. With just the sheer megatonnage of combative American stuff – soldiers, airplanes, tanks, battleships, missiles, and nuclear weaponry – surrounding the Eastern border of the Asian continent, America occupies, in a significant sense, both sides of the Pacific. It is hardly surprising then to find some people calling the Pacific Ocean an American lake. Parenthetically, it is interesting to consider what the world and America would have been like if China rimmed the California-Oregon-Washington coast with a similarly monolithic military presence. World history would have to have been radically different for Chinese spy planes to be regularly buzzing about the coast of Los Angeles and San Diego.

Guam too, then, is a gestalt. On the one hand, its being unincorporated – its being controlled by the American government without having full powers of self-representation and mutual influence – entails its being politically alien or alienated. On the other, its being a legal U.S. territory gives the teasing semblance of its being a Pacific state and, hence, a fully empowered constituent of the U.S. Because Guam is barred from full participation in the American political process, it is not politically proximal to or incorporated in America, like the 50 states. But Guam also takes up a position as a defensive satellite to the American security system such that an attack on Guam would be a violation of American, not an ally's, sovereignty. Unsurprisingly, for some time, the denizens of Guam, primarily Chamorros, were counted as nationals but not citizens of the U.S. Therefore, both political spectator to and legal extension of America, Guam too is caught in the grips of bifurcated perspective. As some have aptly put it, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the other unincorporated territories, are "foreign in a domestic sense."<sup>4</sup> But given what I have briefly described, they also could have said, "domestic in a foreign sense."

As noted earlier, Hawaii is culturally remote and nationally intimate. Guam is politically remote and legally proximal. Importantly, as with the Hawaii gestalt, the bivalent structure of the American politico-legal conception of Guam makes crucial reference to the Asian alien. These gestalts have a contemporary salience. They clarify on-going Pacific normative processes in which Asian Pacific Americans have been placed under a racial framework or matrix that distances or alienates this people culturally and politically. This framework, as a racializing perceptual and conceptual hub, attaches bodily phenotype to a range of first-order properties (like biological inferiority, aesthetic ugliness or pleasing peculiarity, passivity, femininity or emasculation, intransigent Asian nationalist loyalty), second-order properties (like a vaguely Oriental foreignness, which may be a conception that somehow compiles or finds a common denominator underlying various of the first-order properties), and even third-order properties (like unassimilability, which takes the second-order property, foreignness, to be, if not permanent, longstanding or difficult to uproot; and inscrutability, which takes foreignness to be mostly or permanently undecipherable). Of course, this racial template or graphic has a sociohistorical story behind it. And both the graphic and the story must be incorporated in a critical fashion into the standard philosophical narratives of culture- and nation-building, and integrated with the African, American Indian, and Latin American critiques of the same. Consideration of the two gestalts opens up some aspects of the Pacific story because the gestalts highlight various features of the hierarchical cultural and political internationalism that joins subordinated Asia to an enlarged and domineering America. One of the standard ways of "summing up" the Asian personality or social nature is to refer to a distinctive sort of foreignness (i.e., the second-order property noted earlier). Should it be any surprise then that the international story behind the Hawaii gestalt adverts to the exotic denizens of Hawaii and the alien enemies of Pearl Harbor, and the Guam gestalt points to the potential alien enemies that lie within striking distance of Guam and other garrison islands?

### **America's Orientalist Modernity**

The strategic location of Guam as a piece of military real estate and its correlative political impotence is likely to inspire little concern in the average U.S. citizen. I insist, however, that it is important in itself and as an example of America's attempt to contain or combat its 20<sup>th</sup> century nemesis, the Oriental.

Filipino insurgents, Japanese kamikazes, Korean and Chinese communist hordes, Vietnamese guerilla peasants – much of the monolithically violent aspects of American foreign policy have been Pacific-oriented. In addition, unlike incorporated and unincorporated territories, some nations, like South Korea, Okinawa, and the Philippines, fall within America’s “spheres of influence.” And throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Guam, like many of these other nodes in the security perimeter, has served America well. More explicitly, the combination of these gestalts reveals the operations of a larger phenomenon: America as empire.<sup>5</sup> The archipelago, of which Hawaii and Guam are but two elements, forms, in effect, an imperial penumbra. And its Pacific-Caribbean geography indicates unique features of American imperialism in contrast to European variants. Although America’s slaves were African, its colonies and semi-colonies were and continue to be located predominantly in Asia and Latin America. And we get a sense of America’s unique imperialist history in an early passage of the *locus classicus* of studies of orientalism, namely Edward Said’s *Orientalism*:

Americans will not feel quite the same about the Orient, which for them is much more likely to be associated very differently with the Far East (China and Japan mainly). Unlike the Americans, the French and the British – less so the Germans, Russians, Spanish, Portuguese, Italians, and Swiss – have had a long tradition of what I shall be calling *Orientalism*, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience ... In contrast, the American understanding of the Orient will seem considerably less dense, although our recent Japanese, Korean, and Indochinese adventures ought now to be creating a more sober, more realistic “Oriental” awareness. Moreover, the vastly expanded American political and economic role in the Near East (the Middle East) makes great claims on our understanding of that Orient.<sup>6</sup>

So far I have focused on tourism and warfare, exotic people and alien enemies. But I have been especially concerned with the *felt necessity for, and instability of, the outer perimeter* of the U.S. defense system. The manipulative arrangement of Asian and Oceanic nations and territories into a defensive array was formed and weathered by four massively-scaled wars in Asia. These considerations seem to underlie Said’s remarks about a “more sober, more realistic ‘Oriental’ awareness” generated by America’s various Asian “adventures.” But some of the best work in Asian-American Studies has focused on the inner side of the perimeter problem, that is, domestic racism. In the context of America enlarged, how has America proper engaged in racialization processes at, and internal to, its formal borders? Very many studies have shed light on the anti-Asian racial basis of 1) immigration exclusion laws (e.g., 1882 Chinese Exclusion Laws), 2) denials of naturalization rights (e.g., Ozawa v. U.S. in 1922), 3) denials of equal rights protection (e.g., Yick Wo v. Hopkins in 1886), 4) labor exploitation (from coolie indenture to railroad workers and farmers), and 5) cultural oppression and violence. One of the overall features of these domestic

measures taken together is the *efficacy of exclusion*. Until 1965, the U.S. government was extremely successful, not simply in excluding Asian immigrants from domestic empowerment and enfranchisement, but more basically in limiting the very number of Asian immigrants to an extremely miniscule percentage of the population. As a result, the “Negro problem” was far more provocative on the domestic front – though of course the “Oriental problem” has been far more riveting on the foreign policy front.

Although this is not the place to offer an adequately full discussion, the felt necessity for and instability of the outer defense perimeter, and the domestic efficacy of exclusion, have a common root in the materially exploitative relation that America has had with Asia. This is why America began its imperial ascent in taking over colonies from a fading Spanish empire, why the politico-economic rivalry of the major powers of the Cold War was played out so violently in Asia, and why for some time Japan has been a dangerous “success story” in Asian capitalism. What I have offered in the foregoing are some very general ways of understanding America enlarged. Asian-American Studies has typically conceptualized Asian America in terms of a diasporic movement from Asia to America. This is a sound way of understanding its subject matter. But if the foregoing is coherent, then we can also understand Asian America in terms of America expanding across its “lake.” To view these matters in terms of diaspora, Asians coming to America, or in terms of imperialism, America going to and residing in Asia, suggests that America too admits of gestalt interpretation. This interstitial character reveals that any full assessment of America in late modernity will necessarily involve an account of Asian America.

If this is the case, then a number of integrative and reconstructive questions emerge. I conclude with some of them. Can we view Pan-Africanism and Pan-Asianism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century as concurrent responses to white modernity? Is the dispossession of land and livelihood in Hawaii, Guam, the Philippines, and so on, continuous with the American Indian experience? Is the consolidation of black, Asian, and Latin American marxisms from the 1930s onward a convergence of frameworks responding to American hegemony and late white modernity? How can we understand the civil rights and black power movements in terms of their Cold War context, one in which the Asian villain emerges dramatically? How should we characterize the longstanding unjust “peace” in the Pacific that forms the larger context of Michael Walzer’s piecemeal focus on just and unjust wars? What bearing does or should the consolidation of American empire in the Pacific have on Rawls’ writing of *A Theory of Justice* and his communitarian critics? In short, how might we transform standard and critical sociohistorical accounts in light of the orientalism of an America enlarged?

## Endnotes

1. Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998)
2. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
3. John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (NY: Random House Inc., 1983).
4. Christina D. Burnett and Burke Marshall, eds., *Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).
5. On this and related topics, I have learned from the following: Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); Arif Dirlik, ed., *What is in a Rim? Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993); Bruce Cumings, *Parallax*

*Visions: Making Sense of American-East Asian Relations at the End of the Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); and Gary Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History* (WA: University of Washington Press, 1994).

6. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (NY: Random House Inc., 1979), p.1-2.

---

## **The Meaning of the Visible Differences of the Body**

**Emily S. Lee**  
*Le Moyne College*

### **Introduction**

In the discussion of race and sex, what remains persistently elusive is the function of the physical features of the body. Yet I must stubbornly speak on race and sex by emphasizing the physical specificities of the body. Racism and sexism hinge on the visible features of the body. As theorists including Carol Bigwood, Linda Martin Alcoff, Taunya Lovell Banks, Patricia Williams and Jayne Chong-Soon Lee write, the visible features of the body serve as the pivot for sexism and racism.<sup>1</sup>

In focusing on the visible features of the body I am led to examine the role of perception in the dynamics of racism and sexism. During the moment of perception, one recognizes that the visible features of the body possess meaning about the invisible features of the person. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work explores precisely this interstice between seeing and meaning, functioning within the moment of perception. His philosophical system serves as the springboard for an exploration of the meaning of the body's visible features. I utilize Merleau-Ponty's work even though feminist theorists have criticized him for failing to perform an analysis of different body features. Feminist theorists have voiced that Merleau-Ponty's generalized body is a male body. Nevertheless, I believe that Merleau-Ponty's work can be fruitfully mined.<sup>2</sup>

### **À L'état Naissant**

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's aim, particularly in his later works is to locate the birth of meaning, the moment of creation. Merleau-Ponty rightly argues that philosophy until his time cannot explain the creation of meaning. Within traditional philosophy, all meaning is either inherent within the invisible features of the world, or all that exists is simply the visible. Within such a framework, all meaning has existed already throughout time. Human beings are confined to simply discovering the meaning hidden beneath the surface. Against such a system, Merleau-Ponty searches for the original conceiving moments of meaning. Merleau-Ponty searches for the possibility of human beings creatively becoming.

Merleau-Ponty's work makes several controversial maneuvers. First, Merleau-Ponty conceptualizes the ontological as embodied. Such conceptualization requires that Merleau-Ponty relinquish the idea of universal knowledge, aligning him with many feminist conclusions. Merleau-Ponty argues that all knowledge is situated knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Second, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the importance of the experiences that bodies undergo. He writes, "[i]t is to experience ... that the ultimate ontological power belongs."<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty takes experience seriously.<sup>5</sup> Third, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological framework is a philosophy of becoming. Merleau-Ponty's system separates away from a philosophy of

being, towards a philosophy of becoming.<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty's search for creativity is a search for the possibility of movement, of change, of human development. Fourth, Merleau-Ponty's search for meaning is a search for the very forms that Plato inaugurated.<sup>7</sup> Of course, Merleau-Ponty does not exactly search for the Platonic forms. For Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea that these forms are pre-existing, universal, and infinite. But to the extent that these forms reflect an attempt to conceptualize beyond the space of the actual to the space of the possible, Merleau-Ponty argues that human beings are involved in conceiving and creating these forms. Fifth and finally, Merleau-Ponty locates the moment of creation within the moment of perception. Merleau-Ponty argues against the traditional understanding of consciousness as a completely constituting, pure power of signification and representation. It is not through reason alone that man discovers meaning. For Merleau-Ponty creation occurs in the moment of the awakening of attention.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Flesh...Visibility**

To understand how these five steps lead to the possibility of human beings creating meaning, let us more closely examine the process of perception, particularly the perception of something new. Only in his last unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, does Merleau-Ponty offer an analysis of perception radically different from the traditional understanding of perception. Understanding perception within a gestaltian system is itself only reluctantly gaining acceptance. Yet Merleau-Ponty moves away from this gestaltian understanding of perception upon which he had so strongly relied in his earlier works.<sup>9</sup> First note that a vertical structure of the invisible and the visible replaces the horizontal structure of the gestalt, organized as the figure and the ground. The invisible plays a pivotal role in the presentation of the visible. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, the "thin pellicle of the quale, the surface of the visible, is doubled up over its whole extension with an invisible reserve." "[T]he visible is pregnant with the invisible."<sup>10</sup> This is not to argue that the value of the visible is in the invisible. The most commonly understood and perhaps the simplest way of understanding the structure of the visible and the invisible is as the body and the mind, the object and the subject. As the subject, the invisible is oneself, "that which we forget because we are part of the ground."<sup>11</sup> As the subject, James Phillips associates the invisible with the unconscious.<sup>12</sup> The mind and all that are ineffable and ungraspable are usually associated with the invisible, whereas the body and all that are sensuous and concrete are traditionally relegated to the world of matter, the visible. But the invisible is much more than simply mind or subject. The invisible is, as Phillips indicates, the "nucleus of meaning-structures," the "nuclei of signification."<sup>13</sup> Or, the invisible is, as Henri Maldiney writes, "the depth of the world ... the unexpected of the world."<sup>14</sup>

The medium of the relation between the visible and the invisible Merleau-Ponty names as the *flesh*. "The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance, to designate it, we should need the old term 'element,' ... in the sense of a general thing, a midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea."<sup>15</sup> Visibility is the incredible moment when body and mind; subject and object, internal and external, signification and signified, overlap. The flesh accomplishes this feat Merleau-Ponty writes, by folding back on itself. As Shannon Sullivan elaborates, "the 'folding' of which gives birth to both subject and object and their interpenetration. Thus the notion of flesh speaks to us of the intertwining of an exchange ('chiasm') between the subject and the object which results in a fundamental ambiguity and possible reciprocity between