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Convergences

Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy

Edited by
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and
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I dedicate this book to my husband, Scott Davidson.
Thank you for your foundational love and abundant patience.

—Maria del Guadalupe Davidson

For the first black feminist influences in my life:
Kathleen Smallwood-Johnson, Kathryn Harris,
and Serena Smallwood.

—Kathryn T. Gines

For my grandmother, Clarissa Cupid, who provided
comfort in these difficult times.

—Donna-Dale L. Marcano

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Madness and Judiciousness

A Phenomenological Reading of a Black Woman's Encounter with a Saleschild

Emily S. Lee

Introduction

> Buzzers are big in New York City. Favored particularly by smaller stores and boutiques, merchants throughout the city have installed them as screening devices to reduce the incidence of robbery: if the face at the door looks desirable, the buzzer is pressed and the door is unlocked. If the face is that of an undesirable, the door stays locked. . . . The installation of these buzzers happened swiftly in New York . . . I discovered them and their meaning one Saturday in 1986. I was shopping in Soho and saw in a store window a sweater that I wanted to buy for my mother. I pressed my round brown face to the window and my finger to the buzzer, seeking admittance. A narrow-eyed, white teenager wearing running shoes and feasting on bubble gum glared out, evaluating me for signs that would pit me against the limits of his social understanding. After about five seconds, he mouthed "We're closed," and blew pink rubber at me. It was two Saturdays before Christmas, at one o'clock in the afternoon; there were several white people in the store who appeared to be shopping for things for *their* mothers.[1]

Patricia Williams, a black, female law professor, relays the above account in *The Alchemy of Race and Right.* Since so much of phenomenological work is preoccupied with describing phenomenology, it has become common to jokingly wonder when phenomenologists will actually *do* phenomenology. Drawing

primarily from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* this chapter attempts to actually *do* phenomenology in exploring Williams's encounter with the saleschild.[2]

I chose this particular interaction between Williams and the saleschild because this encounter brings to stark focus an important moment in phenomenological analysis: a contestatory moment of the meanings in the horizon or, perhaps alternatively, a moment when a meaning becomes more solidly embedded into the horizon. I read this particular encounter between Williams and the saleschild as a moment when, in regards to a racial meaning in our social world, that which defines reason is contested. As a contestation over reason, society awards the winner as reasonable and deems the other as unreasonable, perhaps even mad.

This contested moment demonstrates a limit condition in regards to the phenomenological concept of the 'horizon.' The concept of the horizon helpfully illustrates the sedimented, prevailing meanings in the world and how these meanings originate always as products of negotiations among members of society. But phenomenology and the conception of the horizon do not illustrate how individuals can change these meanings. Considering the weight of history and the shared quality of the meanings, Merleau-Ponty's elucidation that individuals change the meanings in the horizon through isolated actions appears far from satisfying and seems almost futile. Yet Merleau-Ponty posits such individual contestations as the only means to influence the meanings of the horizon. Hence, although this chapter attempts to do phenomenology, it concludes with a critique of the limits of phenomenological analysis.

The three goals of this chapter are to do phenomenology, to illustrate a moment of racial meaning contestation on the horizon, and to present a limit in phenomenological analysis. Let us return to Williams's account of her experience.

The Given World, the Lived World

A phenomenological understanding of the interaction between Williams and the saleschild must begin with the given world, a notion made familiar by the works of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Williams's description of the world in Soho, New York City, during the Christmas season of 1986—a world where boutiques install buzzers to prevent theft—illustrates that one enters into a particular place, into a specific time and into certain fixed scenarios. One experiences the world within a concrete situation; the world is given to me. As Merleau-Ponty states, "I am given, that is, I find myself already situated and involved in a physical and social world."[3]

The given world is experienced phenomenally. Drawing from Husserl's work, Merleau-Ponty defines phenomena as a "layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us."[4] Husserl and Merleau-Ponty argue that all of our initial contact with the world occurs phenomenally, rather than already, clearly, distinguishable as subjective or objective. Husserl's lived world steers through the unnecessary setup of stark contrast between the naturalism of empiricism and the psychologism of intellectualism, where one reduces the world either to its materiality or to the projections of consciousness. Husserl explains that one experiences the world phenomenally; one experiences both contrasts ambiguously. In describing Husserl's understanding of phenomena, Ronald Bruzina states that "consciousness is now a pure field of experience-in-the-living (lived experience, *Erlebnis*), in which various objects [and features] are found as appearings-in-the-field."[5] Such an understanding of our phenomenal relations within the world acknowledges not only the influence of the world but also that of the subject. Phenomenology recognizes that experiences of the world are negotiations between the subject and the world, between the intentions of the subject and the givens of the world.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology posits a gestaltian contact with the world. Gestalt theory advances that the "most basic unit of experience is that of figure-on-a-background," anything simpler reflects mere mental constructions.[6] Human experience of the world cannot reduce the smallest unit of experience to solely the figure. Rather, one always experiences the figure with its background. The Gestalt *principle of contextual relevancy* holds that "the meaning of a theme is co-determined (a) by the unity formed by the internal coherence of [the theme's] parts, and (b) by the relation between the theme and the horizon that provides its context."[7] Empiricism and intellectualism recognize only the first condition of unity within the theme and fail to recognize the second condition of balance between the theme and the horizon. This second condition is gestalt theory's unique contribution. Gestalt theory explains that one experiences and perceives the theme because of and with the horizon. One cannot perceive the theme without its horizon; one cannot recognize the theme within a different horizon—not without much encouragement. Rather, an optimal relation must exist between the theme and the horizon for perception of the theme.[8]

Merleau-Ponty develops the notion of the theme and the horizon with the gestaltian framework. He advocates against reducing the gestaltian framework to solely a spatial sense. With the new vernacular, Merleau-Ponty elaborates the meanings—the significations already functioning in the world. The horizon represents the sense of possibilities in the world because the world is "an open and indefinite multiplicity of relationships which are of reciprocal implication."[9] In this sense of the irreducibility of the world to any one aspect, Merleau-Ponty

repeats over and over again that human beings are in the world.[10] Human beings are always subject to the influences of the world; we are always situated.

Within the *Phenomenology of Perception*, however, Merleau-Ponty fails to significantly deemphasize the role of consciousness in the structure of the horizon. As such, even in his insightful idea of sedimentation, Merleau-Ponty mistakenly prioritizes the domain of thought. To explain sedimentation, he writes that, "there is a 'world of thought,' or a sediment left by our mental processes, which enables us to rely on our concepts and acquired judgments as we might on things there in front of us, presented globally, without there being any need for us to resynthesize them."[11] Although the notion of sedimentation beautifully depicts the meaning complexes in the world, it mistakenly attributes them solely to the mind.

In his last text, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty more successfully moves away from privileging consciousness. In his working notes, he credits the horizon as the source of all concepts, of a certain style of being, and of being itself.[12] The notion of the horizon functions both in relation to space as exterior to the theme and to time as interior to the theme. In its earlier instantiations, Husserl held forth the possibility of infinity in knowing the theme. Here Merleau-Ponty parts ways with Husserl, for he gives up this possibility of infinity in the sense of absolutely knowing the theme and instead relies upon and evokes historicity in the horizon.[13] The horizon refers to the history surrounding and circumscribing the theme.

For theorists concerned with feminist or race theory, the horizon must be reminiscent of the idea of social or cultural construction. Postmodernism has made the notion of social construction common parlance, and Judith Butler's work is especially important for feminist concerns, with the idea that gender and sex are social constructs. Critical race theorists have made a similar claim in regards to race. Although the horizon and social construction appear similar, the horizon does not conceptualize everything as social constructions. Within the *Phenomenology*, culture plays a central configuration in the notion of the horizon, yet Merleau-Ponty is not explicit about his use of the word *culture*. Merleau-Ponty simply contrasts culture with nature, where, for him, culture serves as the overlay upon nature. He does not explore the possibility that more than one culture may exist, and consequently he does not explore the ramifications of several distinctive cultures. Merleau-Ponty recognized different cultures as demonstrated in his interests in anthropology and Levi-Strauss's work. But by the time of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty demands the dissolution of such distinctions of culture and nature, insisting any such distinctions are merely abstract.[14] He uses the term *abstract* in all its Hegelian negative connotations. To specifically speak of social or cultural construction, as the poststructuralists do, requires distinguishing between culture and nature, a discernment Merleau-Ponty believes impossible.[15] Instead, suffice it to note that culture, in a form indistinguishable from nature, functions within his understanding of the horizon.

Through all of the changing conceptions of the horizon, Merleau-Ponty consistently promotes two central ideas: first, the phenomenological basis that the horizon cannot be removed or eliminated; and second, the horizon, although constantly changing, functions as the meaning framework for our society. In this sense, the horizon functions as a motivating force that guides the experience and perception of the theme. The horizon depicts the sense in which we live in the given world, as beings-in-the-world.

Patricia Williams's Embodiment

In the given world, Williams sees the desirable sweater, presses her round brown face to the window, and places her finger on the buzzer. Members of our world recognize the behavior patterns; the ringing of the bell communicates to the saleschild that Williams desires admittance to the store. The communicated meaning of the body movement indicates that Williams and the saleschild share a culture and a world. As Merleau-Ponty describes, "behavior patterns settle into . . . nature, being deposited in the form of a cultural world."[16] The actions of the body simultaneously draw attention to the implements, the buzzer, the window, and the locked door, which also serve as symbols of culture. "No sooner has my gaze fallen upon a living body in the process of acting," writes Merleau-Ponty, "than the objects surrounding it immediately take on a fresh layer of significance: they are no longer simply what I myself could make of them."[17] Merleau-Ponty astutely recognizes the interplay between body movement, implements, and culture. The three mutually validate each other and facilitate communication among the members of society.

Merleau-Ponty's focus on body movement lies at the center of his challenge of the belief in the divide between the body and the mind in the tradition of Plato, Descartes, Hume, and even Husserl. These traditions leave us with "the living body bec[o]me an exterior without interior, subjectivity bec[o]me an interior without exterior."[18] Such traditions have left us with the problem of intersubjectivity. In perhaps his most radical proposal, Merleau-Ponty locates subjectivity not in something interior to the body, such as a consciousness or a soul, but as the body. To understand how he comes to this conclusion, we must appreciate his early work in child psychology.

Beginning with the discovery of the infant's initial experience of the body as intrinsically reflexive, Merleau-Ponty explains that this initial experience of the body precedes distinctions of subject or object.[19] In this indistinguishable state, the corporeal schema is intrinsically reflexive. From this reflexivity, Merleau-Ponty proposes that the body is experienced as the body image. Body

image is "the thematization of the corporeal reflexivity underlying the corporeal schema."[20] Martin Dillon explains, "My body-image is my image of myself: as image, it is object; as myself, it is the subject I am."[21] The body's reflexivity defies the law of noncontradiction. Merleau-Ponty suggests the following definition of body image: "The word 'here' applied to my body does not refer to a determinate position in relation to other positions or to external co-ordinates, but the laying down of the first co-ordinates, the anchoring of the active body in an object, the situation of the body in face of its tasks."[22] The body serves as the measure of all of our contact with the world. The body image represents the body's spatiality and temporality. The body image evokes how the body in action, the body in movement, acts in the world.

Without a subject interior to the body guiding body movement and without a reductive conception of the body as mechanistic, Merleau-Ponty must explain how the body comes to move. Merleau-Ponty offers the idea of body motility, his third conception of the body. With the idea of body motility, he proposes that the body retains its own intentionality.[23] To appreciate the idea of body intentionality, one must understand the difference between act intentionality and operative intentionality. Act intentionality refers to the common understanding of intentionality, the intentionality of conscious judgments culminating in individual actions, an intentionality familiar to liberal theory.[24] Operative intentionality, first introduced by Husserl, refers to an intentionality functioning within the world.[25] Distinct from the act intentionality of isolated, conscious individuals, operative intentionality depicts an intentionality always already present in the world because of the historical and social meaning influencing all beings-in-the-world.[26]

In between act and operative intentionality, the body's movements project beyond the immediate. For in the relationship between act and operative intentionality, body motility defines the relation between the significance of an individual act and the meanings operating in the world. Merleau-Ponty introduces the concept of 'body motility' to capture this relationship between single acts and the meanings enveloping the world. He writes, " 'Already motility, in its pure state, possesses the basic power of giving a meaning.' "[27] With an elaboration of body motility, Merleau-Ponty's body image captures precisely the body in movement as a movement from the individual, immediate and actual to the community, the world, the future and the ideal. The two moments form a unique totality.[28]

The movement from the immediate to the surrounding world is a movement from the space of the concrete to the space of the abstract. The immediate vicinity of the body in action establishes the setting for the possibility of body movement that extends toward abstract, creative space. In more existential language, Dillon explains that "by virtue of the possibilities opened to it by thematization of the 'I can,' consciousness is liberated from the immediacy of

the bodily projects made in response to the concrete and given context, and may now undertake movements in the human space of potentiality (as opposed to the physical space of actuality)."[29] Our body image retains an intentionality of its very own, which motivates movement toward possible space. The body's abstract movement arises from the accumulation of learned, habitual body movements.[30] Merleau-Ponty describes the movement from the lived to the abstract space as a spiraling centrifugal movement.[31] The body in movement, the body facing its projects is a projective being.[32] The body projects outside itself.

With the body subject, this world remains "undivided between my perception and his . . . both are not cogitations shut up in their own immanence, but beings which are outrun by their world, and which consequently may well be outrun by each other."[33] Perception of the other is possible; intersubjectivity is not impossible.[34] In the given world, when Williams rings the bell, her body movements project her desire of moving from the actual sphere outside the store on the street to the possible sphere of the store. The saleschild in turn perceives her body and her consciousness simultaneously; the saleschild perceives a subject. The saleschild perceives her body movements and surmises her intentions to enter the store because they share a horizon where her body movements convey intentions understood by both of them.

The saleschild does not perceive Williams in her entirety; he sees an anonymous black woman. Merleau-Ponty writes, "In the cultural object, I feel the close presence of others beneath a veil of anonymity."[35] Merleau-Ponty's analysis foregoes the philosophical problem of perceiving the body with its consciousness, yet his analysis leaves us with the perception of an anonymous other.[36] Perception of a particular person does not occur. The saleschild does not recognize Williams as a thinker who contemplates her personal interactions, a person who publicizes seemingly ordinary interactions does not come to pass.

The Saleschild's Perception

In just five seconds, the saleschild mouths the words "we're closed" and "blows pink rubber" at Williams. The saleschild refuses entrance to Williams. Williams leads us to believe that the saleschild must be lying; after all it is one o'clock in the afternoon, a Saturday, two weeks before Christmas. The saleschild lies to deny entry to Williams and avoids telling her directly that she is undesirable, that she appears likely to commit theft. The saleschild only understands Williams's intention to enter the store. The saleschild misunderstands her intentions subsequent to entrance of the store.

As beings-in-the-world, perception occurs phenomenally; perception opens us to the world. Merleau-Ponty's understanding of perception emphasizes

an ongoing contact with the world. Perception occurs continuously; one cannot simply turn perception on and off.[37] But perception is a lacuna; it never finishes;[38] as a result, it can be deceiving because it is partial and full of gaps and holes.[39] Perception occurs through a horizon, through an atmosphere of generality and anonymity.[40]

Williams is not an alien or other worldly creature in the saleschild's world; brown bodies are part of the saleschild's given world. The saleschild's perception of Williams's body—brown, round-faced, kinky-haired, together with the cultural implements, the clothes Williams is wearing—sums up to a type of body associated with undesirability, a type of body associated with the likelihood of committing theft.[41] Through the horizon of the given world, the saleschild perceives Williams as a general type. Husserl explains that *all* perceptions anticipate future perceptions on the basis of types. He writes that "every real thing whatsoever has . . . its general 'a priori,' . . . a type."[42] Alfred Schutz's work elaborates on this aspect of Husserl's work. The saleschild's perception of Williams demonstrates what Schutz designates as "they-orientation." "They-orientation" marks perception of remote and anonymous contemporaries. They-orientation contrasts with "we-orientation," which marks perception of intimate acquaintances.[43] While Husserl views all perception as typified, according to Schutz, perception via types occurs only when one is they-oriented.[44] Schutz's analysis appears more probable. Intimate acquaintances, one's friends, family, and lovers, usually defy types. When one is they-oriented toward the other, one perceives the other as a type; one sees an anonymous being. Being they-oriented, "the synthesis of recognition does not apprehend the unique person as [s]he exists within [her] living present. Instead it pictures [her] as always the same and homogenous, leaving out of account all the changes and rough edges that go along with individuality."[45] Hence, although the saleschild and Williams share the given world, and intersubjectivity is possible, the saleschild perceives Williams as a type because the saleschild is they-oriented toward her.

This framework is limited since Williams's features are anonymous to the extent that the saleschild sees her as a black woman, but her features are not so anonymous that the saleschild sees her as a woman or as a human being. Although the saleschild perceives her as a certain undesirable type, the saleschild could have perceived her as a desirable type, among a broader and more tolerable type, such as among women who enjoy shopping. Even if the saleschild is they-oriented toward Williams, the saleschild could have been they-oriented toward Williams by casting her into the shopping frenzied female type. Why does the saleschild cast Williams into one type and not another?

Schutz offers one explanation for the they-orientation and the selection of types. He advances the notion that individuals hold a specific field of interests, or a system of relevances. One determines one's system of relevances "by the fact that [one is] not equally interested in all the strata of the world within [one's] reach. The selective function of interest organizes the world . . . in strata of major and minor relevance."[46] Schutz's system of relevances indicates that one hierarchizes one's interests. One's interests determine that which one seeks to understand. When the saleschild perceives Williams as the undesirable black woman type, the saleschild exhibits a glimpse of his stratum of relevance. The saleschild positions Williams and racial consciousness outside his "stratum of relevance, which requires explicit knowledge."[47] He is not interested in Williams as a particular person, or what is more important, he is not interested in awareness of race questions. With the notion of stratums of relevances, Schutz accounts for the various "zones of blind belief and ignorance" held by different individuals.[48] Perhaps black women, class, or racial consciousness do not lie within the saleschild's range of interests.

Schutz's analysis provides one possible reason for the saleschild's selective anonymity and system of relevances. He argues that systems of relevances are institutionally derived and sanctioned. Schutz writes that "[t]he order of domains of relevances prevailing in a particular social group is itself an element of the relative natural conception of the world taken for granted. . . . In each group the order of these domains has its particular history. It is an element of socially approved and socially derived knowledge and frequently is institutionalized."[49] Of course, theorists of race and gender have already vehemently voiced the institutionalization of discrimination. Race theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant have written on the institutionalization of discrimination that discrimination occurs on two different strata, structural/institutional and prejudicial/discriminatory.[50] Similarly, the institutionalization Schutz describes does not refer only to the formal laws within a society but also to the sedimented beliefs of our society. The saleschild does not solely derive his selective anonymity.

In a five-second interaction, the saleschild's they-orientation is not at issue. In a five-second interaction, the saleschild cannot know the particular person who is Williams. The institutionalization of systems of relevances explains why the saleschild casts Williams as the type to commit theft and not the type to love shopping. The saleschild surmises a conclusion based solely on the visible features of Williams's body, and the racialized meaning of her body plays a more prominent role than other stereotypes about women. The saleschild's understanding and prejudice of brown bodies triggers "a raison d'être for a thing which guides the flow of phenomena without being explicitly laid down in any one of them."[51] The saleschild's personal previous experiences with brown faces alone could not lead to such a quick decision. The saleschild is, after all, a seventeen-year-old boy. How much direct contact with brown faces could the saleschild have experienced? Rather, the sediment of ideas, the operative intentionality, and the horizon of the given world about brown bodies prevailing in our society nurtures the saleschild's perception. The saleschild no longer resynthesizes, rethinks the meaning of brown faces. The institutionalized system of relevances conditions

the saleschild's understanding of brown bodies and leads him to prominently position the color of her skin in his system of relevances.

Phenomenology and the notion of the horizon helpfully illuminate this particular encounter, but Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological system has been criticized for depicting as natural the racist and sexist beliefs held in our society. Linda Martín Alcoff explains that critics charge phenomenology of taking "subjectivity and subjective experience as cause and foundation when in reality they are mere epiphenomenon and effect. Phenomenology is sometimes portrayed as developing metaphysical accounts of experience outside of culture and history."[52] In a separate article, Alcoff again explains the existence of "a fear that phenomenological description will naturalize or fetishize racial experiences."[53] The problem lies in Merleau-Ponty's portrayal of the horizon as inevitably arising from the world. As an inevitable occurrence, Merleau-Ponty fails to really depict the members of society as involved in influencing or negotiating the horizon. Our horizon, which includes a history of women's secondary status and a history of racism and colonialism, appears simply unavoidable. Merleau-Ponty's portrayal of the horizon depicts such a history as teleological developments of the world, as unavoidable historical evolutions. Feminists and race theorists contest precisely this implication of the horizon. They highlight the role of dominating cultures, the negotiations—including wars—and the social constructedness of human beings that have led to our present cultural and social environment.

Interestingly, in spite of such difficulties, Merleau-Ponty's notion of the horizon has been useful for feminists and race theorists. Gail Weiss evokes the horizon to elaborate the immediateness—so immediate as to be mistaken as inherent—of affiliations of specific bodies with certain negative associations. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology productively highlights the immediateness of the affiliations because he emphasizes embodiment over consciousness with his notion of an embodied subjectivity. Referring to the works of Frantz Fanon, Weiss explains that members of minority communities may feel they possess inferior corporeal schemas, and this feeling of inferiority resides on the level of embodiment. Weiss writes that "the invisible social processes at work in the construction of a racially-coded corporeal schema . . . [are] always already operative, and for those societally designated as 'racial minorities,' the internalization of this racial epidermal schema . . . results in a (psychophysical) inferiority complex."[54] Similarly, Alcoff refers to the givenness of the horizon to explain the confusion of the cause and effect of racism. She writes that "the process by which human bodies are differentiated and categorized by type is a process preceded by racism, rather than one that causes and thus 'explains' racism as a natural result."[55] The notion of the horizon provides a conceptual framework for understanding the depth of the racial associations we make during our perceptions of our own and others' embodiment. Both Weiss and Alcoff utilize the idea of the horizon to illuminate the workings of racism and sexism embedded into our social cultural beliefs, well aware of the dangers involved.

While the notion of the horizon is apparently both useful and problematic for feminists and race theorists, the relevant issue for the present purpose is not the question of how racism and sexism got sedimented into the horizon but whether Merleau-Ponty's depiction of the horizon acknowledges the functioning of racism and sexism. The present question centers on whether he accounts for a struggle between diverging perceptions in their separate claims to more accurately represent the world.

Williams Understands the Horizon

Let me interrupt my phenomenological reading of this event, to elaborate Williams's own description of such events. What I find fascinating about her book, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, is that even without Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological language, Williams seems to be "doing phenomenology." Her words evoke phenomenology's concepts and ideas. Much in her book demonstrates the functions of the horizon. Williams shows acute awareness of how much the meanings in our society have an impact on what the members of society perceive about her embodiment and so prominently influence her experiences in the United States. She comprehends "that a part of ourselves is beyond the control of pure physical will and resides in the sanctuary of those around us; a fundamental part of ourselves and of our dignity depends on the uncontrollable, powerful, external observers who make up a society."[56]

It is important to note that living in our society with its horizon of meanings, its givens in the world, means not only that white bodies accept these meanings but that black bodies internalize the prevailing meanings as well. The notion of the horizon depicts how all members of society, including people of color, accept the association of certain bodies with negative meanings, even if, in the case of people of color, the negative associations define the self. Feminist theorist Annette Kuhn states that women identify with men; and Williams explains that people of color learn to see themselves through white people's eyes. She writes, "[T]he cultural domination of blacks by whites means that the black self is placed at a distance even from itself. . . . So blacks in a white society are conditioned from infancy to see in themselves only what others, who despise them, see."[57] Coherent with Weiss, Williams explains that the internalization of prevailing meanings does not simply occur on the level of consciousness, but on the very corporeal schemas of black bodies. One of the most striking consequences under these circumstances is the very real possibility that black people may forego economic opportunity because such economic advancement may also signify further loss of the self. Williams writes, "I think many people

of color still find it extremely difficult to admit, much less prove, our desire to be included in alien and hostile organizations and institutions, even where those institutions also represent economic opportunity."[58]

Under these circumstances, Williams exhibits an understanding that the meanings in the horizon result from struggles over whose perceptions come to be accepted and hence sedimented into the horizon and whose perceptions are not accepted and ultimately rejected from the horizon. Williams pointedly muses, "There is great power in being able to see the world as one will and then to have that vision enacted."[59] Merleau-Ponty recognizes that perception has a relationship with power, that perception does not occur passively, and that the horizon must have arisen from struggles. But he does not address the ramifications of the racism and the sexism sedimented into his conceptualization of the horizon.[60] Merleau-Ponty takes a Nietzschean or Hegelian stance about the inevitableness of such struggles and does not concern himself with its implications to the people who lose the contestations over correct or true perception.

Williams does not take such a laissez faire attitude perhaps because she recognizes that the horizon includes meanings about her subjectivity/embodiment that clearly do not benefit her. Unlike Merleau-Ponty, I suspect Williams cannot sit back, calm in the idea that the contestations in meanings in the horizon will eventually and inevitably resolve themselves. She does not have the luxury of accepting a resolution on the basis of its inevitability. Rather, Williams urges that the black self cannot accept such prevailing meanings, explaining, "In such an environment, relinquishing the power of individual ethical judgment to a collective ideal risks psychic violence, an obliteration of the self through domination by an all-powerful other. . . . What links child abuse, the mistreatment of women, and racism is the massive external intrusion into [the] psyche that dominating powers impose to keep the self from ever fully seeing itself."[61] Clearly, passively accepting prevailing meanings in the horizon is not an option for all subjects.

This seemingly small moment when the saleschild and Williams confront each other with her ringing of the doorbell illustrates a pivotal moment of questioning and contesting or accepting and sedimenting a social meaning about her embodiment/subjectivity even deeper into the horizon. In this moment, in affirming the saleschild or Williams's perception of the situation, we decide on true and reasonable perception.

The Judiciousness of the Saleschild's Decisions

The decision to affirm the saleschild's surmisal or to affirm Williams's frustration depicts a contestation of meaning in the horizon. The majority of society has chosen to empathize with the saleschild's decision. Williams conveys that

"even civil-rights organizations backed down eventually in the face of arguments that the buzzer system is a 'necessary evil.' "[62] Merleau-Ponty's analysis helps us to understand why; after all, the saleschild inhabits our world, with the givenness and the institutionalized systems of relevances of our culture and society. In relaying the "understandability" of the saleschild's behavior, Williams admits "[t]hat some blacks might agree" to the judiciousness of the saleschild's decision.[63] Merleau-Ponty's analysis, with the help of Schutz, highlights why members of our society might consider the saleschild's decision as judicious, sensible, and reasonable. Merleau-Ponty's work sheds light on why racist beliefs can be a part of the acceptable, the sensible, and the logical beliefs in our society. Connecting brown faces with undesirability and suspecting black female bodies of criminal inclinations represents an acceptable reaction given the horizon of our world.

Racist analysis has focused historically on egregious acts of power and overt signs of racism by white supremacists, such as the Nazis or the Ku Klux Klan. Focusing on such extreme acts of racism diverts attention away from the lived experience of racism and too easily relaxes the anxieties and responsibilities of the rest of us. For although we can perhaps conclude that our society does not condone egregious signs of racism, the small, seemingly forgivable, judicious, sensible, and understandable acts of racism that persist in our social horizon serve as the index of the tenacity of racist attitudes in our world. Because of our willingness to forgive the seemingly inconsequential, the seemingly reasonable signs of racism, racism continuously eludes us. Racism may be insidious not simply because it is a conscious, isolated exercise of power but because it is sedimented, pervasive, and reasonable.[64]

The acceptance of the judiciousness of the saleschild's decision leaves Williams with the descriptions of overreacting, being too sensitive, and acting unreasonably. Pondering moments in which society questions her sanity and encourages her to question her sanity fill her book: "What was most interesting to me in this experience was how the blind application of principles of neutrality . . . acted . . . to make me look crazy";[65] "[M]y story became one of extreme paranoia";[66] or in referring to herself, "You should know that this is one of those mornings when I refuse to compose myself properly . . . trying to decide if she is stupid or crazy."[67] We as a society fail to acknowledge that Williams is correct to be upset; instead, we support the saleschild's decision and relegate Williams to madness. At this moment, we create a particular meaning in the horizon. Merleau-Ponty's analysis too facilely passes over the plight of those who lose in the struggle for meanings in the horizon, but Williams's work points to where phenomenology could benefit from increased attention.

So should we absolve the saleschild of all responsibility? Merleau-Ponty's work suggests the answer—no. Drawing from Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty presents a rather complicated notion of agency and freedom. Freedom cannot be

separated from the given world. He writes, "My freedom, the fundamental power which I enjoy of being the subject of all my experiences, is not distinct from my insertion into the world."[68] But as much as our freedom is integrally linked to the given world, the world does not constitute us; we also constitute the world.

As a subject, the saleschild does not simply bend to the whims of our culture. Every interaction with another provides an opportunity to affirm or to deny a shared cultural belief. The saleschild's action illustrates the "resistance offered by passivity."[69] Our willingness to accept the judiciousness of the saleschild's decision illustrates that we resist fighting racism through passivity. The saleschild resists an opportunity to deny a shared racist belief by passively accepting the racist, yet sensible belief. As Merleau-Ponty argues in regards to sedimented knowledge, "this acquired knowledge is not an inert mass in the depths of our consciousness . . . what is acquired is truly acquired only if it is taken up again in a fresh momentum of thought."[70] And as Husserl maintains, although one perceives by drawing on types, every act of perception is an opportunity to forge new types."[71]

After all this emphasis on the functioning of the horizon, Merleau-Ponty still ultimately leaves the individual alone in resisting the horizon. The notion of the horizon depicts the spatial, temporal, social, cultural, and historical meanings; as such it belies individual acts of manipulation. Individual subjects can hardly influence or change the horizon. Phenomenological notions such as the horizon helpfully explain the depth of the embeddedness of racist meanings, but for Merleau-Ponty to point only to individual acts of resistance to counter the meanings in the horizon seems limited indeed, if not futile. This depicts the limits of phenomenological analysis, and it epitomizes the reasons why racism is so pervasive and persistent.

The Primacy of Visibility over Communication and toward a Conclusion

This particular interaction between Williams and the saleschild, an interaction based solely on the visible, forecloses other possibilities of affecting the saleschild's decision. I specifically chose this interaction precisely because it depends solely on a visual surmisal and so highlights the pivotal role of the visible differences of the body in daily personal interactions. However, Merleau-Ponty, in accordance with the dominant trend in present day philosophy, emphasizes the importance of communication, of language, for influencing the child's use of his options to affirm or to deny prevalent social beliefs.[72] Merleau-Ponty believes in the ability to create a reciprocal relationship with the means of language. I cannot help but wonder if communication may be overvalued. My suspicion

stems from the number of occasions in which one must quickly form a decision based solely on visible features. The frequency of these occasions far outnumbers occasions for fully communicating with the stranger, the other. Perhaps because communication is not an option in this interaction, full perception of the particular person who is Williams does not occur. It is precisely in these interactions that a phenomenological analysis can be of great assistance.

Notes

1. Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 44–45.

2. I limit myself primarily to the phenomenological concepts in this text for considerations of length and because the concepts from the *Phenomenology of Perception* suffice for the ideas I want to convey. In some ways, for the present analysis, I prefer the notions of embodiment and the horizon over the notion of the visible and the invisible and the chiasm. For my attempts at doing phenomenology with the phenomenological concepts from Merleau-Ponty's later works, see "The Meaning of Visible Differences of the Body," *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on the Status of Asian/Asian Americans* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 34–37.

3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 360.

4. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 57.

5. Ronald Bruzina, *Logos and Eidos* (Paris: Mouton, 1970), 53.

6. M. C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 59–60.

7. *Ibid.*, 67–68. See also Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 302.

8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 205.

9. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 71. See also *Visible*, 100.

10. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, xvii–xviii, 84, 137, 451.

11. Ibid., 130.

12. Ibid., *Visible*, 237.

13. See Francoise Dastur, "World, Flesh, Vision," in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, ed. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 38.

14. Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, 253.

15. This is especially evident in the *fundierung* model.

16. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 347.

17. Ibid., 353.

18. Ibid., 56.

19. Corporeal schema describes the experience of the body as "neither purely subject (in which case it would be invisible to him) nor purely object (in which case it could not serve his primitive intentions); it is rather the ground of a style of interacting with the environment." Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 122.

20. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 124.
21. Ibid., 123.
22. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 100.
23. Ibid., 387.
24. Ibid., xviii.
25. Merleau-Ponty describes operative intentionality: "[T]he life of consciousness—cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life—is subtended by an 'intentional arc' which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects" (*Phenomenology* 136).
26. Merleau-Ponty eventually relies less and less upon the notion of intentionality, both act and operative. Intentionality evokes too much of an affinity with consciousness, and Merleau-Ponty aspires to understand the body in both its materiality and cognitive capacity. The notion of operative intentionality—Husserl's recognition of an influence functioning in the world—Merleau-Ponty continues to explore in other forms; for he appreciates the idea of a guiding influence that arises from the world.
27. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 142. He cites from Grünbaum, *Aphasie und Motorik* 397–98.
28. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 110.
29. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 136–37.
30. Ibid., 147.
31. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 111. See also Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 136–37.
32. Lawrence Hass, "Sense and Alterity: Rereading Merleau-Ponty's Reversibility Thesis," in *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World*, ed. Dorothea Olkowski and James Morley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 94.
33. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 353.
34. Ibid., 350–51.
35. Ibid., 348.
36. Ibid., 137.
37. Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, 99–100.
38. Ibid., 57.
39. Ibid., *Visible*, 77.
40. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 215.
41. I cannot help wondering what clothes she was wearing.
42. Edmund Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, tr. James. S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 36.
43. Sartre and de Beauvoir have also advanced similar analyses.
44. Alfred Schutz, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 227.
45. Ibid., 226.
46. Ibid., 100.
47. Ibid., 92.
48. Ibid., 100.
49. Ibid., 115.

50. See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the Unites States from the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
51. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 50.
52. Linda Martín Alcoff, "Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Theory on Experience," in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, ed. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 252.
53. Linda Martín Alcoff, "Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment," *Journal of Radical Philosophy* 95 (May/June 1999): 18.
54. Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 27–28.
55. Alcoff, "Toward," 18.
56. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 73.
57. Ibid., 62. See Annette Kuhn, "The Body and Cinema: Some Problems for Feminism," *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
58. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 118. She continues, "What the middle-class, propertied, upwardly mobile black striver must do, to accommodate a race-neutral world view, is to become an invisible black, a phantom black, by avoiding the label 'black' " (119).
59. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 38.
60. Merleau-Ponty only demonstrates awareness of the existence of racism and sexism in his article, "The Child's Relations with Others," *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, tr. William Cobb (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964).
61. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 63.
62. Ibid., 44.
63. Ibid., 46.
64. For further explorations of a lived sense of race, see E. S. Lee, "Towards a Lived Understanding of Race and Sex," *Philosophy Today* (SPEP Supplement 2005): 82–88.
65. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 48.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid., 4. See also pages 78, 98, 119–20, 143, 182, 183, 184, 204, 207–08, 221, 228–29. (Thank you Aram Hernandez for researching all these references.)
68. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 358.
69. Ibid., 61.
70. Ibid., 130.
71. Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, 37.
72. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 354.