TOWARDS A LIVED UNDERSTANDING OF RACE AND SEX

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David Theo Goldberg postulates a paradox in present day western societies, "race is irrelevant, but all is race."[1] Linda Martín Alcoff, elaborating on this paradox, writes, "the legitimacy and moral relevance of racial concepts is officially denied even while race continues to determine job prospects, career possibilities, available places to live, potential friends and lovers, reactions from police, credence from jurors, and the amount of credibility one is given by one's students."[2] We live in a society that recognizes the dangers of associating the color of one's skin with inherent biological or psychological differences of the person. Yet this paradox illustrates that although the common parlance declares intolerance towards racism, the body and race still function as axes of meaning. In the hopes of addressing this paradox, I turn to grasp the lived experience of race.

This project of addressing the lived sense of race focuses on the particular experiences of women of color. On the one hand, I put forward an understanding of the lived quality of race, in the hopes of providing a more thorough account of racism. On the other hand, a lived understanding of race elucidates the experiences of women of color, whose experiences are perhaps the most difficult set of experiences to portray.

The difficulty lies in depicting the experience of both the racism and the sexism simultaneously. Trina Grillow and Stephanie Wildman argue that the two "isms" of sexism and racism are not entirely accessible to each other through analogies or by adding one onto the other.[3] Illustrative of this positionis the fact thtat although quite a body of work on sexism and on racism exists, much of this work does not grapple with the experiences of both race and sex. These works leave unanalyzed how the two features overlap, interface, and contradict each other. My focus on the lived experience attempts to address these difficulties.

Consciousness vs. Lived Racism

What exactly defines the lived experience of race? I approach this question sideways by first addressing the question, why has the lived experience of race been so elusive? And to answer this latter question let me first present the prevailing understanding of racism. Gary Peller explains that racism results from a mistake on the level of conscious decisions. He writes, racism is "rooted in consciousness, in the cognitive process that attributes social significance to the arbitrary fact of skin color. The mental side of racism is accordingly represented either as 'prejudice,' the prejudging of a person according to mythological stereotypes, or as 'bias,' the process of being influenced by subjective factors."[4] Racism is the result of a mistake made in reason of associating a meaning with arbitrary body features. This belief that racism is an illogical mistake presumes that attributing significance, any significance, to body features is mistaken. The arbitrariness of nature is the only meaning of distinct body features. Peller continues to explain that, nevertheless, such mistakes have been so frequently made that they have become embedded into the governmental/institutional structures of society. Theorists including Alcoff, Patricia Williams, and Elizabeth Spelman explain that in addition to these institutions, these mistakes made in thought have become embedded in the social/cultural norms, including our understanding of common sense and categories in our society.[5]

Goldberg, Alcoff, Peller, Michael Omi, and Howard Winant oppose precisely this conception of racism as a mistake made in reason, as sufficiently encompassing for an understanding of the more thorough ramifications of racism. Peller explains that this understanding of racism and of justice as neutrality have encouraged some to conclude that the inevitable solution ought to be the encouragement of neutrality and colorblindness in state policies and its citizens. Based on the presumption that body features are not informative about the person,[6] encouraging a disconnection between the

body and the person becomes the inevitable solution. Such a solution implies the possibility of seeing qualities without context, of seeing freestanding features.

In the hopes of adding to these attempts to understand racism, I am compelled to step back and explore race first. Acknowledging the plethora of work addressing the pros and cons of using the term "race," as opposed to ethnicity or some cultural derivative, I sidestep this discussion here. Instead, to explore a lived understanding of race, let me turn to Michael Omi and Howard Winant's definition of race. They write, "*race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies* . . . selection of these particular features for purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process."[7] Notice two important features of this definition. First, Omi and Winant make explicit that society chooses both the signs and the symbols of race. Historically, society has determined not only which features of the body serve as the symbols of race, but also the signs, or what the symbols have come to signify. Omi and Winant's definition clarifies not only the well-accepted belief that racial significations are social/historical constructs, but that the symbols—the body features that exhibit the signs—are also social/historical constructs. My affinity for Omi and Winant's definition lies precisely here. They point out the fluidity of both the symbols and the signs of race. The body features serving as indicators of race have changed and their subsequent meaning have also changed. There are a myriad of examples, such as the British colonialism of the Irish that has not been based on skin color, and the categorization of the Chinese as racially black at times and white at other times in the history of the United States, even as their skin color remains more or less distinct from either. Race has functioned creatively and dynamically.

The Relevance of Phenomenology

I turn to phenomenology to explore a lived experience of race and sex. I utilize the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, specifically *The Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*. Merleau-Ponty's work serves as the impetus for an exploration of the perception and the experience of our small, daily interactions with others.

Merleau-Ponty defines phenomena as a "layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us."[8] This definition of phenomena originates from Edmund Husserl's work. In his famous injunction to go back to the things themselves, he focuses on, what Gail Weiss describes as, both the investigations of the "'how' as well as the 'what.'"[9] This dual-faceted exploration attends to "what is being observed but also to the intention of the one doing the observing and to the modes through which the phenomenon is 'given' in the first place."[10] Between these two questions Merleau-Ponty focuses on the latter question of the *how* and acknowledges the impossibility of completely answering the first question of the *what*.

Investigation of the *how* requires awareness of the lived world, of the layer of living phenomena. Husserl and Merleau-Ponty argue that all our initial contact with the world occurs phenomenally, rather than already, clearly, distinguishable as subjective or objective. The lived world is an open-ended framework with meaning complexes.[11] Husserl's lived world steers in between the unnecessary setup of stark contrast between the naturalism of empiricism and the psychologism of intellectualism, where one reduces the world either to that which exists out there, or to the projections of consciousness. Instead, Husserl offers the phenomenal world in between the two contrasts. Ronald Bruzina describes Husserl's understanding of phenomena as follows: "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."[12] Such an understanding of our phenomenal relations with the world depicts 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.[13] 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 or the theme with its horizon. 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."[14] Empiricism and intellectualism recognize only the first condition of unity within the theme and fails 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 perceives the theme because and with the horizon. One would not perceive the theme without its horizon; one would not recognize the theme within a different horizon. Rather, an optimal relation must exist between the theme and the horizon for perception of the theme.[15]

Epistemological Implications of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

High Altitude Thinkers

Merleau-Ponty christens the epistemological quagmires of traditional philosophy as "high-altitude thinking." He uses this term in a thoroughly negative connotation. Admittedly, Merleau-Ponty does not discriminate in his application of the title of high-altitude thinking.[16]

High-altitude thinking holds the following two positions. Martin Dillon provides the two initial misguided tenets. First, high-altitude thinkers commit what Merleau-Ponty calls the experience error. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor explain this "experience error"; they write, "perception ends in objects and so, once constituted, these objects, and not the body's creativity or movement of transcendence, appear 'as the reason for all experience of [them] which we have or could have.'"[17] Because perception and our experience of the world results in objects, we mistakenly believe that all our perception and experience of the world must be complete. In perceiving, we are not aware that our initial experiences of the world are phenomenal; so we simply presume that we see the objects, the scenery, and the theme in their entirety. The experience error explains how we forget about our active involvement in the act of perception. High-altitude thinkers claim complete knowledge of objects not realizing that such completeness can only be mistaken.

Second, high altitude thinkers maintain the prejudice of determinate being, that "things are in themselves, completely and unambiguously determined."[18] They move through, live and access the world confidant that the things in the world are fully formed, that they are not subject to change. The prejudice of determinate being ultimately is a position that claims access to infinity. This is not to suggest that any of the philosophers earlier listed under the heading of high altitude thinkers claim access to infinity. But in their lack of a philosophical framework that accommodates the possibility that the objects in the world change, they inadvertently claim access to infinity. Merleau-Ponty argues against the possibility of thought thinking into eternity.[19] The prejudice of determinate being, that "things are in themselves completely and unambiguously determined," implies a confidence in the stability of all things. Such faith in the static state of all objects in the world presumes access to eternity.

Merleau-Ponty does not accept these two features because they transform perception into thought about things. Against such mental acrobatics, he insists, "the real has to be described, not constructed or formed," and "there is no inner man, man is in the world."[20] Merleau-Ponty argues that we can never eliminate our phenomenal encounter with the world. Dillon explains, "clarity and distinctness . . . are incompatible with externality. What is external to me must, by that fact alone, transcend me in some degree. . . . But what is transcendent is, by definition, not fully known; it is attended by a modicum of opacity—that opacity being phenomenal evidence for its transcendence."[21] Merleau-Ponty insists the world must transcend us to some degree. This insistence portrays his respect for the world and ensures that our knowledge of the world could truly reflect the world and are not simply constructions of our minds. Knowledge of the world must transcend us and we must remain immanent within ourselves.

Phenomenological Openness

We have the reasons for Merleau-Ponty's disparagement of high altitude thinkers; we must now see if phenomenology avoids these dilemmas. He insists knowledge is open, ambiguous, and contextual. Phenomenology centers on ambiguity and indeterminacy. Merleau-Ponty writes, "ambiguity is of the essence of human existence, and everything we live or think has always several meanings. . . . Thus there is in human existence a principle of indeterminacy . . . it is the very process whereby the hitherto meaningless takes on meaning."[22]

Two sources of ambiguity concern me here. First, let me elaborate on the second feature in gestalt theory, the principle of contextual relevancy. The delicate balance in the relationship between the theme and the horizon co-determines the gestaltian framework. Distance exists between the theme and the horizon.[23] This distance plays a formative role in perceiving and experiencing the theme. There is an optimum spatial distance for looking at objects in the world; the object, close up, such as in microscopic views, may be unrecognizable, or the same object in two or three times the distance appears quite different, such as in aerial views. The time of looking at the theme matters, much as a child sees very different things in a room than an adult, much as one's work looks very different in the morning than in the previous evening. These two senses of distance are perhaps the easiest aspect of the horizon to articulate. For the distance in the horizon refers to so much more than this. Because of the relevance of the distance, if one were to move the theme to another horizon, it cannot be recognized as identical, not without explanations and encouragements. Hence the insistence that perception occurs through a context depicts the ambiguity of phenomena.

The second ambiguity centers on the role of the human body. The distance between the perceived and the perceiver signals the historicity, the subjectivity—the immanence from which the individual perceives. For much of the reason why each body occupies a unique position within the horizon is because each body also carries within itself a horizon of personal experiences.[24] These two ambiguities are only a few of the ambiguities that exist within gestaltian frameworks. Yet these two ambiguities illustrate how phenomenology arrives at situatedness. Merleau-Ponty explains that knowledge arises from our specific situations in the world.[25] Obviously this is a position much discussed, especially in the works of feminists. As situated, each body has a blind spot; the subject cannot be fully self-conscious of the situations of her own body at any moment.

So why value openness and ambiguity? Open and ambiguous knowledge permits the possibility of becoming and change. The tenets of high altitude thinking do not account for the possibility of becoming; according to their epistemological framework, every feature in the world is complete, until all time. Within a gestaltian framework, knowledge of the world is centrifugal and centripetal to the world; knowledge of the world must derive from the world and refer to the world.[26] Hence knowledge can evolve and grow.

The openness and ambiguity in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology permit change and becoming, but precisely because of this, it is subject to bias.[27] There are two sources of bias—from incompleteness and from subjective prejudice. Perception is open to bias because it is always incomplete and because the subject always perceives with the weight of her background. Merleau-Ponty understands that because of the immanence of the subject and the transcendence of the world, the seer and the seen can never exactly concur. It is not that he nonchalantly dismisses the relevance of bias; he does fear bias. Merleau-Ponty recognizes the epistemological dangers of maintaining bias in coming to knowledge about the world. His consolation lies in his belief in the occurrence of the daily small miracle of perception. The daily miracle is that although we are situated in our unique positions within the horizon in relation to the theme, somehow we come to agree that we see the same theme. Aside from this consolation, there is no way of avoiding bias. The two sources of bias arise really from one simple fact—the finitude of phenomena—and this simply cannot be avoided. Hence, in a position that agrees with numerous feminists, Merleau-Ponty opposes omniscience and proposes finitude and situatedness as the true ground for perception and knowledge of the world.

Towards a Lived Sense of Race and Sex

By prioritizing open and ambiguous knowledge, Merleau-Ponty's work paves the way towards understanding a lived sense of race and sex. For the reason for the limited view of racism as merely prejudice, a mistaken conscious prejudgment or as a subjective bias, may result from the possibility that the dominant epistemological framework is of high altitude thinking. This analysis constrains understanding race and sex by isolating it to a specific, deterministic, essential source.

Phenomenology illuminates six concerns in regards to racism. First, in regards to the analysis that racism results from subjective bias, eliminating such subjective bias becomes the only solution. Merleau-Ponty's work contests the possibility of eliminating bias. All subjects necessarily hold bias precisely because of the historical, cultural, social, gendered—situated nature of our lives. Only an epistemological framework that presumes the possibility of eliminating bias can define racism as bias. Such a framework fails to recognize the very real situatedness of human lives, and that, bias is an inherent part of our reality. For an epistemology that accepts the unavoidability of bias positing that racism is a subjective bias adds nothing to further the understanding of racism.

Second, turning to the belief that racism is prejudice, that racism is a mistaken prejudgment made in thought, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology proposes that racism occurs in the immediate and bodily act of perceiving and experiencing the world. Because our contact with the world transpires within a gestaltian framework, perception occurs within a horizon of contexts, meanings, and prejudgments already prevailing in the social cultural environment. In the immediacy of perception and bodily experience, all these prejudgments already function; we need not blame consciousness for these mistakes. We need to understand the immediate, moment by moment experience with its accumulation of small interactions in living every day with certain body features that serve as the vehicles for these prejudgments and biases. Racism functions sedimented in the immediate bodily functions; it is much more immediate than thought. Consequently to address racism, an understanding of the bodily experience and its daily interactions are necessary; a lived understanding of race and sex is necessary.

Third, the notion of prejudice and bias suggests that one can separate the seen in the world from their significations, from their meaning. Because of this belief, the common solution for racism proffers neutrality in one's judgments. The solution of colorblindness and neutrality hinges on the possibility of seeing body features in this world without attributing any meaning about the person exhibiting these features. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology denies the possibility of this separation between the feature and its meaning; his work counters the possibility of perceiving neutrally. Perception occurs within a gestaltian framework, one cannot perceive without a horizon. Much like the impossibility of eliminating bias, colorblindness and neutrality in perception is unfeasible.

Fourth, as Omi and Winant's definition of race explains, both the symbol (the feature of the body expressing race or sex) and the sign (the racial or sexual meaning of the feature of the body) change over time. Clearly racism has not been static. Racism has not simply focused on skin color or on one meaning of that skin color. This dual-faceted definition of race explains why colorblindness is not a solution for racism. The solution of colorblindness presumes that skin color is the only symbol of race; it alone has statically served as the indicator of race. Omi and Winant's definition of race suggests that even if all citizens successfully keep separate the symbol from its racial signification, as the solution of colorblindness promotes, another part of the body can eventually serve as the indicator of race. Race and racism are far from isolate-able to a static expression that can be addressed once and for all. We must address race through its metamorphosis.

Racism has been dynamic; I would say that the expressions of racism have been downright creative in its multiple expressions. Even a cursory look at the history of colonialism, the statements of enlightenment philosophers, the international policies of the United States, the works of scientists, as well as our daily interactions with those whom we characterize as others—racism obviously expresses itself in creative ways. Omi and Winant's definition illuminates Goldberg's paradox. His paradox

suggests that today racism expresses itself in a different form. A phenomenological framework accounts for this multiplicity, because the open, ambiguous gestaltian framework accommodates change. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology acknowledges that we cannot have absolute knowledge and that the objects of our knowledge are not completely and infinitely determined. Within this epistemological framework, we need not reduce racism into one form of expression; we may admit that expressions of racism evolve and transform.

Fifth, I suggested in the introduction that a lived understanding could better address the experiences of women of color. The biggest difficulty in conceptualizing the experiences of women of color has been how to treat both the experiences of race and sex without completely separating them or simply analogizing between the two. I suggest that phenomenology's open framework sustains the ambiguous relationship between the two experiences. Women of color can speculate and propose that one experience arose because of racism, while another occurred because of sexism, that yet another resulted from an indeterminate combination of the two, or that it was simply the product of a miscommunication. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology permits all these options without consistently and reductively positing that only one "ism" must be responsible for all experiences of all women of color. Within a phenomenological framework, ambiguity exists for the multiple understanding of both race and sex for women of color.[28]

Finally, the phenomenological framework outlined here explains one final aspect of racism, a feature unabsorbed within the traditional static conception of racism. Williams writes that both a white man and a black female asked her if she "really identified as black."[29] She explains that she absorbs the question very differently from the two. Phenomenology with its insistence on the horizon and on the situatedness of the subject accounts for Williams's reactions and the possibility that the same words may have different meanings depending on who expresses them. High altitude thinking's emphasis on isolated, total, and static knowledge cannot accommodate the varying meanings of these words and people. According to this traditional framework, one can only relegate Williams's reactions to her own bias (need I say, as reverse racism) because the sentiment that she does not identify as black must be true no matter who expresses it. Phenomenology insists that the context, the horizon matters in the perceptions, the experiences and finally the understandings of signification. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology reconciles the possibility that Williams can determine the truth of this statement from her relation with the speakers and her assessment of the speakers' knowledge of white and black Americans.

I do not claim to have clearly demarcated how to achieve a lived understanding of race and sex. But hopefully I have clarified the value of exploring a lived sense of race and sex.[30]

ENDNOTES

1. David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Cultures: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), 6.
2. Linda Martín Alcoff, "Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment," *Journal of Radical Philosophy* 92 (May/June 1999): 16.
3. Endnote Text
4. Gary Peller, "Race-Consciousness," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, eds. Kimberle Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995), 129.
5. See Alcoff, "Toward a Phenomenology" and Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: The Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).
6. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology denies such a division of the subject into the body and the person within.
7. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55. Author's italics.

8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 57.
9. Gail Weiss, *body images: embodiment as intercorporeality* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 41.
10. Ibid.
11. Ronald Bruzina, *Logos and Eidos* (Paris: Mouton, 1970), 73.
12. Ibid., 53.
13. M. C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 59–60.
14. Ibid., 67–68. See also Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 302.
15. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 205.
16. See ibid., 19, 30, and 36, for just a few of the times that he uses this description. He criticizes not only intellectualists, but also empiricists, and even psychologists as "high altitude thinkers." He also quite liberally categorizes various thinkers under these headings such as Plato, Kant, Descartes and Freud under intellectualists, and Locke and Hume under empiricists. But this is not surprising, for Husserl originally delineates the phenomenological position from the naïve certainty of both empiricism and intellectualism. Under such circumstances, only a phenomenological investigation avoids high-altitude thinking.
17. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, "Introduction: The Value of Flesh: Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy and the Modernism/Postmodernism Debate," *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, ed. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 5. They cite from the *Phenomenology*, 67, 70, and 71. The term "experience error" is from *Phenomenology*, 5.
18. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 62.
19. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 38. The entire passage reads, "we shall not reach this constitutive dimension if we replace the plenary unity of consciousness by a completely transparent subject, and the 'hidden act' which calls up meaning from 'the depths of nature', but some eternal thought." Comparing this with Aristotle would be interesting, but needless to say, I do not address this any further here.
20. Ibid., x–xi.
21. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 18.
22. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 169. See also Henri Maldiney, "Flesh and Verb in the Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty," *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*. He writes, "ambiguity is as essential to being as transcendence. This ambiguity is the sign of a divergence" (61).
23. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 23. See also 12.
24. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 238. See also Richard Wolin's wonderful explanation of Merleau-Ponty renouncing all suppositions of "epistemological transparency: that is, the idea that somehow our knowledge of things could ever be exhaustive, consummate, and pure. For it is the perennially situated nature of the knowing subject that mocks omniscience and suggests finitude as the true transcendental ground of cognition." "Merleau-Ponty and the Birth of Weberian Marxism," *Praxis International* 5 (July 1985): 117.
25. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, viii. See also xi.
26. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 45. See also 87.
27. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 91.
28. This leaves open the question of determining an inadequate understanding of an experience. Not all explanations are correct, and ambiguity does not imply that any explanation of an experience suffices. I hope this essay explains at least that Merleau-Ponty provides the beginnings of an explanation, in his insistence that different perspectives are valuable to the extent that they can assist in coming to a better perception of the theme. Different perspectives can encourage communication to promote a more accurate perception of the theme.
29. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 10.
30. I cannot thank enough Linda Martín Alcoff's patience and guidance; this paper benefited greatly from her reading and rereading. I would also like to thank Gail Weiss for her detailed comments.

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