The Meaning of the Visible Differences of the Body

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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.¹

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 interface 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.²

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 that 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 maneuver. 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.³ Second, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the importance of the experiences that bodies undergo. He writes, "I] is to experience ... that the ultimate ontological power belongs."⁴ Merleau-Ponty takes experience seriously.³ Third, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological framework is a philosophies of becoming. Merleau-Ponty's system separates away from a philosophy of being, towards a philosophy of becoming.⁵ 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.⁶ 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 discourses meaning. For Merleau-Ponty creation occurs in the moment of the awakening of attention.⁷

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.⁸ 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."¹⁰ 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."¹¹ As the subject, James Phillips associates the invisible with the unconscious.¹² 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."¹³ Or, the Invisible is, as Henri Maldiney writes, "the depth of the world ... the unexpected of the world."¹⁴

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."¹⁵Visibility 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
them." Chiasm refers to reversibility. Chiasm refers to the
reversibility between me and the other, intersubjectivity.
Chiasm refers to the reversibility between the subject and the
world. Merleau-Ponty posits reversibility between all the
prevalent and famous dichotomies. With the notion of the
flesh and chiasm, Merleau-Ponty collapses traditional, sacred
dualities. Alphonso Lingis beautifully states, "this intertwining,
this chiasm effected across the substance of the flesh is the
inaugural event of visibility."18

Within the shimmering between the visible and the
invisible, through the chiasmic medium of the flesh, perception
occurs. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor eloquently describe
this shimmering in terms of a dialogue:

According to 'objective thought'... perception either
mirrors a fully determinate object (empiricism) or
constitutes an object in light of a fully determinate
idea (intellectualism). In contrast... like a dialogue,
perception leads the subject to draw together the
sense diffused throughout the object while,
simultaneously, the object solicits and unifies the
intentions of the subject.19

Consonant with the numerous manifestations of the
visible and the invisible, the dialogue occurs through a variety
of mediums or relationships. The dialogue occurs between
the intentionality of the subject and the transcendence of the
object.20 The dialogue occurs also within the function of time.
Hence, Gail Weiss depicts the dialogue as, "[r]anscendence
as a sense of openness to future projects as an existence-for-
itsel and Immanence as a sense of rootedness to the past
stemming from one's objectification as a being-for-others."21
The dialogue occurs not simply within the vacillation of
movement between the subject and the object, but within a
vacillation inherent in the subject herself living within time
and facing oneself and the world. Perception occurs,
amazingly enough, through this heavy thickness of time and
space, a thickness in which time and the objects of the world
do not sit unobtrusively aside, but impinge, melt, and spill over
into the intricacies of flesh. Perception occurs through a haze
of ambiguity.

The Creation of Meaning

Because perception occurs through this ambiguity, the
possibility of creativity exists within perception. Merleau-
Ponty's ultimate goal of searching for meaning is a search for
creativity. Evans and Lawlor show the possibility of creativity
within the vacillation of perception. They write, the dialogue
"provides a direction for the becoming of both subjects and
objects and yet retains the degree of indeterminacy or
ambiguity required for the creative contributions of subjects
and for the surprises that the world harbors."22 It is because
the flesh is so dense, so rich, so indeterminate that Merleau-
Ponty ultimately locates creation here. Merleau-Ponty is not
simply speaking of the creation of a few anomalies, Merleau-
Ponty addresses the birth of the very forms that Plato made
famous, the norms of society, and the significations for
understanding. Merleau-Ponty searches for "the very
appearance of the world and not the condition of its possibility;
it is the birth of a norm and is not realized according to a
norm."22

Merleau-Ponty provides a very possible account of how
creation might occur, and a generous reading of Merleau-Ponty
would argue that he succeeds. Merleau-Ponty provides a likely
account of the circumstances of how creativity might occur,
but yet is there explicit guidance for creating in his account
aside from the establishment of this novel framework of
perception and embellishments in nomenclature.

Merleau-Ponty's work does not answer the questions:
how does meaning arise, when one is solely a sum of one's
experiences? How does one create when one is a product of
the given world? Merleau-Ponty's analysis plants the seeds
for the search for meaning, yet ultimately he does not succeed
in showing exactly how the moment of creation happens.
Merleau-Ponty simply writes that "if, through all these
experiences, some unique function finds its expression, it is
the momentum of existence."24

The Symbols on the Body: the Meanings about the
Person

It is precisely these questions that haunt the analysis of race
and sex. Racism and sexism hinge on the visible features of
the body, even though the visible features of the body are
completely arbitrary.25 The features of the body are the symbols
for racism and sexism without which racist or sexist
occurrences cannot be understood as racist or sexist.26
Through the visible differences of the body, one conjectures
about the invisible differences of the person.27

Yet human bodies have visibly similar features as well as
visibly different features. Racism and sexism utilize certain
visibly different features. Is it that visibly same features are
not so meaningful, while visibly different features indicating
skin color and sex are so meaningful? Of course, one answer,
much familiar after the works of Nietzsche and Foucault,
is the institutionalization of the discrimination.28

Institutionalization does not explain all of racism and
sexism, particularly the lived, every day experience of racism
and sexism. For as Merleau-Ponty recognizes even with the
institutionalization of discrimination, every individual is
responsible for every act of discrimination. As Merleau-Ponty
writes, an institutionalized 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."29 To understand the lived level of the discrimination
one must understand the meaning that the visibly different
body features have attained. Consequently one prominently
recalls, beckons, and focuses on such body features. It is to
such a phenomenon that Omi and Winant, Alcoff, Williams
and others refer when speaking of the naturalized status of
the visibly different body features.30 The prominent visibility
of body features indicating race and sex is a function of the
signification these features have taken on.

The Asian American Woman's Body

Although I am frustrated with Merleau-Ponty for failing to
provide a definitive answer, I believe his phenomenological
framework is especially useful for addressing two particular
endemic qualities of racism and sexism. The first, as indicated
above his analysis helps reach the lived sense of living in a
society with racist and sexist significations embedded in the
invisible. And second, his work facilitates understanding the
particular situation of women of color. For women of color
continually disappear in the current predominant analyses of
race and sex. As Elizabeth Spelman elucidated almost twenty
years ago, it is the amorphous problem; the current analyses
of sexism and racism leave the impression that there cannot
be an experience of both sexism and racism simultaneously—
for all people of color are men and all women are white. To
illustrate the usefulness of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological
system, I apply the framework of the visible and the invisible
to a reading of Chanda Talpade Mohanty's article, "Defining
Genealogies: Feminist Reflections of Being South Asian in
North America."
On a TWA flight on my way back to the U.S. ... the professional white man sitting next to me asks: (a) which school do I go to? and (b) when do I plan to go home? ... I put on my most professional demeanor (somewhat hard in crumpled blue jeans and cotton t-shirt)—this uniform only works for white male professors, who of course could command authority even in swimwear!—and inform him that I teach at a small liberal arts college in upstate New York and that I have lived in the U.S. for fifteen years. ... Being mistaken for a graduate student seems endemic to my existence in this country. Few Third World women are granted professional (i.e., adult) and/or permanent (one is always a student!) status in the U.S. ... He ventures a further question: what do you teach? On hearing "Women's Studies" he becomes quiet and we spend the next eight hours in polite silence. He has decided that I do not fit into any of his categories.31

To understand why Mohanty takes such offense in this seemingly innocuous interaction, is to understand the lived sense of racism and/or sexism precisely in these innocent, banal, and what the 'professional white male' probably considers a friendly interrogation. To understand this interaction, we must recognize that Mohanty's body spurs the particular questions from the "professional white male." It is unclear if either the female or the racial features motivate the questions. One can make arguments for either characteristic: for women of color it may be that the conglomeration of both features hurtles the association. The extent of the difficulty in delineating precisely which "ism" beckons the connection is endemic to women of color.

Mohanty's body as a female and as a person with Asian features motivates the first question and the meaning, student; her body reads as still growing. Perhaps the assumed national origin of the body, the third world, an undeveloped or a developing nation, associates the individual with the not yet developed, the not yet professional status.

Perhaps her body features going to the United States only occurs if she is a student; her body features read as a temporary resident of the United States. This connection explains the "professional white male's" second question. The curiosity in regards to her return home illustrates a lack of connection with Asian female bodies and the United States. Moreover, that he the "professional white male" independently seizes the privileged position in posing such a question implies that his white male body has some closer association with the United States. Although generations of Asian Americans have inhabited the United States for over a century, including South Asians, the "professional white male" regards his own body as having a closer affinity to the United States.

Perhaps her body's class association inspires the "professional white male's" questions. Dark Asian female bodies—read "poor"—and unable to afford the flight from the Netherlands unless it is a momentous life event en route from another country. Pointedly, Mohanty provides us with a depiction of the clothes she was wearing, assuring us that such a uniform does not command authority on her body. Mohanty insinuates that white male bodies mean middle class, hence white male bodies in jeans and t-shirt can still be recognized as simply in casual, comfortable clothes and not that such clothes are the only clothes "professional white male" bodies possess. Whereas dark Asian female bodies mean poverty; to defy the meaning of her body as poor and as not professional, the jeans and t-shirt do not suffice.

I do not present this reading to argue that the "professional white male" is racist or sexist, but rather to investigate the incredible informative content of the two bodies. To the "professional white male," Mohanty's body conveys information about her stage of educational and professional development, her country of residence, her class level, and finally her area of specialization—witness the silence upon being informed that she is a professor of Women's Studies. Her body apparently does not read as a feminist. The ignorance of so much meaning the "professional white male" instantly reads on the body of this Asian female elucidates the invisible significations with which he perceives. Mohanty's exasperation, with which I can readily empathize, is precisely with the presumption of the "professional white male" to know so much about her, to categorize her, to essentialize her. But that Mohanty sees so much meaning about this "professional white male" also clearly illustrates the embedded, endemic quality of seeing through the denseness of flesh.

Conclusion

Merleau-Ponty's work implies that every racist and sexist perception is a missed opportunity for creativity. If racism and sexism are a result of the significations of the visible features of the body, to break out of the framework of racism and sexism requires an act of creation, an act in which the subject perceiving must see new meaning in the body features. Yet, creativity occurs within and because of the shimmering of the visible and the invisible; and Merleau-Ponty does not show us how to actually create the invisible itself. But perhaps a systematic attempt to reach creativity belies the nature of creativity.

Endnotes


20. Barbaras 82.


26. I can cite extensively in this regard. Consider Patricia Williams, who recounts her experiences publishing an article explicating her own quite famous case of being denied entrance to a Benetton store. Williams writes that the editors erased all references to the fact that she is a black woman, effectively erasing all means for understanding that she was denied entrance because of racism. Williams writes that “[t]hat was most interesting to me in this experience was how the blind application of principles of neutrality, through the device of omission, acted either to make me look crazy or to make the reader participate in old habits of cultural bias.” (The Ichery of Race and Rights (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981, 48.)


30. Omi and Winant, 60.


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

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Anyone who teaches college in California knows the importance of including groups other than blacks and whites in discussions of the social and political implications of race. In a larger project, I aim to do this by considering certain parallels, as well as some important discontinuities, between Asian-Pacific-American panethnic identity and the panethnic identities of other minority groups in America, in particular, Latinos, Native Americans and African Americans. I aim to draw attention to a social dynamic underlying the social identities of racial groups, more notice able from a panethnic standpoint, that operates under the guise of a biological concept of race, and thereby reiterates the legitimacy of that notion. Here I can only present a brief sketch of how I propose to apply a panethmic model, as a general account of racial identity in America, to Asian-Pacific-Americans. Certain sociopolitical aspects of Asian-Pacific-American panethnicity seem to destabilize the biological concept. What is of special interest is the manner in which panethnic identity incorporates a biological notion of race despite these destabilizing factors. In what follows I focus on the situation of Asian-Pacific-Americans (APAs) to provide a brief sketch of my general account of how a destabilized biological concept of race can be reconstructed to provide a politicized racial (rather than cultural) ground for panethnic identity.

Panethnicity seems to be an internally and externally driven social formation, nurtured by a largely mass-media-based discourse on race, that posits a racial identity across diverse cultural groups in accordance with a time-honored three-race ideology—specifically, yellow, black and white. The unspoken assumption underlying the idea of panethnic identity is that within each biological racial group there are ethnic subdivisions. When necessary, as in the case of Latinos, this assumption is sometimes amended to accommodate “mixels” of the three major racial groups. On this view of race, Asian-Pacific-Americans, like blacks and whites, can be identified by reference to certain group-specific physical characteristics that serve as biological criteria. What is rarely acknowledged by subscribers to this view is the extent to which racial identification based on physical characteristics, and hence, its use as a ground for social practices that grant privileges and deny rights, is phenemological. Instead, we are led to believe that the science of anthropology has, in some objective manner, established that there are these three races. In many parts of the world, especially Latin America, racial identification by a third party is based primarily on how a person “looks,” but, in the United States, it matters also whether a person is known to be related to someone who “looks” black. Naomi Zack and other mixed-race black people