

# LIVING ALTERITIES

*Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*

EDITED BY EMILY S. LEE

**SUNY**  
PRESS

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including the experience of the millions of light-skinned African Americans in the United States (and African Europeans more generally), quite a few of whom can pass as white just as he claims the Jew can pass as a non-Jew. Presumably, Fanon would view such light-skinned Blacks as overdetermined from within, like the Jew, and not necessarily overdetermined from without, like their darker-skinned brethren.

36. Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, 117 (my emphasis).

37. *Ibid.*, 117.

38. Iris Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 53.

## TEN

# BODY MOVEMENT AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR A SITUATION

EMILY S. LEE

## Introduction

In place of the impossible impasse between the body as object and the mind as subject, perhaps Maurice Merleau-Ponty's most important and radical proposal remains that the subject is embodied. Between the facticity of the material world and the ideality of meanings, Merleau-Ponty recognizes that the body-subject epitomizes the complex relation between the two spheres without splitting into duality and without positing a monadology. This integration of the matter of the body and the consciousness of the subject—this reconceptualization of the subject as embodied or the body as conscious—undergirds the inextricable tie between our subjectivity and the world. We interact with the world far more intimately because of the intricate and inherent condition of always, already, immediately being-in-the-world.

In trying to understand the meaning and the implications of such intimacy between subjectivity and the world in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues that the body in its movement generates space and time. Body movement generates *phenomenological space and time*. Within this paper, I clarify this, as yet, underappreciated position in the *Phenomenology of Perception* to tie this position with Merleau-Ponty's conception of freedom. Understanding that body movements generate space and time explains Merleau-Ponty's position (following Martin Heidegger) that for human beings, to claim responsibility, they must accept their entire situation. One cannot truly

claim freedom and blame fate; one can only claim true freedom by accepting responsibility for one's own individual actions and situations.

Responsibility for one's situation is especially presently poignant for whiteness studies to recognize the current position whiteness occupies in society. Studies on whiteness explain the existence of ineffable privileges in simply being white or possessing a white body and the comportment of white bodies. Such experiential privileges with real social-structural benefits come from a particular history, a history of colonialism, slavery, and segregation. Because the privileges emblemize this history, in a controversial and radical move, whiteness theorists recognize the responsibility for situations not of one's own making and do not limit responsibility to only the results from one's immediate personal decisions and acts within one's lifetime. Radical whiteness theorists advocate responsibility for one's situation, not simply the situation one creates for oneself through a series of actions, but including the history into which one is born. But this position has not received widespread acceptance, and without accepting this position, one of the strongest arguments against affirmative action policies has been that whites today should not be held accountable for the sins of their forerunners. The recognition that freedom includes responsibility for the situations in which one finds oneself, including the situations of one's birth, posits that whites today should be held responsible for their forerunners' actions. Merleau-Ponty's analysis that body movements generate space and time fills in some of the details to substantiate this responsibility for the situations of one's birth.

#### Phenomenology and the Body

Let me begin with Merleau-Ponty's position on the centrality of the subject as embodied. He writes, "the alleged facts, the spatio-temporal individuals, are from the first mounted on the axes, the pivots, the dimensions, the generality of my body." The body "is the mesurant of all, Nullpunkt of all the dimensions of the world"; the body is "a heavy signification."<sup>1</sup> As phenomenally experienced, embodied subjectivity is ambiguous. But in order for embodied subjectivity to be ambiguous, the body defies the law of noncontradiction. The body is matter and is not matter.<sup>2</sup> The body is mechanistic and intentional; the body is sentient and sensible. These contradictory ambiguities reflect embodiment as reflexive; one can feel oneself touching oneself and see oneself looking at oneself.<sup>3</sup> The subject is reflexive in the intertwining of the psychological, intellectual, and subjective with the material, biological,

and natural features of embodiment. This intertwining of the body and the world explains that our bodies intertwine with others in the world and the intersubjectivity is not a problem for Merleau-Ponty.<sup>4</sup>

Instead of getting caught in the debate and confusion about exactly what constitutes body image and body schema,<sup>5</sup> let me turn to a less attended discussion on body movement. Attending to body movement facilitates an appreciation of the intimate relation between embodiment and the world. I begin with what body movement is not. Body movement does not occur solely as the result of physical causality—such a depiction treats the body as only matter. Body movement does not occur like the movement of physical materials, which relies on an alternative exterior physical force. Alternatively, body movement does not result simply from conscious intentions because body movement does not directly fulfill conscious aims. The mind does not function as the sole originator of body movement. Such a belief errs toward a psychological or cognitive conception of the subject that persists in conveying the body as simply a vehicle that carries forth the decisions and desires of something internal to itself. For as much as one may aim to run a mile within a specific time, most people cannot directly fulfill such an aim without much bodily conditioning. Merleau-Ponty recognizes body movement as "something between movement as a third person process and thought as a representation of movement—something which is an anticipation of, or arrival at, the objective."<sup>6</sup>

Dismissing the traditional explanations for body movement, Merleau-Ponty offers the idea of body motility. Merleau-Ponty proposes that the body retains its own intentionality.<sup>7</sup> Appreciating the idea of body intentionality requires understanding 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.<sup>8</sup> Such an intentionality is familiar to liberal political theorists as *agency*. Operative intentionality, first introduced by Edmund Husserl, refers to an intentionality already functioning within the world. Merleau-Ponty describes operative intentionality: "the 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."<sup>9</sup> Operative intentionality depicts an intentionality always already present in the world because we occupy a specific spatial and historical location within a community. Merleau-Ponty eventually relies less heavily on the notion of intentionality, both act and operative. Intentionality evokes too much of an affinity with consciousness, and

Merleau-Ponty aspires to understand embodiment in both its materiality and cognitive ability. He continues to explore the notion of operative intentionality in other forms. For although Merleau-Ponty recognizes the limitations of the notion of intentionality, he appreciates the idea of a guiding influence from and within the world.<sup>10</sup>

Within the relationship between act and operative intentionality or the relationship between the significance of an individual act to the meanings operative in the world lies body motility. Merleau-Ponty writes, “[a]lready motility, in its pure state, possesses the basic power of giving a meaning.”<sup>11</sup> Body intentionality captures precisely the body in movement from the individual, immediate, and actual intentionality to the community, world, potential, and operative intentionality. The two movements form a unique relationship that demonstrates the intertwining of the self and the world.<sup>12</sup> The movement from the immediate to the surrounding world is a movement from the space of the concrete now to the space of the abstract future. The immediate vicinity that the body in action, the habitual body, establishes around itself provides the setting for body movement to extend toward possible and creative space. Merleau-Ponty describes the movement from the lived to the abstract space as a spiraling centrifugal movement.<sup>13</sup> The body in movement projects beyond itself.<sup>14</sup>

With the understanding that body movement connects act and operative intentionality from somewhere between a physical or mental force, what is the source for the beginning of body motility? Martin Dillon argues that body movements arise from habitual body movement, which possesses a nonending impetus of continual, ritualized movement.<sup>15</sup> Although this sounds persuasive, I do not find this explanation to sufficiently or fully explain body movement. Dillon explains habitual movement already in motion, but he does not explain what initiates habitual movement. All bodies do not develop exactly the same habitual body movements. Moreover, habitual body movements do not all continue forever. Habits and habitual movements begin, change, and end.<sup>16</sup> Body movement, and especially that which initiates and ends habitual movements, still requires explanation.

#### The Body Generates Space and Time

At this point, drawing from the understanding that body intentionality moves us from actual space to potential space, and to determine what initiates body movement, I turn to a lesser-known position from Merleau-Ponty that body

movement generates space and time.<sup>17</sup> Let me begin by citing a few tantalizing lines that initially led me to this conclusion. Merleau-Ponty writes, “[t]here must be as Kant conceded a ‘motion which generates space’ which is our intentional motion, distinct from ‘motion in space,’ which is that of things and of our passive body.”<sup>18</sup> And alternatively, “[m]y body takes possession of time . . . it . . . creates time.”<sup>19</sup> Additionally, he writes, “by considering the body in movement, we can see better how it inhabits space (and, moreover, time) because movement is not limited to, submitted passively to space and time, it actively assumes them.”<sup>20</sup> The possibility of body movement generating space and time is the inevitable, remarkable conclusion from Merleau-Ponty’s works.

To elaborate how and exactly in what sense the body generates space and time, let me address each in turn. First, in turning to the possibility of generating space, Iris Marion Young’s classic essay, “Throwing Like a Girl,” demonstrates well Merleau-Ponty’s notion of phenomenal space as distinct from objective space. Whereas in objective space all positions are external to each other and hence interchangeable, in phenomenal space positions are distinctly personal. Body motility establishes such subjective experience of space.<sup>21</sup> Upon describing girls’ body movements when throwing a baseball, Young explains that girls’ body movements characterize the specific space they occupy. Without going too much into the details of Young’s well-known article, she describes three features of girls’ body movements as demonstrating “ambiguous transcendence,” “inhibited intentionality,” and “discontinuous unity.”

Within Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, all body movements ambiguously transcend to a certain extent because the subject is embodied. Existentialism forwards that subjectivity demands transcendence; nevertheless, Young contends girls’ body movements never quite transcend as much as boys’ body movements. The lack of fluidity and confidence in girls’ body movements while throwing a baseball illustrate ambiguous transcendence. Girls’ body movements are overlaid with immanence.<sup>22</sup>

Consistent with act intentionality and body motility, Young explains that generally body intentionality represents a resolve, an “I can” to carry out one’s aims.<sup>23</sup> Yet, Young argues that girls’ body movements, not drawing from the entire body and full body strength, exhibit an overlay of a sense of fragility conveying a broken intentionality, an inhibited intentionality.

Finally, recall that Merleau-Ponty understands the body as intrinsically reflexive between subjectivity and the world. As reflexive, the body posesses an immediate intertwining with the world. Young writes about body

movements that, “[b]y projecting an aim toward which it moves, the body brings unity to and unites itself with its surroundings.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, again, girls’ body movements exhibit, in their limited and nonfluid use of space, a discontinuous unity with their surroundings.

These body movements correlate—indeed create—a specific space that circumscribes the girls’ bodies. Young distinguishes three ways the space around girls’ bodies differs from that of boys. She argues that girls establish horizons that set the far reaches of one’s sense of space circling closer to the body than do boys. Within this restricted or smaller horizon, girls utilize the space in more limited ways. Young explains that girls divide the space in ways that do not make full use of spatial depth. Finally, the yonder beyond the horizon influences girls’ body movements less than boys’ body movements. In other words, girls do not reach out to move into the space beyond the horizon, into the yonder.<sup>25</sup>

Young’s essay is groundbreaking in its descriptions of the possible meanings of girls’ body movements when throwing a baseball, but she has been criticized as essentializing girls’ body movements—something she writes that she took pains to avoid. Rather, or in addition to reading Young’s work as essentializing girls’ body movements, a more generous reading suggests that her descriptions relay the historical sedimentation of bodily interactions, expectations, and scripts of girls and boys that have resulted in such body movements for at least until the 1980s and to some extent continues today. She is not saying such body movements are essential to girls, but that they are a result of a specific social historical horizon. Important to my present concern is not the accuracy of Young’s depiction of girls’ body movements and their associated space, but her illustration of Merleau-Ponty’s insistence on an immediate *correlation* between body movements and space. Young writes, “[f]or Merleau-Ponty, the body is the original subject that constitutes space; there would be no space without the body . . . Because the body as lived is not an object, it cannot be said to exist in space as water is in the glass . . . Body is space.”<sup>26</sup> Merleau-Ponty posits that body movements generate space; our body movements correlate to a size, type, and kind of space—a phenomenal space—which we create. Our body movements generate and establish a particular lived space.

Turning to the possibility that body movement generates time, I find it helpful to begin with some of Merleau-Ponty’s disagreements with previous philosophical attempts to understand time. Concurring with Henri Bergson, Merleau-Ponty opposes the idea that time objectively and successively flows. He writes, “the space and time of culture is not surveyable from above. . .

[and] do[es] not hold under their gaze a serial space and time nor the pure idea of series.”<sup>27</sup> Rather, time links distinctly to our body in movement. To illustrate this point, let us look at Bergson’s insistence on the importance of the *speed* of time. Bergson’s example of the flow of a film reel demonstrates that if time simply flows in infinitesimal, successive, and distinguishable moments, the speed at which a film strip plays would be inconsequential. At any speed, the film strip—discrete, serial pictures representing moments of time—is flowing. Yet we, human beings only appreciate the film within a small range of speeds; there is an *ideal* speed for the flow of the film. What exactly establishes this *ideal* speed? The speed of the film, the ideal pace of the flow of time depends on the subjects as embodied sitting and viewing the film.<sup>28</sup> The subject determines when time is flowing too fast or too slow. Both the constraints of the speed of thinking and the constraints of the speed of perceiving, because of the physicality of embodiment, sets the ideal speed of time. For this reason Bergson refers to time as intuition or as duration, for the speed of time’s flow is intimately tied to subjectivity. Bergson posits the existence of an experiential, a phenomenal time.

In stressing time’s intimacy with embodied subjectivity, however, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes his notion from Bergson’s conception of time as internal to the subject. Merleau-Ponty’s disagreement with Bergson is less well known than his agreement with Bergson on time’s status as external to the subject. Although appreciative of Bergson’s insight in establishing time’s tie to the subject, Merleau-Ponty writes in a footnote that “[t]he lived-through which Bergson sets over against the thought-about is for him an experience, an immediate ‘datum.’ But this is to seek a solution in ambiguity. Space, motion and time cannot be elucidated by discovering an ‘inner’ layer of experience in which their multiplicity is erased and really abolished.”<sup>29</sup> Merleau-Ponty opposes Bergson’s solution of “intuition” or “duration” because these notions simply hide the problem by burying it deep within the subject. Bergson’s solution of positing another layer of existence leaves time unintelligible.

If time is not objective and serialized, and time is not an intuitive duration, what does Merleau-Ponty offer? Consistent with other phenomenologists, Husserl and Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty’s theory of time is a theory of the present. He writes, “[t]he true place of philosophy is not time, in the sense of discontinuous time, nor is it the eternal. It is rather the ‘living present’—that is, the present in which the whole past, everything foreign, and the whole of the thinkable future are reanimated.”<sup>30</sup> Time flows; the past flows toward the present and the present continues into the future. Because time flows, it

is impossible to divide the flow of time into distinct moments statically identified as the past, the present, and the future. Yet, although time flows, the past does not predetermine the present,<sup>31</sup> and the future must remain unpredictable, for the present cannot decide the future. He describes the present as possessing an internal horizon—since past events accumulate within the present—and an external horizon—since the future lies beyond the present; “[t]he lived present holds a past and a future within its thickness.”<sup>32</sup>

The indeterminateness, the openness of time, even as it flows, eludes or defies identification as objective/external or intuitive/internal. To capture this particular sense of the flow of time, Merleau-Ponty focuses on the embodied subject's particular situation at the present moment, from which one experiences time. He writes, “[c]hange presupposes a certain position which I take up and from which I see things in procession before me: there are no events without someone to whom they happen and whose finite perspective is the basis of their individuality.”<sup>33</sup> From the subject's perspective, one experiences the flow of time.

So if time flows, but in a sense in which the present does not determine the future, in what sense does time flow? What are the meaning and the significance of the subject's perspective in experiencing the flow of time? Merleau-Ponty writes, “[t]ime is the one single movement appropriate to itself in all its parts . . . It is nothing but a general flight out of the Itself, the one law governing these centrifugal movements, or again, as Heidegger says, an *ekstase*.”<sup>34</sup> Drawing from Heidegger's notion of *ekstase* in its intimate connection with freedom,<sup>35</sup> Merleau-Ponty speculates that time self-generates; time self-produces. “Time is ‘affecting of self by self,’ what exerts the effect is time as a thrust and a passing towards a future: what is affected is time as an unfolded series of presents: the affecting agent and affected recipient are one, because the thrust of time is nothing but the transition from one present to another.”<sup>36</sup> Only in this sense does the present flow into the future. The present does not determine the future although the future must go through the present.<sup>37</sup> Because time self-generates, time does not flow like a stream, but rather like a fountain; time flows through a spout that constantly generates and renews itself at the present time. In place of a linear picture of time, Merleau-Ponty offers, “a cycle defined by a central and dominant region and with indecisive contours—a swelling or bulb of time.”<sup>38</sup>

The present is primary, yet the present lies always beyond grasp. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty highlights the transcendence of the present. One cannot live the present in its immediacy. A gap lies between the moments of living the present and awareness or reflection of living in

the present. In a sense, the present always escapes us and lies just beyond our attention.<sup>39</sup> The present is inherently transcendent. In other words, “[w]e have to pass from the thing (spatial or temporal) as identity, to the thing (spatial or temporal) as difference, i.e., as transcendence, i.e., as always ‘behind,’ beyond, far-off.”<sup>40</sup>

In positing the integral link between time and the body, Merleau-Ponty draws two conclusions. He presents an embodied subject whose body movement, much like the *ekstase* of time, self-generates and whose body movement *generates* time.<sup>41</sup> To stress this kinship between the body and time, Merleau-Ponty writes, “[i]f . . . the subject is identified with temporality, then self-positing ceases to be a contradiction, because it exactly expresses the essence of living time.”<sup>42</sup> The *ekstase* of time and time's integral tie to the body explains body movement as self-generating. The *ekstase* of time and that the subject as embodied establishes the speed of time explains that body movement generates phenomenal time.

To accept that body movement self-generates requires a novel understanding of causality. Merleau-Ponty offers what he calls a *motivation* to explain the indeterminate self-generation in body movement. He draws the conclusion of a motivation from Sigmund Freud. Merleau-Ponty writes, “[i]nto the sexual history, conceived as the elaboration of a general form of life, all psychological constituents can enter, because there is no longer an interaction of two causalities and because the genital life is geared to the whole life of the subject.”<sup>43</sup> Freud's work posits and explains how sexuality can function as a drive that does not immediately and directly lead to one inevitable expression or result, but rather leads toward a possible variety of ends. Motivations can come in the form of objects, events, or “nonthetic or not-explicitly-experienced motive[s].”<sup>44</sup>

This open-ended force or drive is a motivation distinct from the causality of formal logic, physics or the act intentionality of consciousness. The rigid causality of formal logic and physics—a causality defined within the parameters of repeatability and predictability—never escapes the facticity of the material world. The determinateness of consciousness does not recognize that fulfillment of one's intentions depends on the material conditions of my body and the circumstances of the world. As Mark Wrathall writes, motivations have an ambiguous presence because it speaks more to our bodies and less to reason and our minds.<sup>45</sup> Both causalities do not address that the body as subject is both matter and ideas. The causalities of physics and act intentionality do not explain the variety and the creativity of human projects, human endeavors, and human responses. Guy Widdershoven explains, “[t]he

notion of motivation offers an alternative to the concept of cause, engendered by empiricism, and the notion of reason which is central to idealism. A motive is not the cause of the resulting action, since its meaning cannot be defined apart from the action; on the other hand, the action is not a totally free response to the motive.<sup>73-76</sup> Because motivational relations depend on the context and the agent—the embodied subject matters. Motivation describes how sometimes, some individuals can perceive something different and beyond the familiar scope of everyday perceptions; how the body can move in multiple expressive ways; and how one can create a broad range of experiences and explanations. The notion of a motivation coheres with the phenomenological existential tradition, which places much responsibility on the choices and actions of individual human beings.<sup>77</sup> For these self-generated and nondeterminative body movements give birth to the human subject. Through body movement, one shapes the quality of the space and time and one moves from the given world to the sphere of the potential and abstract world.

Through self-generated motivations, body movement generates phenomenological space and time. I should say something about the relationship between the objective understanding of space and time and the phenomenological understanding of space and time. I suspect that Merleau-Ponty intended for the phenomenological conception of space and time to replace the objective conception of space and time. This is not to deny the very real existence of space and time, but admits the epistemic limits of experiencing pure space and time.

#### Responsibility for a Situation

Merleau-Ponty's embodied subject and his phenomenology as a whole insists on the intimate ties between the subject and the world. He demonstrates such intimate relations with the world without reducing the subject as the result of causal forces from the material world or as the construct of normalizing ideas. Merleau-Ponty maintains the existential dimension of the subject exercising open-ended motivations for body movement. To appreciate the importance of body movements generating space and time within our existential capabilities and responsibilities, I turn to ethics. In ethics and whiteness studies, questions persist about responsibility not only for one's immediate actions, but also for the situations, one finds oneself in, including situations not of one's own intentional making.

Traditional liberal conceptions of agency and ethics too narrowly focus only on individual actions and ethical responsibilities. To illustrate this, let us look at Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, which is considered to be one of the most important—if not the most important—treatises on ethics and freedom. His work serves as a foundation for Western ethical theory. He argues for the importance of ethical life for human beings because human beings possess reason. How should reasoning human beings demonstrate their freedom, especially in situations defined by questions of morality? Kant's famous moral imperative states: "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."<sup>48</sup> One uses reason to exercise freedom when one follows one's own laws—laws one has made for oneself, because the "will is therefore not merely subject to the law, but is so subject that it must be considered as also making the law for itself."<sup>49</sup> Regarding these laws, Kant argues, one should imagine what would happen if all individuals act similarly in like circumstances. Only by acting with the belief that all individuals would behave similarly can one claim to act freely; Kant insists that only moral beings can claim freedom.

For Kant, autonomous individuals—subjects who can separate themselves from the world—exercise freedom. Within Kant's framework it is not clear whether his subjects are embodied, and so it seems unimportant. Kant's analysis presumes three criteria: first, his theory relies on the possibility and the imperative to separate the ethical decision-making moments from their context, to develop a universal criterion. Second, he insists on the essential commonality of all human beings facing and making decisions because of human beings' ability to reason. Kant believes that all reasoning individuals can and will ultimately reach the same conclusions. Finally, and most importantly, Kant's ethical system centers on autonomous individuals who are responsible for only their individual actions.

Merleau-Ponty's understanding of freedom and agency challenges all three of these tenets. Within the *Phenomenology*, he only explicitly addresses freedom in the last chapter; there he writes, "[t]here is free choice only if freedom comes into play in its decision, and posits the situation chosen as a situation of freedom."<sup>50</sup> In other words, choice only arises within a situation and one chooses a situation. Rather than reducing the ethical decision and action into isolated moments, Merleau-Ponty's freedom requires accounting for the history of one's past, which leads to the present situation with its available set of choices evolving to specific future options. Merleau-Ponty explains, "choice presupposes a prior commitment" and "the normal person



*reckons* with the possible.<sup>351</sup> He concludes, “the real choice is that of whole character and our manner of being in the world. But either this total choice is never uttered . . . or else our choice of ourselves is truly a choice, a conviction involving our whole existence.”<sup>352</sup> One does not exercise freedom in spurts of isolated moments but as a continuum, built into the minutia of choices. Based on one’s past decisions, one faces different and fewer or greater opportunities in the present. As such, the ethical decision-making moment is not isolatable from its context. Rather, moments of ethical decision making, moments of exercising freedom, demand an acknowledgment of the importance of the circumstances within which human beings’ started their lives and their history of choices. This position refutes Kant’s first two criteria. The moments of ethical decision making cannot be isolated from their context. Contextually situated human beings do not essentially face the same ethical decisions. All human beings can reason, but, from a series of past decisions, they develop into subjects who utilize their reason in varying complex ways. Human beings face different decisions because they occupy different subjective contexts and situations.<sup>353</sup>

Finally, and most importantly for the present concerns, Merleau-Ponty’s freedom requires assessments of normative demands for situations not of one’s own making. Merleau-Ponty’s conception of freedom suggests that individuals are responsible for more than personal decisions, but also for the situations in which they find themselves. Either human beings are not free because the circumstances of birth define and constrain human freedom, or human beings are truly free and accountable for the entirety of the situations in which they find themselves. In distinction from Kant, Merleau-Ponty broadens our ethical responsibilities to include one’s situatedness. Merleau-Ponty stresses this conception of freedom and agency, well aware that human beings do not choose their situations of birth. His work demonstrates the extent of our existential possibilities, including challenging the formative influences of the world and the conditions of our situatedness that include the societies and communities we find ourselves.

Recall my earlier position that body movement generates space and time. Because of embodied subjectivity and because body movement generates the very space and time circumscribing the subject, Merleau-Ponty insists on the broadened responsibility for freedom, including responsibility for one’s situation. Because body movements possess such power in their intimate relation with matter and ideas—because body movements generate two of the most fundamental features of being-in-the-world—one is responsible not only for

one’s immediate choices, but also for one’s situations. “With great power comes great responsibility.”<sup>354</sup>

### The Benefits of Whiteness in a Situation

Merleau-Ponty’s work illuminates the far reaches of both the broadened weight of embodied subjectivity and the extent of human existential possibilities in positing that our body movements generate space and time. Consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology holding human beings responsible for their situations, his phenomenology also attributes to body movements the ability to create the very feel of two of the most basic dimensions of being-in-the-world. For individual, minute, and small body movements build within a community to establish the phenomenal quality of a situation and a society. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone illustrates this especially poignantly in the case of dance movements that can be generalized here. She writes, “[t]he possibilities of the situation at any moment do not then stand out as so many recourses of action possible to take; they are adumbrated, mutely or tacitly given, in the immediacy of the evolving situation itself, a situation which moment by moment opens up a certain world and a certain way of being in the world.”<sup>355</sup> To solidly illustrate this buildup of individual body movements generating space and time and responsibility for one’s circumstances, let me end with one concrete example of the importance of claiming responsibility for one’s situation.

One of the most intriguing positions voiced in whiteness studies is the insistence that white people experience benefits simply from the location of whiteness in society. Because of this society’s history, simply having a white body confers benefits. Theorists who write about whiteness aim to clarify this particular advantage that comes from merely possessing a body that looks white. Such clarification is necessary for understanding how to become responsible race traitors. In this specific context, race traitors are whites who endeavor to disavow their whiteness by repeatedly acting to defray their white privileges. Linda Martín Alcoff’s caution to race traitors illustrates the informative role of body features; she writes, “in one important sense, whites cannot disavow whiteness. One’s appearance of being white will still operate to confer privilege in numerous and significant ways, and to avow treason does not render whites ineligible for these privileges, even if they work hard to avoid them.”<sup>356</sup> So, even race traitors, whose behavior does not passively

absorb the social benefits of being white, who actively work to dispel these privileges, nevertheless profit from being white. For white people who want to conscientiously address the inequities of race, isolated actions do not suffice to dispel the personal benefits of whiteness. Isolated individual actions do not suffice because isolated individual actions cannot address the injustices inherent in a social structural situation. Rather, sometimes, individual acts of transgression of whitey scripts by whites are dangerous because unsuspecting black people are abruptly reprimanded in addition to or in place of whites.<sup>57</sup> Individual responsibility for one's own actions does not suffice to address the benefits inherent in social situations; Kant's moral imperatives center on autonomous individuals whose ethical behavior focuses only on individual actions. Kant's moral framework does not address the history of past injustices that now leads to the injustice's inherent in the present social situation with its structural benefits for whites.

To be a race traitor, Lisa Heldke writes, "involves taking responsibility for one's social location."<sup>58</sup> Heldke and Alison Bailey recognize that white people concerned with racial injustice, who recognize the benefits of simply possessing white bodies, must take responsibility for the social situations in which they live. This is quite an acknowledgment, for this requires taking responsibility for a history that one is not personally responsible for creating. Owning such responsibility remains one of the most radical and intriguing insights in whiteness studies. A general acceptance of this position could provide a thorough argument for affirmative action policies. For a much repeated argument against affirmative action policies is that present-day white people did not commit the atrocities of past white people. As Michael D. Barber explains, one of the arguments against affirmative action is "that white males who did not discriminate against blacks unfairly bear the brunt of the compensation burden."<sup>59</sup> This position that present-day whites should not be held accountable for the sins of their forebears is widely accepted today. But if we follow Heldke and Bailey's position and accept responsibility for a situation, including the historical moment of our birth, then present-day whites *can be held* accountable for the past injustices of their forebears that have resulted in today's social circumstances.

Here Metleau-Ponty's position that body movements generate space and time become pertinent. Bailey explains that history sediments into social meanings in the form of body comportments. The performance of whiteness has and requires white scripts that white and black bodies enact. Bailey writes, "[r]acial scripts are internalized at an early age to the point where they

are embedded almost to invisibility in our language, bodily reactions, feelings, behaviors, and judgments."<sup>60</sup> The history of colonialism has not or sediments into the social structural situation in terms of laws and institutions or conscious and unconscious beliefs and prejudices about difference racialized body features, but into the very way one lives one's body, in one body movements. In other words, how one stands, sits, walks, and greets another human being, how slowly, or quickly, one moves in a social situation are body movements that develop within a history and exhibit how comfortable one feels and is made to feel in any given context. Feminists have already argued that many public spaces in social institutions provide comfort for white men and intimidate women and minorities. Here I want to add that the architecture does not solely permit such levels of comfort and discomfort, but also the body comportment—the body movements of men and women, whites, blacks, or otherwise racialized people—in these spaces: also establish the phenomenal feel of the space as welcoming or forbidding. Some obvious and well-known examples include the body comportment of resorting to smiling more frequently exercised by blacks and women; the use of handshakes for greeting, which is more frequent among white men, compared to greeting with more body contact, which is more frequent among certain people of color and women; or the notion of colored people time (CP time), referring to the likelihood of lateness by certain groups of people of color. Not only do specific racialized and sexualized subjects more frequently exercise each of these of body movements, but specific racially and sexually embodied subjects read each of these body comportments differently. Some read the tendency to smile as welcoming and endeavoring to put others at ease, while others read excessive smiling as obsequious and a sign of a lack of intelligence.<sup>61</sup> Some read handshakes as tasteful, while others read handshakes as cold. Some read greetings with more body contact such as kisses and hugs as more intimate and welcoming, while others read these greetings as unnecessarily invasive of personal space. I have noticed that I welcome hugs from women while feeling suspicious of hugs from men, especially men I do not know well. Some read CP time as demonstrating flexibility, patience, and the spirit that one should not take life so seriously, while others read CP time as demonstrating an inability to follow directions and disrespecting other people's time. Because the subject is embodied and in the world, not only does the existing architecture or institutional practices constitute space, but also body movements generate a phenomenal space and time around oneself.

## Conclusion

The history of colonialism has sedimented into racialized body movement to generate phenomenal spaces and times that are also racially specific.<sup>62</sup> As a result, today, body comportment and movement are racially specific, and one understands the intentions and the significances of the body movement in racially specific ways. In this society, the sedimented scripts in the embodiment of white bodies and black bodies illustrate the depth of the racial benefits and disadvantages of the present social situations.

Whiteness studies' position that one is responsible for one's situation coheres well with Merleau-Ponty's claim that one is truly free only in accepting responsibility for the entirety of one's situation. Rising to the challenge of such freedom is an important consequence of understanding that our body movements generate space and time. Only in recognizing responsibility for one's situations, even if one was not personally complicit in creating such contexts, can one truly recognize the broad scope of one's existential power and ethical responsibility. To take responsibility for the history of racial injustice that has resulted in a social situation where simply possessing a white body confers benefits, following Bailey's account that such benefits are embedded in body scripts, requires changing the prevailing meanings of white and black bodies and our own body movements.

Phenomenology's account of freedom requires reconceptualizing our responsibilities as beings-in-the-world. Let me end with a hint here; recall Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body as "a heavy signification." Ultimately, I suspect that he would attribute to body movement the generation of significations.<sup>63</sup> In other words, in addition to, or perhaps more than, addressing the linguistic signs about race, developing and accumulating different and new body movements can ultimately generate new meanings about white and black bodies.

## Notes

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 114, 248–249.
2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1962), 164, 166, 181. I follow this translation, although I understand that this translation conflates body image and body schema. See footnote 5 below.
3. Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, 136, 249.

4. Helen Fielding, "Depth of Embodiment: Spatial and Temporal Bodies in Foucault and Merleau-Ponty," *Philosophy Today* 43, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 78.
5. Shaun Gallagher clarifies that there has been quite a bit of confusion over the uses of the terms *body image* and *body schema* across various disciplines, including among Merleau-Ponty scholars. Nevertheless, Gallagher believes Merleau-Ponty was consistent in his reference to the body schema, "to signify a dynamic functioning of the body in its environment. The schema operates as a system of dynamic motor equivalents that belong to the realm of habit rather than conscious choices" (*How the Body Shapes the Mind* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], 20). Gallagher points out, "however, the term 'schema corporel' was rendered 'body image' in the English translation of his work in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962)." Gallagher offers the following definition of a body image and body schema. Body image "consists of a system of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs pertaining to one's own body. In contrast, a body schema is a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring" (24). Gallagher continues, "[t]his conceptual distinction between body image and body schema is related respectively to the difference between having a perception of (or belief about) something and having a capacity to move (or an ability to do something)." I do not follow Gallagher here, mainly because I worry about the possible loss of reflexivity between perception and action.
6. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 110.
7. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 387.
8. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, xviii.
9. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 136.
10. See Galen A. Johnson, "Inside and Outside: Ontological Considerations," *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World*, ed. Dorothea Olkowski and James Morley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).
11. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 142.
12. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 110.
13. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 111.
14. Lawrence Hass, "Sense and Alterity: Rereading Merleau-Ponty's Reversibility Thesis," *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.

15. Martin Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 124.
  16. See Richard Shusterman, "The Silent Limping Body of Philosophy," *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 151–180.
  17. Although Merleau-Ponty uses the word *generate*, I do not believe that he uses the word in the sense referred to in Anthony Steinbock, "Generativity and Generative Phenomenology," *Husserl Studies* 12 (1995): 55–79. Steinbock talks about generating to refer to becoming over the generations (57). Unfortunately the same word is used here, but even Steinbock admits that Husserl never fully developed a generative philosophy (75).
  18. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 387.
  19. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 240. Although later he clarifies that he does not mean create, exactly, but generate.
- Martin Heidegger suggests a similar relation: "Spaces, and with them space as such—'space'—are always provided for already within the stay of mortals. Spaces open up by the fact that they are let into the dwelling of man. To say that mortals *are* is to say that in *dwelling* they persist through spaces by virtue of their stay among things and locales" ("Building Dwelling Thinking," *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell [San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993], 359).
  20. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 102; see also 142, 148.
  21. Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like a Girl," *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, ed. Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 62.
  22. Young, "Throwing Like a Girl," 59.
  23. Young, 59.
  24. Young, 60.
  25. Young, 63.
  26. Young, 63.
  27. Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 115. See Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Citadel Press, 1946), 18.
  28. Bergson, 1946, 55.
  29. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 276. Or see 420 for another reason why Merleau-Ponty disagrees with Bergson's analysis. Merleau-Ponty writes, "Bergson was wrong in *explaining* the unity of time in terms of its continuity, since that amounts to confusing past, present, and future on the excuse that we pass from one or the other by imperceptible transitions; in short it amounts to denying time altogether."

30. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man," *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, trans. John Wild (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 90.
- I understand that Jacques Derrida criticizes phenomenology for being "presentists," but this critique does not suffice to completely dismiss phenomenological theories on time.
31. Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, 114.
  32. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 275.
  33. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 411; see also 331, and 1968, 114, 184.
  34. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 419.
  35. Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth," *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 126.
  36. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 425–426. He continues to write, "[t]he primary flow, says Husserl, does not confine itself to being; it must necessarily provide itself with a 'manifestation of itself' without our needing to place behind it a second flow which is conscious of it. It 'constitutes itself as a phenomenon within itself'" (1962, 426). He cites Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 180.
  37. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 85.
  38. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 184.
  39. Merleau-Ponty writes, "the present is us; it awaits our consent or our refusal. . . . The proximity of the present, which is what makes us responsible for it, nevertheless does not give us access to the thing itself" (1964b, 194).
  40. Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, 195.
  41. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 426. He cites Husserl, *Zeitbeusstsein*, 436.
  42. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 425, 423–424
  43. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 158.
  44. Mark A. Wrathall, "Motives, Reasons, and Causes," *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 117.
  45. Wrathall, "Motives, Reasons, and Causes," 115.
  46. Guy A. M. Widdershoven, "Truth and Meaning in Art: Merleau-Ponty's Ambiguity," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 30, no. 2, (1999): 231. Merleau-Ponty also writes, "Plato and Kant, to mention only them, accepted the contradiction of which Zeno and Hume wanted no part. . . . There is the sterile non-contradiction of formal logic and the justified contradictions of transcendental logic" ("The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences," *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James

M. Edie, trans. William Cobb [Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964], 19).

In other words, motivational relationships “lack extensionality. Causal relationships, by contrast, are extensional, in the sense that the relationship holds up between the relata regardless of the mode by which the relata are presented to us” (Wrathall, 116).

47. See Wrathall, 118.
48. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1964), 88. This categorical imperative can also be stated as: “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end” (96).
49. Kant, 98–99.
50. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 437; see also 164.
51. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 439 and 109, respectively.
52. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 438–439
53. Merleau-Ponty’s position dissolves the strict distinction between ethical and practical decisions.
54. I am facetiously quoting *Spiderman* (2002, directed by Sam Raimi, written by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, screenplay David Koepp). This individual responsibility for the situations of one’s birth, of one’s history suggests responsibility by the “winners” of history for all the possibly atrocious acts committed to be able to portray themselves as the winners of history and the “losers” of history for all their failures and calamitous endeavors. In this chapter, I only explore responsibility for the history by the so-called winners of past atrocious acts. It would be interesting to think of responsibility for a history of loss. But I leave this exploration for another occasion.
55. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, “Thinking in Movement,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 39, no. 4 (Summer, 1981): 405.
56. Linda Martin Alcoff, “What Should White People Do?” *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World*, ed. Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000): 273.
57. See Alcoff, “What Should White People Do?” 215.
58. Lisa Heldke, “On Being a Responsible Traitor: A Primer,” *Daring to Be Good: Essays in Feminist Ethico-Politics* eds. Bat-Ami Bar On and Ann Ferguson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 96.

59. Michael D. Barber, *Equality and Diversity: Phenomenological Investigations of Prejudice and Discrimination* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001), 223.
60. Alison Bailey, “Locating Traitorous Identities: Toward a View of Privilege-Cognizant White Character,” *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World*, ed. Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000): 290.
61. See Martha Nussbaum, “Don’t Smile So Much”: Philosophy and Women in the 1970s,” *Singing in the Fire: Tales of Women in Philosophy*, ed. Linda Martin Alcoff (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 81–92. See also Toni Morrison’s description of Clarence Thomas’s laugh in, “Introduction: Friday on the Potomac,” *Race-ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon, 1992), xii.
62. I am not claiming absolutely all body movement conforms to their racialized scripts, but that the tendency is distinguishable.
63. This position coheres with Gallagher’s analysis of gesture. Carving a middle space between theories that gesture develops either from linguistic or from motor capabilities of the body, Gallagher argues for an integrative understanding of gesture. He describes gesture to be “first, embodied (constrained and enabled by motoric possibilities); second, communicative (pragmatically intersubjective); and third, cognitive (contributing to the accomplishment of thought, shaping the mind)” (123).