

The normal, the natural, and the normative: A Merleau-Pontian legacy to feminist theory, critical race theory, and disability studies

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Abstract This essay argues that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of embodiment can be an extremely helpful ally for contemporary feminist theorists, critical race theorists, and disability studies scholars because his work suggests that the gender, race, and ability of bodies are not innate or fixed features of those bodies, much less corporeal indicators of physical, social, psychic, and even moral inferiority, but are themselves dynamic phenomena that have the potential to overturn accepted notions of normalcy, naturalness, and normativity. Taking seriously Merleau-Ponty’s insistence that our bodies (rather than our consciousnesses) are the means by which we directly engage with the world, I suggest, encourages us to be attentive to how an individual’s or group’s gender, race, and bodily abilities differentially affect how their bodies are responded to by other bodies. The responses of others, in turn, directly influences the significance of an individual’s (inter)actions within that situation. This essay provides a critical examination of specific feminist philosophers, critical race scholars, and disability theorists who creatively utilize Merleau-Pontian insights to illustrate, and ultimately combat, the insidious ways in which sexism, racism, and “compulsory able-bodiedness” (McRuer in Crip theory: cultural signs of queerness and disability. NYU Press, New York, 2006), impoverish the lived experience of both oppressors and the oppressed, largely by predetermining the meaning of their bodily interactions in accordance with institutionalized cultural expectations and norms.

Keywords Merleau-Ponty · Normalization · Naturalization · Normativity · Embodiment · Disability

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was no longer alive during the last quarter of the 20th century when feminism, critical race theory, and disability studies were gradually being

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accepted as legitimate areas of study in their own right (though this is still an uphill battle with regard to disability studies!). Moreover, he is not usually seen as having made major contributions to any of these fields. And yet, I argue that taking seriously his insistence that our bodies (rather than our consciousnesses) are the means by which we directly engage with the world, encourages us to be attentive to how an individual's or group's gender, race, and bodily abilities differentially affect how their bodies are responded to by other bodies, and in so doing, directly influences the meaning of their (inter)actions within that situation. While the work in feminist theory, critical race theory, and disability studies that I will be discussing has mostly arisen as a *critique* of the lack of attention to crucial gender, race and disability concerns in Merleau-Ponty's and other philosophers' work, I am nonetheless claiming that Merleau-Ponty can be a helpful ally in the continued effort within these fields to show how and why the gender, race, and ability of bodies are not innate or fixed features of those bodies, much less corporeal indicators of physical, social, psychic, and even moral inferiority, but are themselves dynamic phenomena that have the potential to overturn accepted notions of normalcy, naturalness, and normativity.

To undertake this task, I turn to the work of specific feminist philosophers, critical race scholars, and disability theorists who creatively utilize Merleau-Pontian insights to illustrate, and ultimately combat, the insidious ways in which sexism, racism, and what Robert McRuer has called "compulsory able-bodiedness" impoverishes the lived experience of both oppressors and the oppressed, largely by pre-determining the meaning of their bodily interactions in accordance with institutionalized cultural expectations and norms.¹ Starting with Iris Marion Young's identification of three contradictory modalities of female bodily existence (each of which challenges but, in important ways, also affirms the importance of Merleau-Ponty's invocation of an embodied "I can" as an originary lived experience that precedes the Cartesian "I think"), I will explore how specific experiences with sexism, racism, and able-ism, directly affect our intercorporeal encounters, most frequently by decreasing our confidence in our own and/or others' bodily capacities.

1 Maybe I can and maybe I can't: The challenges of doing

In the chapter on "The Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motricity" in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues that it is bodily movement, rather than thought, that constitutes an "original intentionality." From this claim he then draws the following conclusion: "Consciousness is originally not an 'I think that,' but rather an 'I can.'" "Movement" he adds a few sentences later, "is not a movement in thought, and bodily space is not a space that is conceived or represented."² This anti-representationalist view of movement, consciousness, and spatiality emphasizes that our primary orientation to the world as human beings is

¹ For an account of "compulsory able-bodiedness" and its close connection with heteronormativity, see Robert McRuer's Introduction to *Crip Theory*, ps. 1–32.

² Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 139).

constituted by doing, not by thinking. Even though we undoubtedly often bring thought to bear on our actions as well as on the actions of others, doing, for Merleau-Ponty is a meaningful activity whether or not it is accompanied by thinking. Moreover, thinking, as a conscious activity, is itself a form of doing, a way of *engaging* with the world of our concern. And if, as he declares in the *Preface*, “we are condemned to sense,” this is not because we think about everything we do, but because our actions are already meaningful whether or not we reflect upon them.

This insistence on the primacy of doing over thinking is affirmed by Iris Marion Young in her famous early essay, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality,” even as she challenges and complicates the strong sense of bodily agency implied by the Merleau-Pontian “I can” as an adequate description of how all or even most human beings experience their bodies in relation to the motor tasks they seek to realize through them. Young criticizes Merleau-Ponty’s general (universalizing) description of the lived experience of motricity as an “I can” by pointing out that both girls and women often face difficult but nonetheless doable motor tasks with the nagging doubt that maybe “I cannot” undertake them successfully. This diffident response, and the hesitant behavior that typically accompanies it, usually doesn’t lead to an outright rejection of the “I can,” that is, a bodily conviction that there is no way one can successfully complete a given task, but rather, is most often experienced as a tension-filled seesawing between an “I can” (with its associated normative implication that “I really *should* be able to do this”) and an equally strong feeling that “perhaps I cannot” meet this challenge without risking injury or embarrassment. Young describes this lived tension between the “I can” and the “I cannot” as an experience of “inhibited intentionality” and she identifies it as one of three contradictory modalities of feminine bodily comportment that collectively undermine a strong, confident sense of bodily agency.

While the “I can” is not absent but clearly still operative in these types of experiences, the simultaneous worry that “I cannot” fulfill these demands, Young suggests, “inhibits” the bodily intentionality Merleau-Ponty is describing as a universal experience, thereby compromising our sense of bodily agency to the point where the body is experienced more as an immanent burden than a locus of transcendence. Thus, in addition to intentionality being inhibited in relation to a specific motor activity, there is a more general experience of what Young calls “ambiguous transcendence.” With regard to the latter, she states that:

The transcendence of the lived body that Merleau-Ponty describes is a transcendence that moves out from the body in its immanence in an open and unbroken directedness upon the world in action. The lived body as transcendence is pure fluid action, the continuous calling-forth of capacities that are applied to the world. Rather than simply beginning in immanence, feminine bodily existence remains in immanence or, better, is *overlaid* with immanence, even as it moves out toward the world in motions of grasping, manipulating, and so on.³

³ Young (2005, p. 36).

I would contest the accuracy of Young's description of bodily transcendence for Merleau-Ponty as "moving out from the body in its immanence," since I believe he is rejecting the notion of bodily immanence and therefore the traditional transcendence/immanence distinction altogether. Nonetheless, Young's description of ambiguous transcendence evokes a "bad" or self-limiting ambiguity that interrupts our fluid engagement with the world rather than the "good" or productive ambiguity that opens up new possibilities of movement and meaning that Merleau-Ponty is embracing throughout his work.

The final contradictory bodily modality that Young claims characterizes (stereo)-typical feminine bodily comportment, discontinuous unity, is evoked most poignantly in the title of her essay "Throwing Like a Girl." Discontinuous unity involves the isolation of a specific part of the body (in this case the arm) to undertake a specific motor task. In such cases, she notes, "a woman typically refrains from throwing her whole body into a motion and rather concentrates motion in one part of the body alone, while the rest of the body remains relatively immobile."⁴ This artificial restriction of movement to a single bodily appendage means not only that one will not be able to throw as far as when the whole body is operating as a fluid unity, but also that one is at much greater risk of bodily injury since one is actually working against rather than fully harnessing one's motor forces, forces that are not compartmentalized in different appendages but integrated within and across the body as a whole.

As I previously noted, Young's essay offers a powerful critique of Merleau-Ponty insofar as he presents an allegedly neutral and universal experience of bodily transcendence, intentionality, and unity that is, in actuality, more frequently enacted by and associated with boys and men rather than girls and women. And yet, at the same time, it is clear that the contradictory bodily modalities she is describing are problematic precisely because they fail to realize the possibilities for transcendence, intentionality, and unity that, like Merleau-Ponty, she believes that both male and female bodies are capable of achieving. As she affirms in her retrospective essay, "'Throwing Like a Girl': Twenty Years Later," her original essay

accepts the existential humanism Merleau-Ponty assumes, that is, that phenomenology uncovers and describes basic structures of universal human experience. Following the lead of Simone de Beauvoir and many other humanist feminists before and after her, "Throwing like a girl" implicitly constructs the project of feminist criticism as showing how women in patriarchal society are excluded and inhibited from full expression of that universal humanity.⁵

While many scholars have lauded Young's original essay as a much-needed feminist corrective to yet another male philosopher's tendency to presume that his descriptions of lived experience hold true for all human beings, regardless of gender, race, class, ethnicity, age, ability, etc., it is important to recognize that Young is *not* suggesting that the contradictory modalities of feminine bodily comportment she describes are a positive gendered model that girls and women

⁴ Young (2005, p. 38).

⁵ Young (1998, p. 286).

should seek to emulate. Though she claims in the original essay that “[T]he modalities of feminine bodily existence are not merely privative” and that “[T]here is a specific positive style of feminine body comportment and movement, which is learned as the girl comes to understand she is a girl,” she is merely emphasizing that feminine motor behaviors are readily identifiable as such; they are not positive phenomena in the sense of opening up liberating possibilities for executing motor tasks.⁶ Indeed, she suggests that quite the opposite is the case as the following description of this “positive style of feminine body comportment and movement” makes clear: “The girl,” she tells us,

learns actively to hamper her movements. She is told that she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes, that the things she desires to do are dangerous for her. Thus she develops a bodily timidity that increases with age. In assuming herself to be a girl, she takes herself to be fragile.⁷

As this passage poignantly illustrates, Young argues that those of us who exhibit these contradictory modalities of bodily comportment do not do so as a result of “hardwiring,” or because these modalities are prescribed by our specific female anatomies. This diffidence or lack of confidence in our bodily abilities is rather the direct result of traditional, differential patterns of gender socialization that reward boys who seek to maximize their motor strength and coordination through rigorous physical activities, with no regard for their appearance at the end of the task, and reward girls who move gracefully, keep their clothes and bodies clean, and hair un-mussed, who, in short, comport themselves, no matter what the activity, in a “ladylike” fashion. Indeed, as Young observes in the “Twenty Years Later” retrospective essay, despite the fact that more American girls and women participate in strenuous, competitive physical activities than ever before, in no small part due to the passage of Title IX which was intended to guarantee that girls and boys in the United States have equal opportunities to engage in competitive sports, college-aged American women who read the original essay today continue to identify strongly with her description of the contradictory modalities of feminine bodily comportment.⁸

Even if young girls are less frequently encouraged to adopt traditionally feminine styles of movement at home or when participating in physical education classes at school, the ubiquitous examples of admired female role models in TV, movies, advertisements, the internet, and other social media who do exhibit and even flaunt them, guarantees that embodying these gendered norms is not something girls must

⁶ Young (2005, p. 43).

⁷ Young (2005, p. 43).

⁸ Although one could argue that the “Twenty Years Later” piece is itself dated since it appeared in 1998, I have found that Young’s observations concerning the persistence of contradictory modalities of “typical” female embodiment continue to hold true today. I personally witness the strong identification of female undergraduate students with the contradictory bodily modalities Young discusses in the initial article each fall when I teach “Throwing Like a Girl” in my Philosophy of Race and Gender course at The George Washington University. Even in the second decade of the twenty-first century, both young men and young women have no trouble recognizing stereotypical styles of feminine bodily movement such as throwing, lifting, bending, walking, and running “like a girl” that adhere closely to Young’s original descriptions.

consciously think about, but rather, something they just *do*.⁹ Moreover, if even successful performances in the strenuous physical tasks that seem best able to vanquish the nagging doubts of the “perhaps I cannot,” are unable to eliminate them once and for all, this should not, I argue, be attributed to a failure in the power of “I can” but rather to a failure in the cultural imaginary that continues to embrace as normative feminine ideals outdated models of bodily comportment that are predicated on the restriction as opposed to the maximization of girls’ and women’s bodily capabilities. And, as long as this continues to be the case, there is no guarantee that a positive motor outcome in one situation, as Young’s personal example below amply demonstrates, will promote increased confidence in another one. In her words:

Many times I have slowed a hiking party in which the men bounded across a harmless stream while I stood on the other side warily testing my footing on various stones, holding on to overhanging branches. Though the others crossed with ease, I do not believe it is easy for *me*, even though once I take a committed step I am across in a flash.¹⁰

Given that the standards for acceptable feminine bodily comportment most often involve the artificial restriction of movement due to the fear of getting hurt and/or behaving in an “unladylike” fashion, it is no surprise that many girls and women may implicitly (or even explicitly) question their ability to achieve specific physical tasks that require sustained and coordinated effort. Interestingly, from a Merleau-Pontian perspective, this worry that perhaps I cannot accomplish a particular motor task I am undertaking seems to create a situation where thinking inhibits doing, and it often results, Young notes, in a half-hearted or partial withholding of effort that makes failure to complete the task a self-fulfilling prophecy. In Young’s words, “a woman frequently does not trust the capacity of her body to engage itself in physical relation to things. Consequently, she often lives her body as a burden, which must be dragged and prodded along and at the same time protected.”¹¹ Even if one succeeds, despite one’s worries, in eventually meeting a given motor challenge such as crossing the stream as Young does above, this doesn’t mean that these doubts and fears are vanquished once and for all; indeed, it is more likely that they will reassert themselves, as Young’s emphasis on the “many times” she has had this experience attests, the next time one encounters a similar challenge.

If thinking is decidedly ineffective in overcoming the contradictory bodily modalities that far too often negatively impact girls’ and women’s abilities to accomplish specific motor tasks, as I believe both Merleau-Ponty and Young would agree, the assertion of a confident “I can” must come from doing, yet it is equally

⁹ By contrast, the refusal to embody female styles of movement, I would argue, often occurs as a result of thinking about how one has been trained to move and consciously choosing not to fulfill those expectations. This leads to the strange consequence that seeking to move more “naturally” by not restricting one’s movements to comply with accepted feminine norms, usually occurs through a most “unnatural” process, namely through conscious reflection upon habitual gendered patterns of motor behavior that need to be unlearned in order to be replaced with more fluid and expansive styles of comportment that maximize one’s bodily capabilities.

¹⁰ Young (2005, p. 34).

¹¹ Young (2005, p. 36).

evident, from Young's analysis, that this confident doing will inevitably challenge traditional expectations that impose concrete limits on what girls and women can and should do.¹² Young doesn't offer concrete solutions to the pressing problems posed by her essay but one possible response is presented by Judith Butler in her early work on gender performativity, work that was itself inspired by the phenomenological accounts of bodily movement offered by Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir, and Young.¹³

2 The "natural" historicity of the body

In the 1989 essay, "Gendering the Body: Beauvoir's Philosophical Contribution," that directly preceded her groundbreaking 1990 monograph, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler, like Young, draws attention to the lack of attention paid by Merleau-Ponty to specific, gendered, socialization practices that lead boys and girls (and men and women) to have profoundly different experiences of their bodies and bodily possibilities. Butler takes both Merleau-Ponty and Sartre to task for discussing the body in abstract terms; she argues, by contrast, that the bodies we encounter (our own as well as those of others) are never perceived as neutral entities but are always already identified as gendered, that is, as masculine or feminine bodies.¹⁴ She appeals to Beauvoir's work to support her agreement with Young that the seemingly "universal" body Merleau-Ponty and Sartre present in their work is actually a masculine body, and therefore not a universal body at all.¹⁵ "Like Sartre and Merleau-Ponty," Butler asserts,

¹² Such limits include legal, political, social, as well as physical barriers to women's full motor participation in the world. Prohibiting women from driving (as in Saudi Arabia), confining them to their homes and preventing them from attending school or having a profession (as in Afghanistan under the Taliban) or forbidding women soldiers from engaging in direct combat (as in the United States until 2013), are all different ways of illustrating to women that they are not viewed as capable of doing the same things that men can do.

¹³ While Beauvoir's and Young's influence on Butler's account of gender performativity is much more explicitly affirmed by Butler and by her commentators, I would argue that Merleau-Ponty's insights are more crucial to this work as well as to Butler's later work than is usually acknowledged. Indeed, Butler's defense of Merleau-Ponty against Luce Irigaray's critique of "The Chiasm" chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, in Butler's essay, "Sexual Difference as a Question of Ethics: Alterities of the Flesh in Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty" significantly accuses Irigaray of a "dismissive and contemptuous" reading of his work that denies its indebtedness to it. "This," Butler claims, "involves her in a spectacular double-bind: thinking against him within his terms, attempting, that is, to exploit the terms that she also seeks to turn against him in an effort to open the space of sexual difference that *she believes his text seeks to erase*." (Butler 2006, p. 108, my emphasis) On Butler's reading of this chapter from Merleau-Ponty's final, unfinished work, Merleau-Ponty does not, contra Irigaray, reduce the Other to the self-same, but rather, affirms that the Other, as Other "constitutes him internally" such that "[t]o have one's being implicated in the Other is thus to be intertwined from the start, but not for that reason to be reducible to or exchangeable with- one another." (Butler 2006, p. 123) In a sense, what I am proposing is that Merleau-Ponty is one of the important Others to which Butler's own work is indebted and that her theory of gender performativity takes up his emphasis upon the primacy of doing and opens up new possibilities for thinking gender, racial, and sexual differences through it.

¹⁴ Clearly they are racialized as well though Butler doesn't address race in this early piece.

¹⁵ I would go even further and say that for Butler, as well as for Young, this ungendered body ultimately isn't even a masculine body but a masculine fantasy of a masculine body that is really no one's body at all.

Beauvoir works to reveal the structures of lived experience, especially the structures of *embodiment*. But whereas for Sartre and Merleau-Ponty we hear only about “the body” in its abstract and ostensibly universal form, Beauvoir warns us that the universal is often equated with the masculine, that bodies for the most part come in gendered pairs, and that a concrete analysis of the body requires an answer to the question, ‘How is it that the human body takes on a gendered form?’¹⁶

Not only are we unable to talk about “the body” apart from the gendering process that is increasingly beginning even before birth due to the widespread use of sonograms, chorionic villus sampling (CVS), amniocentesis, and other reproductive technologies that can reveal the sex of the fetus in utero, but, as Butler poignantly points out, boys and girls as well as men and women are socially penalized for “doing their gender wrong,” that is, for failing to live up to society’s normative expectations for masculine and feminine bodies respectively. And yet, even as she critiques Merleau-Ponty and Sartre for failing to recognize that our bodies are always perceived and experienced as gendered (or, when this doesn’t happen, are punished for failing to be clearly identifiable *as* a masculine or feminine body), she also suggests that Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* was a direct source of inspiration for what she calls Beauvoir’s “underacknowledged theory of gender identity and gender acquisition” in *The Second Sex*. This is a rather stunning claim that has not received adequate attention, most likely because it seems to be more of a tangent that veers off from the original account of gender performativity that Butler begins to put forward in this essay and, a year later, develops in much more detail in *Gender Trouble*.¹⁷

Interestingly, I will argue, Butler’s positive assessment of Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis upon the historicity of the body, can potentially serve as a defense of Merleau-Ponty against Young’s critique that he provides a generic account of embodiment that falsely universalizes a masculine bodily experience as the experience of all human beings. On the one hand, Butler would agree with Young that Merleau-Ponty does present the “I can” too often as the default attitude that we bring to our motor tasks, and that he ultimately fails to acknowledge adequately that the “I can” is not merely an expression of embodied agency but also of *cultural agency*. That is, for both Young and Butler, the “I can” is never exclusively a function of an individual’s bodily capabilities but also of gender, race, class, ability, and other social and spatial privileges that some bodies enjoy more than others. And yet, on the other hand, in praising Merleau-Ponty for recognizing that the significance of our embodied experiences is always tied to a particular historical context, Butler suggests that his work supports an understanding of gender as never purely natural but always naturalized. “Taken from Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*,” Butler asserts,

¹⁶ Butler (1989, p. 253).

¹⁷ Also, given that the title of this essay signifies that it is about Beauvoir’s “philosophical contribution” to our understanding of gender identity and acquisition, it is, perhaps, an unlikely place to find a defense of Merleau-Ponty. Nonetheless, my claim is that not only is this defense there, but that it is worthy of further critical examination.

the notion of the body as an historical idea suggests only that for the body to have meaning for us, for the body to appear within a field of intelligibility, it must first be signified within an historically specific discourse of meaning. Applied to the gendered body, this formulation suggests that gender is an historical idea or construct that the body assumes *as if it were its natural form*. The formulation does not dispute the biological or physiological facticity of the body, but is concerned, rather, with the meaning that the body- in all its facticity- comes to assume within the context of historical experience.¹⁸

Butler does not cite specific passages from the *Phenomenology of Perception* that might support this feminist reading of Merleau-Ponty but it is not hard to find them, even in the chapter on “The Spatiality of One’s Own Body and Motility,” where he introduces the “I can” as the attitude of an embodied consciousness for whom the celebrated “I think” of the Cartesian cogito is not primary but derivative. If “the space and time that I inhabit are always surrounded by indeterminate horizons that contain other points of view,” as Merleau-Ponty tells us, he also makes it clear that these other points of view are never generated ex-nihilo but come from others with whom I share a historical, cultural, social, and political situation.¹⁹

Further support for Butler’s suggestion that Merleau-Ponty is aware that the naturalization of the body is predicated upon its historically specific meanings, comes from a well-known passage in “The Body as Expression and Speech” chapter, where Merleau-Ponty proclaims: “It is impossible to superimpose upon man both a primary layer of behavior that could be called ‘natural’ and a constructed cultural or spiritual world. For man, everything is constructed and everything is natural...” and, he adds a few sentences later, “[b]ehaviors create significations that are transcendent in relation to the anatomical structure and yet immanent to the behavior as such, *since behavior can be taught and can be understood*.”²⁰ How behaviors are taught and understood occurs not through instinct or biology, Merleau-Ponty insists, but through our concrete interactions with others; these latter are in turn situated within a broader cultural and historical context that incorporates, reflects, and reinforces the demands of the society within which an individual lives.

It is perhaps in the final “Freedom” chapter of the *Phenomenology of Perception* that the notion of the body as a historical idea comes to its fullest expression. It is here that Merleau-Ponty most eloquently presents what I would call his “intersectionalist” account of the meaning of behavior, an account that refuses reductionist explanations that would look to a single factor as the underlying source for our actions rather than recognizing that psychological, physiological, and cultural factors *together* shape the historical meaning of our gestures. In his words:

All explanations of my behavior in terms of my past, my temperament, or my milieu are thus true, but only on condition of not considering them as separable contributions, but rather as moments of my total being whose sense I

¹⁸ Butler (1989, p. 254, my emphasis).

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 141).

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 195, my emphasis).

could make explicit in different directions, without one ever being able to say if it is I who give them their sense or if I receive it from them.²¹

If it is indeed the case, as he suggests, that “I am a psychological and historical structure” who “along with existence” has “received a way of existing, or a style,” this “givenness” of style, which, I would argue, is the very condition for recognizing it as such, signifies that it does not belong solely to a single individual but is, more precisely, an historical expression of the relationship she sustains with the society in which she dwells. And, as Frantz Fanon so powerfully emphasizes in *Black Skin White Masks*, if one’s social relations are oppressive, due to particular bodily and cultural differences that are stigmatized as inferior, this bodily judgment is itself internalized, affecting not only how that individual responds to and is responded to by others but how she regards herself and her bodily possibilities. Let us turn, then, to Fanon’s discussion of a historically racialized body schema to see how Merleau-Ponty’s account of the historicization of bodily meaning can be productively utilized even against Merleau-Ponty’s own gender and race-neutral accounts of embodiment, to address not only the naturalization and normativization of gender identity but racial identity as well.

3 Intercorporeal dimensions of identity: Historico-racial schemas and racialized bodies

In the chapter entitled “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” in *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon presents a trenchant critique of the race-neutral, generic, and ultimately quite positive account Merleau-Ponty and the Gestalt theorists provide of the body schema. Strikingly, Fanon does not simply refute this positive account through his powerful autobiographical counterexamples, but complicates his critique by inserting between them a Merleau-Pontian description of the body schema as an enabling phenomenon that facilitates a dynamic rapport between myself and the world. By providing this confirmatory account of how the body schema *should* operate in the allegedly “normal” subject, Fanon enables us to see exactly how and why it can become an impossible achievement for those whose bodies are deemed inherently inferior, that is, for those who are ruled out, from the outset, from achieving the status of “normal” subjects. Being viewed and treated as a “normal” subject, then, is revealed by Fanon not to be one’s “birthright” as a human being, but as an inherited privilege that white bodies (if, I would add, they are able-bodied) enjoy and that non-white bodies do not.

Before examining the ways in which his critique shatters the illusion of a race-neutral body schema as the norm for all bodies, let’s look at his own, rather traditional description of the dynamic organizational role the body schema (is supposed to) play in mundane, human activities:

I know that if I want to smoke, I shall have to stretch out my right arm and grab the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table. As for the

²¹ Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 482).

matches, they are in the left drawer, and I shall have to move back a little. And I make all these moves, not out of habit, but by implicit knowledge. A slow construction of my self as a body in a spatial and temporal world- such *seems to be* the schema. It is not imposed on me; it is rather a definitive structuring of my self and the world- definitive because it creates a genuine dialectic between my body and the world.²²

Fanon signals his refusal of this rather conventional description of how the body schema ordinarily functions not only by the dubious, yet rather innocuous statement: “such *seems to be* the schema,” but also by his immediately preceding remarks about the profoundly inhibiting influence the “white gaze” of colonialist Antillean society has upon the formation of the colonized individual’s body schema. In an almost mythical staging of a primal encounter between colonizer and colonized that signifies “the moment when his inferiority is determined by the Other,” Fanon declares:

And then we were given the occasion to confront the white gaze. An unusual weight descended on us. The real world robbed us of our share. In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one’s body is solely negating. It’s an image in the third person. All around the body reigns an atmosphere of certain uncertainty.²³

In this oft-cited passage, Fanon reveals the power of the “white gaze” of the French colonist to alienate the native Antillean from her own body. Here the classic depiction of the body schema as a first person, lived experience that produces “a genuine dialectic between my body and the world” (as in the smoking example presented above) is decisively interrupted and undermined by the extremely negative image of one’s body that is communicated through the ongoing, oppressive look of the colonizer. This “white gaze,” Fanon claims, generates a third person body image, a “bodily curse” that is internalized in the form of what he calls a “historico-racial schema.”

Moving seamlessly back from the third to the first person, Fanon affirms the debilitating personal effects of this historico-racial schema, a socially-produced, yet subjectively lived phenomenon that does not replace the body schema but, he suggests, functions as a disruptive force “beneath” it. If the body schema is generated, as Jean Lhermitte (who Merleau-Ponty also cites several times in *Phenomenology of Perception*) asserts, in *L’Image de Notre Corps*, out of “remnants of feelings and notions of the tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, or visual nature,” the historico-racial schema, Fanon maintains, has a much different source, namely, “the Other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories.”²⁴

Insofar as both schemas are operative simultaneously, the tension between their competing demands is ineliminable: the demand to meet the motor challenges of my

²² Fanon (2008, ps. 90–91, my emphasis).

²³ Fanon (2008, p. 90).

²⁴ The original Lhermitte passage is quoted along with the subsequent observation by Fanon in Fanon (2008, p. 91).

situation cannot dispel the equally pressing demand to do so in a manner that conforms to and thereby confirms the other's views of my corporeal, psychical, social, and cultural inferiority. The ongoing clash between them, as Fanon describes it, is often experienced by the person of color as existential trauma.²⁵ The coexistence of these two schemas, then, cannot be regarded as a "good ambiguity," in the Merleau-Pontian sense, namely as the possibility of two quite different perspectives that add richness and depth to our experience. The traumatic effects of this experience, Fanon is suggesting, reverberate psychically, physiologically, socially, and culturally; they cannot be contained within any one sphere. With a final jab at overly simplistic, traditional portrayals of the formation of the body schema that present it as what I am calling an "enabling phenomenon" (insofar as it allows us to meet the corporeal demands placed upon us by our situation without the need for reflection), Fanon ironically concludes: "I thought I was being asked to construct a physiological self, to balance space and localize sensations, when all the time they were clamoring for more."²⁶ What, we might ask, are these Others clamoring for, exactly? No more and no less, I would assert, than that one uncritically internalize the pathologizing demands of these Others and live them as *one's own*.

Addressing a similar point in a Foucauldian register, George Yancy, I believe, might describe this self-alienating internalization of an oppressive historico-racial schema as an ongoing function of what he calls the "reactive value-creating power" of white racism. In his words, it "disciplines and shapes black bodies/selves in such a manner that they come to 'discover' the 'truth' that their moral and physical deformation is inherent."²⁷ By highlighting its debilitating normative implications, Yancy's discussion of the pathologizing effects of this process reinforces Fanon's account of the corporeal, psychical, ethical, and social challenges the historico-racial schema presents to the coherent construction of a body schema. Yancy also emphasizes, along with Fanon, and other critical race scholars, how the superiority of "whiteness" is established in and through this denigration of blackness.

Strikingly, this leads us to question whether the confident "I can" that allegedly flows naturally from our body schemas is itself constructed through the historico-racial schema of white skin privilege. It is important to recognize, moreover, that historico-racial schemas always intersect with and incorporate other historical schemas, including, for instance, what I would call the historico-gender schema of male superiority. Thus, though Fanon is primarily trying to provide a "therapeutic" diagnosis of the existential drama that constitutes the "normal abnormality," to use Simone de Beauvoir's expression, not of old age, but of the colonized subject, a provocative implication of his account is that the internalization of historico-racial schemas enables some bodies even and precisely as they disable other bodies.

²⁵ I'm using this particular expression to indicate that, in contrast to a psychic trauma, which might be triggered by an external event but which primarily impacts a single individual, an existential trauma is never restricted to an individual or group but affects/infects the entire society in which they live.

²⁶ Fanon (2008, p. 91).

²⁷ Yancy (2004, p. 121).

Fanon, as noted earlier, presents his account of the historico-racial schema as a much-needed corrective to the deceptively neutral Gestaltist and Merleau-Pontian descriptions of an efficacious body schema that is responsive to the demands of a motor task, suggesting that these descriptions fail to recognize the often debilitating demands of Others who insist that certain bodies must express, at all times, their alleged corporeal inferiority in and through their body schemas. And yet, I would argue once again, there are rich resources in Merleau-Ponty's own discussion that undermine a false view of the body schema as unaffected by the normative expectations of others, whether these latter are based on our race, our gender, our class, our religion, a particular ability or disability or on other aspects of our identities. For if, as he stresses in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, "to be an experience, is to have inner communication with the world, the body, and others, to be with them rather than beside them," then the experience of the body schema will, of necessity, always be informed by that *inner communication*, by our being with others and the world "rather than beside them."²⁸

There are clearly many different ways in which this "inner communication" can be enabling and many different ways it can be disabling for any given subject or group of subjects. What is also clear is that this "inner communication" is always an "outer" one as well since it is always being conducted through intercorporeal channels. Though we might fault Merleau-Ponty for focusing more on enabling experiences than on disabling experiences, he does provide, unlike most of his philosophical contemporaries, many examples of experiences that are normally regarded as disabling, such as the phantom limb, aphasia, or the case of Schneider, a WWI combat veteran with a serious brain injury, even if these latter, in his hands, always seem to end up on an enabling note! Turning now to the recent work of disability theorist, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson on the phenomenon of "misfitting," the lived experience of a lack of "fit" between body and world, between one's own body and other people's bodies (an experience that characterizes some bodies more than others, but all bodies, on at least some occasions). I would like to explore how Garland-Thomson's account of "misfitting" marks a distinctively Merleau-Pontian intervention into the field of disability studies.

4 Fitting and misfitting

In a 2011 *Hypatia* essay entitled, "Misfits: A Feminist-Materialist Disability Concept," Rosemarie Garland-Thomson introduces the concept of misfitting as a more "fitting" alternative to the two historically dominant models of disability, namely the medical model and the social model. The more traditional, medical model, locates disability in the body (or mind) of the individual. According to this model, the individual with one or more disabilities suffers from an abnormal body and/or mind, and it is modern medicine that we must look to in order either to "cure" her and "restore" her to normality, or, if that is not an option, at least provide her with drugs and/or adaptive devices that will enable her to function as

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 99, my emphasis).

“normally” as possible given her condition. Contemporary examples of the medical model are easy to find. Taking Adderall or Ritalin to counter the symptoms of ADHD for instance, as an increasing number of American children do each school day, is a perfect case in point.

The social model, which arose as a critique of the medical model, argues that disability is not due to malfunctioning bodies but rather to inhospitable social and physical environments that refuse to accommodate bodies that vary too much from the norm. Rather than locating disability “in” the non-normative body then, the social model claims that it is the lack of access to social and public spaces that renders individuals “dis-abled.” As Garland-Thomson, observes, “Disability oppression in this view emanates from prejudicial attitudes that are given form in the world through architectural barriers, exclusionary institutions and the unequal distribution and access to resources.”²⁹ The landmark 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, which mandated that individuals with disabilities have the legal right to freedom from discrimination in “employment, housing, public accommodations, education, transportation, communication, recreation, institutionalization, health services, voting, and access to public services” is largely a result of the success of the social model in arguing that it is the environment, rather than the individual with the disability, that is the main problem to be “cured.”³⁰

Just as the empiricist view, which presents the world as the source of experience and the body as the passive recipient of that experience, allegedly offers a much-needed antidote to the intellectualist view that it is the mind that is the source of experience and the world that is passively there, meaningless until we give meaning to it, the social model has claimed to be the necessary corrective to the medical model that has historically pathologized and isolated, often through institutionalization, those bodies deemed to be “deficient.” And just as Merleau-Ponty argues that both the empiricist and the intellectualist go astray in the same way, despite their opposition to one another, because both are committed to a one-sided, active/passive model that does not accurately describe our lived experience, so Garland-Thomson argues that whether disability is seen as a function of a deficient body *or* a deficient environment, we are not doing justice to the lived experience of disability. And, finally, just as Merleau-Ponty concludes that neither the body nor the world is the source of perceptual experience but that it arises in and through their dynamic interaction, so Garland-Thomson maintains that disability cannot simply be attributed *either* to the body *or* to the environment but, is better understood as a “mis-fit” between them. In her words, “[t]he problem with a misfit, then, inheres

²⁹ Garland-Thomson (2011, p. 591).

³⁰ From ADA TITLE 42, CHAPTER 126, Sec. 12101 (<http://www.ada.gov/pubs/adastatute08.htm>). Of course, just because an employer is legally obligated to provide specific accommodations for an individual’s disability such as a handicapped restroom, special computer software, etc., doesn’t mean that the individual who requires this accommodation still won’t be blamed for the extra trouble or expense associated with it. Thus, these two models should not be seen as completely separate from one another but as often uncomfortably co-existing together, with political correctness on the side of the social model but with a continued stigmatization of the individual who has the disability that is more in keeping with the medical model.

not in either of the two things but rather in their juxtaposition, the awkward attempt to fit them together.”³¹

Garland-Thomson provides several arguments in favor of this new model, which, she tells us, utilizing Merleau-Pontian language, “offers an account of a dynamic encounter between flesh and world.”³² I would like to focus on two of her arguments in particular, namely, her claim that “the concept of misfit emphasizes the particularity of varying lived embodiments and avoids a theoretical generic disabled body that can dematerialize if social and architectural barriers no longer disable it” and her claim that “the concept of misfitting as a shifting spatial and perpetually temporal relationship confers agency and value on disabled subjects at risk of social devaluation by highlighting adaptability, resourcefulness, and subjugated knowledge as potential effects of misfitting.”³³

Echoing both Young’s and Fanon’s objections to generic descriptions of the “I can” and the body schema that I discussed earlier, Garland-Thomson states that:

Fitting occurs when a generic body enters a generic world, a world conceptualized, designed, and built in anticipation of bodies considered in the dominant perspective as uniform, standard, majority bodies. In contrast, misfitting emphasizes particularity by focusing on the specific singularities of shape, size, and function of the person in question. Those singularities emerge and gain definition only through their unstable disjunctive encounter with an environment. The relational reciprocity between body and world materializes both, demanding in the process an attentiveness to the distinctive, dynamic thingness of each as they come together in time and space. In one moment and place there is a fit; in another moment and place a misfit.³⁴

One of the virtues of this account of misfitting is that it presents us with an existential continuum in which, while some people’s bodies “fit” more than others in particular social and physical environments, all of us have had the experience of misfitting and, as a result, being regarded as a “misfit” whether we are able-bodied or living with a disability, male or female, black or white, young or old, gay or straight, Christian or Muslim, rich or poor (and the list goes on). “A reasonable fit in a reasonably sustaining environment,” Garland-Thomson tells us, “allows a person to navigate the world in relative anonymity, in the sense of being suited to the circumstances and conditions of the environment, of satisfying its requirements in a way so as not to stand out, make a scene, or disrupt through countering expectations.”³⁵ “Misfitting,” by contrast, is not an anonymous experience but an intensely personal one, usually accompanied by a mixture of unsettling emotions

³¹ Garland-Thomson (2011, p. 593).

³² Garland-Thomson (2011, p. 592). I should note that although I am claiming that Garland-Thomson is using Merleau-Pontian language, she does not cite Merleau-Ponty in this work. That is, Garland-Thomson’s invocation of what might be viewed as a classically Merleau-Pontian form of expression (i.e., “a dynamic encounter between flesh and world”) is something I am drawing attention to, and not a connection that Garland-Thomson is making herself.

³³ Garland-Thomson (2011, p. 592).

³⁴ Garland-Thomson (2011, p. 595).

³⁵ Garland-Thomson (2011, p. 596).

such as anxiety, embarrassment, diffidence, and fear, indeed the very emotions that both Young and Fanon so often evoke in their respective critiques.

“Misfitting,” as Garland-Thomson describes it, is not simply a disability studies concept. She persuasively suggests that it can be utilized to describe the experience of other marginalized groups, as well as the experiences of dominant subjects who may have this experience less often, but have it nonetheless. This is because misfitting is not an unusual or abnormal experience, but rather “a contingent and fundamental fact about human embodiment.”³⁶ And yet, even if it is a universal experience, it is not a generic experience because there are as many different ways to misfit (and to fit) as there are bodies, cultures, and environments.

Explicitly integrating insights from feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory, and disability studies, Garland-Thomson maintains that:

Like the dominant subject positions such as male, white, or heterosexual, fitting is a comfortable and unremarkable majority experience of material anonymity, an unmarked subject position that most of us occupy at some points in life and that often goes unnoticed. When we fit harmoniously and properly into the world, we forget the truth of contingency because the world sustains us. When we experience misfitting and recognize that disjuncture for its political potential, we expose the relational component and the fragility of fitting. Any of us can fit here today and misfit there tomorrow.³⁷

Expanding on this point a few pages later, Garland-Thomson adds: “A misfit occurs when world fails flesh in the environment one encounters- whether it is a flight of stairs, a boardroom full of misogynists, an illness or injury, a whites-only country club, subzero temperatures, or a natural disaster.”³⁸

Just as Merleau-Ponty emphasizes Schneider’s adaptability to the bodily and situational limitations that “normal subjects” believe make his experience profoundly deficient, so that they are lived as normal for him, Garland-Thomson stresses that what might look like a misfit to others, namely a non-normative body that engages with the world in non-normative ways, with the right support from others and from the environment, may actually be lived as a fit. “For example,” she asserts,

a white cane or a brailled book is an element of the sustaining environment for a blind person to encounter a fit that accommodates the minority embodiment of blindness in an environment built for the sighted. Such prostheses ease the material divergences between bodies and their location, making misfits into fits.”³⁹

As a quintessentially phenomenological concept (even though Garland-Thomson never identifies it as such), “misfitting” captures a common lived experience that has the potential to teach us much more about ourselves, others, and our environment, than fitting can ever do. Perhaps this is why Merleau-Ponty spent so

³⁶ Garland-Thomson (2011, p. 598).

³⁷ Garland-Thomson (2011, p. 597).

³⁸ Garland-Thomson (2011, p. 600).

³⁹ Garland-Thomson (2011, p. 601).

much time in *Phenomenology of Perception* discussing allegedly abnormal experiences, not as negative examples that reinforce the rigid boundaries of normality, but, I would argue, to challenge our conceptions of what is normal, what is natural, and what can and should be normative. And, this, I think, is precisely the future that his work has bequeathed to us, a future whose potential will be more fully realized when we embrace the possibility of “singing the world” in ways that transform more misfits into fits; these “fits,” as feminist theorists, critical race theorists, and disability theorists have shown us, cannot be “one size fits all” majority models, but must be attuned to our specific bodies and bodily potentialities as well as the particular environments in which we live.

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