

“The Place Where Life Hides Away”: Merleau-Ponty, Fanon, and the Location of Bodily Being

*I*n much critical writing about the body, the notion persists that the body is something of which we have unmediated knowledge, that the body is a material thing that we possess or *are* unproblematically, effortlessly, utterly. Philosophy in general, and phenomenology in particular, is forever asking us to interrogate truth claims: *how do we know what we know?* Interestingly, truth claims that emanate from the body, or the body itself as a truth claim, often escape our epistemological scrutiny. However, like most kinds of knowledge, our epistemological certainty about our own bodies is not given, but is delivered by processes and interactions—mostly mundane and largely unremarkable—that connect us to the world through which we move. This paper will examine some of the ways in which our knowledge of the body is mediated in an attempt to show that this social mediation shapes not only our *knowledge of* our bodies but our *feelings in* them as well. These are structurations that take place at the border between the body and the world and exemplify the ways in which the outermost edge of the body is malleable and permeable. In the first section of this paper, I will discuss Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s

descriptions of proprioception and its creation of the outermost edge of the body. In the second section, I look at the idea of “flesh” that Merleau-Ponty outlines in *The Visible and the Invisible*, and examine the function of perception as the means by which relations between myself and the world are organized. Through perception, I apprehend the other, located just beyond the sensate border of my body; I also find the limit of my own body through perception. In the third section, I turn to bodily inwardness—in Merleau-Ponty’s words, “anonymous life”—in *Phenomenology of Perception* and Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. There, I ask if it is possible to consider the inner experience of embodiment without postulating a deep core of bodily being that exists unaffected by structures of race and gender. I aim to challenge the common assumption that the outside envelope of the body may be subject to the shaping press of the world that is its context, but that there exists beneath this outer surface an inner core of the embodied self that is immune to these pressures. An account of gender and race that understands “surface” interventions to be secondary or auxiliary modifications that are overlaid on the ungendered, unraced materiality of the body cannot explain the pervasiveness of the structures of either race or gender. This parsing of inside and outside necessarily posits another body beneath the surface of the visible and the bodily scene of difference, an “underneath” that is untroubled by dramas and dilemmas of racial or sexual difference, and thus restores an embodied subject whose ostensible “universality” critical studies of race and gender have taught us to view with skepticism. Even those aspects of the body that would seem to escape or evade structures of gender and race, that is, the body as it exists beyond the scope of the visible, are in fact still marked by them. Gender and race *are* often read from the surface of the body (though in quite different ways), however, gender and race cannot be said to be *located* there, but must also be understood to structure and shape the ways in which all subjects relate to their own bodies and, in turn, to the world. Here, I will argue that gender and race can determine our very ability to retreat into the body, to experience the body *as* a core or a haven into which the self might retreat.

Put another way: we are by now comfortable enough with the notion that “gender” and “race” are socially constructed categories. I am suggesting that we do not yet have a thorough enough account of how the body’s inner life is constructed by these categories and want to suggest that the accounts of bodily being offered by Merleau-Ponty and Fanon give us a way of understanding the retreat into the body as a difficult but necessary

achievement that paradoxically both is born of social relations and opens the way for a body and a subject to exist in the world.

Proprioception and Externality

A phenomenological view of subjectivity understands the self to be formed proprioceptively, through our daily, and mostly mundane, encounters with the world around us. Proprioception is a constant movement between the inside of the self and the outside of the world, where that movement sometimes creates a boundary between inside and out and sometimes blurs the distinction between them altogether. Proprioception, particularly the model of proprioception used by Merleau-Ponty, is vital to an explication of bodily being in two ways: first, it shows that the relation between the materiality of the body and our *knowledge* of the body is more complex than it might first appear. Second, understanding the body proprioceptively underscores the extent to which the body is an amalgam: not only matter and not wholly ideality, but found somewhere in the relation between the two. This last is crucial in its disjunction of bodily material from bodily truth, and allows us to chart the ambivalent presences of the body and to account for the ways in which ambivalent presences manifest themselves in the embodied experiences of transgendered and transsexual subjects.

Proprioception is that process through which we apprehend and make sense of our own bodies; it is what enables the psyche to construct a unified and coherent body from the body's disparate parts. Proprioception creates a body from the fragmented, disjointed chaos of the body in bits and pieces.¹ It is that *felt sense* that I have of my body, both as it relates to itself and to the world in which my body is always inescapably situated. At the level of the senses, proprioception is both a concatenation of the input that I receive from my sensory organs and something that exceeds my senses. It might seem a curious choice of focus, when inquiring after the materiality of the body, to concentrate on a “felt sense” that is decidedly nonmaterial. Yet, as Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* argues, the body does not belong entirely to the realm of the material; it can only be located in the juncture between the psychic and the physiological. It is this hinge between the material and the phantasmatic, the physiological and the psychic, the present and the absent, that is the subject of *Phenomenology of Perception* and the site at which the embodied subject emerges.

Merleau-Ponty illustrates this juncture by describing bodily supplements and bodily absences, illustrating the former by describing the blind man's cane and the latter in his discussion of phantom limbs. The cane is, to be sure, an external object, unlikely to be mistaken for an organic part of the body. The cane's function as a tool would also seem to place it in the class of things that are used *by* the body but are not part *of* the body. And even the most cursory of examinations would seem to confirm the commonsense certainty that a cane is not a body part, since it is not attached to the body. And yet, the blind man is not only able to experience the cane proprioceptively, in the same way that we might interact with any object that we pick up, but his sense of proprioception itself relies upon it. "Its point has become an area of sensitivity" (*Phenomenology* 143), it has ceased to become an object and become a part of his body. It is what Merleau-Ponty will call a "bodily auxiliary" (152), an extension of the bodily synthesis. Many different objects in the world can be taken up and utilized in an instrumental way, but the cane belongs to a special class of objects in that it is not just something that the blind man can feel but *the means by which* he can feel. It has become an organ of perception.

This is a becoming effected by a double movement, rather than a simple graft. The cane becomes something other than, something more than, an object in the world; so, too, does the blind man's body become something that exceeds its corporeal contours. "To get used to a hat, a car, or a stick is to be transplanted into them, or conversely, to incorporate them into the bulk of our own body" (*Phenomenology* 143). This transformation is not a mere addition, not a matter of my cementing an object onto my corporeal schema; part of me must be transplanted into these objects in order for me to incorporate them into my body. This transplantation is, indeed, a material one, as I incorporate the space of everyday tools and objects into my own embodied space. But this transplantation is no less a psychic operation in that these bodily auxiliaries become such by virtue of the meaning that I invest in them.

For Merleau-Ponty, the composition of the body itself hinges on this question of meaning, and this meaning is, at every point, created rather than found. The construction of a corporeal schema is, he suggests, a way of trying to direct oneself toward that meaning, and it often requires the body to supplement its given materiality with auxiliaries: "Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby

around itself a cultural world” (146). We see here that what a body might be, and what a body might be able to become as it moves through the world, is, for Merleau-Ponty, almost limitless. Body parts are not objects, but potentialities, and the body itself is, he writes, “a nexus of living meanings, not the law for a certain number of covariant terms” (151). This does not mean that we have the capacity to create any kind of body we choose or that we can make material any kind of phantasmatic embodiment merely by willing it so. It does mean, however, that a phantasmatic body part cannot be considered *not-body* simply by virtue of its nonmateriality.

Merleau-Ponty uses the example of the phantom limb phenomenon to demonstrate not merely the ways in which the physiological and the psychic are inextricably linked but also the impoverishment of these categories for understanding embodiment. It is not strictly correct, he asserts, to consider the phantom limb as a wholly psychic appendage divorced from the realm of physiology, since the felt sense of a phantom limb is not qualitatively different than the felt sense of a “real” one. “The phantom arm,” he writes, “is not a representation of the arm, but the ambivalent presence of an arm” (81).

What might it mean to speak of an “ambivalent presence” of a body part or parts? It is not only that the phantasmatic and the material are inextricably intertwined; phenomenologically speaking, there exists no bright line between them.² Indeed, to suggest that one’s felt sense can register a body that is, in part, ambivalently present is to challenge the assumption that a “felt sense” of the body is able to affirm one’s certainty about the materiality of that body. What is felt about the body is both something more and something less than materiality. The corporeal schema that results from my proprioceptive engagements with the world is not merely a mental map of bodily materiality; it is what, through making the body available to the subject, constructs the body itself. The relation between the corporeal schema and the parts of which it is comprised is not a strictly indexical one, because a body part’s position within the corporeal schema is determined by the psychic energy invested in that part rather than its morphological configurations. This principle is illustrated by Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of anosognosia, in which a person fails to acknowledge or recognize parts of her or his own body. An anosognostic might perceive his or her own arm as “a long cold snake” (76), or recognize this limb as an arm but conclude that it must belong to someone else. The limb in question is ambivalently present; the arm is materially “there” but has become excluded from the anosognostic’s corporeal schema in such

a way as to render it “not there.” The certainty that a “felt sense” seems to promise is not a sense of materiality, but a sense of “mine-ness” or “own-ness.” The materiality of the anosognostic’s arm is not in dispute, even to the anosognostic himself; it is a sense of mine-ness that is lacking. Conversely, the presence of the phantom limb is a function of the mine-ness that inheres in it—not of its materiality.

If the materiality of the body promises a certainty or a truth, it is a truth that must be constantly created rather than finally or simply found. That creation arises from an ongoing series of acts, of physical and psychic exchanges with the world that are sometimes unconscious and sometimes volitional. To see body parts as potentialities rather than objects is to radically rethink both what it means to be a body and what it means to be a body in the world.

Flesh and Bodily Borders

Upon first consideration, nothing would appear to be more internal to, or phenomenologically closer to, the subject than his or her bodily sensations. However, the body schema is not “biologically given,” but must be built up over time into the assemblage that we eventually come to recognize as a whole, if only provisionally so. And this process is never complete or final; the postural model exists less as a stable thing through space and time and more as a series of different models. Thus, our sense of the body schema, the postural model of the body, is a sedimented effect without a stable referent or predictable content, since it may be different in form and shape, moment to moment, with each new iteration. Paul Schilder describes the body image as “in some way always the sum of the body images of the community according to the various relations in the community” and even insists that the body schema “belongs” to the world more than it belongs to the individual whose body it surveys—such is its instability and referential resistance.⁵

The phenomenological experience of embodiment, the concatenation of my perceptions that form a relation between my body and its world can make external distinctions between body and world, between inside and outside of the self, difficult to discern. Merleau-Ponty designates that region of being that is comprised of the intertwined layers of body and world as “flesh.” Merleau-Ponty describes perception as a productive activity and insists that my perception is not properly thought as a survey of the world or its objects, but is, rather, the mode through which I make meaning

not only of the world but also of myself. Perception is not only what brings the world to me; it is what actively forms me in my engagement with the world. Merleau-Ponty’s description of the productive capacities of perception has two consequences for thinking bodies as an amalgam of inside and outside. First, it allows us to understand perception as forming a permeable border between the body and the world, a sensate envelope that functions to mediate between body and world. Second, it helps to elucidate the ways in which the activity of perception is the work of relation, where relation is finally what produces a body. Both the activity of perception and the body that perceives depend on a certain indeterminacy, an in-between-ness, for their coherence. The objects delivered by any perception are only legible in the context of their relation to their ground and to the location of the embodied perceiver; perception is, finally, a movement between the perceiving and perceived. Similarly, the body itself is brought into legibility at the border of its contact with the world, both in a material sense (through the bounding envelope of the skin) and in a less concrete way (through the relationship of the particularity of my body to the cultural context of bodies in general). Ultimately, the equivocal nature of perception and of the body extends to their relation with one another: Merleau-Ponty comes to posit perception not just as a capacity of the body but *as the body itself*, as an extension of the body, in that sensation—and thus the discreteness of the category of either world or body—happens at the sensate border, the edge. In the case of the body, this sensate border or edge is the skin.

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the world as a prolongation of the body establishes a relation between self and world that is not a barrier, but a sensate border. He suggests that perception itself *is* that sensate border, thus establishing a model in which perception is something akin to a skin:

But my perception of the world feels it has an exterior; I feel at the surface of my visible being that my volubility dies away, that I become flesh, and that at the extremity of this inertia that was me there is something else, or rather an other who is not a thing. He then is seated nowhere. (The Visible 61)⁴

Through my interactions with the world, I “become flesh,” and my acts of seeing, speaking, and even being are my “carnal relation with the flesh of the world.” It is a transmission, an exchange across the border of what I perceive (the perception that both emanates from me and *is* me) toward that other who is only vaguely locatable as outside of my perception. That other is outside of me, is not-me, but is crucial for my sense of self, my

project of becoming flesh. I become flesh in feeling the press of myself out toward the world and feeling the presence of the other for whom I, too, am an object or not quite an object just outside of the reach of her or his perception. This would seem to ally flesh with the invisible, in that I become flesh only in relation to that which is outside of my perception as I push against the surface of what is outside of me and other than me. I become flesh only at the very edge of my perception, and can do so only under the press of the invisible and imperceptible outside that, it would seem, forms the border of that flesh. My body is visible and able to be apprehended like any object, but my flesh is not; it is bounded by my perception and extends proprioceptively into the world.

The other enables me to become my own flesh through her location outside of my zone of perception, but she also constitutes my flesh through her perception of my body. This produces an objective body that, when wedded to my phenomenological body, constitutes my flesh. My body as seen by another is an objective fact, but my body as I feel and experience it is a phenomenological entity. The relation between these two bodies is not indexical; the one need not map onto the other. Merleau-Ponty describes the relation between the objective body and the phenomenological body as a doubling and redoubling in which “the objective body and the phenomenal body turn about one another and encroach upon one another” (*The Visible* 117). This encroachment occasions a “dehiscence” that “opens my body in two, and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things” (123). My relation to my own body and to the world around it is thus enabled by a reciprocity between myself and the other. Because I see and am seen, touch and am touched, “the world and I are within one another” (123). This folding of self into world is possible through the reciprocal relation between myself and the other; my body becomes for another, and the body of the other simultaneously becomes for me. The body is for itself, and it is for others, it is both seeing and it is seen, it is sensible and sentient, and the enfolded relation and movement between these two halves constitute “flesh.”

We have now explored the ways in which a bodily sense of self is created from both proprioception and perception, from contact between its outermost edge and the world. However, our external proprioceptive sense of the body is not our only means of feeling and inhabiting the body; the body is also experienced in a more solitary mode, as a kind of interiority. Experiencing the body as an interiority is a quite different kind of

phenomenological event from proprioception and external perception, though I will argue that even a bodily feeling of utter isolation is no less a kind of relation between self and world. How can the body come to be felt as an interiority, as a place into which we can retract from the world, and what consequences does this have for gendered and raced embodiment?

“This Anonymous Life”: Bodily Interiority

Among the many psychological case studies that Merleau-Ponty discusses in the *Phenomenology of Perception* is the case of a girl whose mother has warned her away from the man with whom she is in love. Forbidden to see the object of her desire, the girl loses the power of speech. Merleau-Ponty dwells upon this phenomenon at some length, and is concerned to show that the girl’s loss of voice is something other than a simple refusal of speech in the sense that her voice is not present and refused or turned away from; instead she is “literally without a voice,” severed from it, he will later suggest, “as certain insects sever one of their own legs” (163). We are offered this simile, suggesting affinity between the voice and an insect’s leg, the means by which the insect moves through the world. The image of the insect’s dismemberment finds its startling counterpoint in the girl’s voice, which we now understand not quite as something she has lost, but as something from which she is cut off. Possession of the voice thereby transfers from the girl to the world, and the figuration offers the voice as lodged and left in the world, sacrificed for the sake of retreat. And the simile offers a still more astonishing comparison: the insect, despite the loss of something as vital as a limb, continues to move and to live. Likewise the girl, despite the loss of something as vital as a voice, continues to live. She lives housed in the “anonymous life” of her body, suggesting that the experiential interiority of the body is even more essential to life than the voice.

The girl’s is not a “deliberate or voluntary silence,” but rather, the result of a qualitative change in her ability to relate to her body and a corresponding change in her body’s ability to relate to the world. This change is an act that the girl performs at the same time that it is something less than voluntary, taking place, he tells us, “at a *lower* level than that of will” (*Phenomenology* 163). Merleau-Ponty describes the way this liminal withholding, this withdrawal from life, *dissolves* time, relying on a distinction, elaborated upon elsewhere in the *Phenomenology*, between personal and impersonal time:

In the case of the girl just discussed, the move towards the future, towards the living present or towards the past, the power of learning, of maturing, of entering into communication with others, have become, as it were, arrested in a bodily symptom, existence is tied up and the body has become “the place where life hides away.” For the patient, nothing further happens, nothing assumes meaning and form in life, or more precisely there occurs only a recurrent and always identical “now,” life flows back on itself and history is dissolved in natural time. (190)

Though this reads in part as a description of feminine hysteria, the conversion of a psychic suffering that is in some sense unspeakable into a bodily symptom, Merleau-Ponty’s account differs from classic Freudian hysteria in two respects. First, if the female body in cases of hysteria becomes the conduit for the transmission of affect, functioning *as* speech, then the relationship between body and speech here is precisely reversed, where affect and the ability for communication become submerged in the opacity of the body. Second, as Merleau-Ponty continues to describe the body that results from this change, the gender of that body shifts, moving from the third person feminine—the girl—to the third person masculine—the patient—to the revelation of first person—“my body.” He goes on to suggest that this cloistering of the self inside the body is not only a mark of pathology but is a capacity of any body, of any gender:

Even when normal and even when involved in situations with other people, the subject, in so far as he has a body, retains at every moment the power to withdraw from it. At the very moment when I live in the world, when I am given over to my plans, my occupations, my friends, my memories, I can close my eyes, lie down, listen to the blood pulsating in my ears, lose myself in some pleasure or pain, and shut myself up in this anonymous life which subtends my personal one. (164–65)

It seems at first as if Merleau-Ponty is suggesting that the maternal prohibition has broken some vital relation between the girl and the world, that an externally imposed isolation has corroded her ties to life. It soon becomes clear, however, that something more complicated has occurred. After suggesting that this capacity of bodily withdrawal characterizes a subject whose mourning has impoverished her world, he then suggests that this state of being, or this state of barely being, is temporally and

spatially coincident with “normal” bodily being. The power to burrow into the body in order to escape from the press and threat of “situations with other people” is a power that every body, or at least the body of every “normal” subject, retains. And it is not only that “normal” life can accommodate or tolerate these moments but that there is a pleasure that attends to this shuttering of self into the body. He continues:

But precisely because my body can shut itself off from the world, it is also what opens me out upon the world and places me in a situation there. The momentum of existence towards others, towards the future, towards the world can be restored as a river unfreezes. (164–65)

It is important to note how this opening toward the world occurs, how this ice-locked river suddenly cracks apart. For it is not only that my body is a thing that, at some moments, is capable of being immersed in the world and, at other moments, chooses to withdraw from it. This is certainly true, but Merleau-Ponty wants to stress that these are not independent and unrelated modes of being. At all times, the body retains the power to put itself into relations with the world and with others or to withdraw from them. The body’s capacity for openness *is the same* as its capacity for withdrawal into apparent solipsism; this is the fulcrum of its being. When Merleau-Ponty writes elsewhere that “[m]y body is the pivot of the world” (82), he is pointing to this movement, the systole and diastole of bodily being.

This retraction or withdrawal is best understood as itself a relational activity. Merleau-Ponty begins the section of *Phenomenology of Perception* titled “The Body in Its Sexual Being” by asking: “Let us try to see how a thing or a being begins to exist for us through desire or love” (154). This at first seems only to preface a discussion of the ways in which the object of desire comes to exist, which does indeed follow. But by the end of the section, it becomes clear that “the thing or being which begins to exist for us through desire” is also, extraordinarily enough, the body itself.

When the body says no—to speech, or to food, or to interactions with others—when the body refuses the world and burrows into itself, it retracts from its own particularity as surely as it retracts from the external world. Instead of delivering to the self an identity that might be fortified and amplified by solitude, this inward turn is, quite the opposite, a draining away of life from the self. The retreat from the world transforms bodily life into “anonymous life,” in which the pulse hums beneath the skin and

is amplified in the ears, and the body's functions persist, maintaining a life that exists beneath any sense of self. This mode of existence, "which runs through me, yet does so independently of me, is only the barest raw material of a genuine presence in the world." The self can be regained only when the body "opens itself to others or to the past, when it opens the way to co-existence and once more (in the active sense) acquires significance beyond itself" (165). The ability to relate to others, the capacity to have a world, has, then, as its necessary condition its converse, the ability to submerge oneself in the "anonymous life" of the body. The anonymity of the life in and of the body is mediated in part; it is not just anonymous life but "*this* anonymous life," and the self must be able to take hold of it enough to become engulfed in it. Instead of requiring the self to be in full possession of the body in order to encounter the world, Merleau-Ponty advances quite a different notion: in order to engage with the wider world, the self must be able to become lost to itself in the opaque thickness of the body.

Race and Insularity

Fanon's writing in *Black Skin, White Masks* is closely engaged with psychoanalysis and with the phenomenologies of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. Though much divides these ways of thinking the body and subjectivity, what Fanon leads us to in each is the zone of indeterminacy in bodily being that both of these traditions suggest is necessary in order for subjectivity and relation to exist. This bodily sense of location, a "zone of nonbeing" as Fanon will term it, is precisely what is denied the man of color through his relations with the white colonizer. It is also the necessary location of resistance: "There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born" (8). Thus we see subjectivity, paradoxically, finding its point of germination in the "sterile and arid region[s]" of the body, though this is neither a body only incidentally overlaid with its race and its gender, nor a body that exists in some fantastic space without them, but a body whose access to even its most decidedly material and ostensibly "universal" aspects is shaped by its racialization and its gendering.

In the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon discusses the situation of a colonized man arriving in France and describes the particular psychological attitude toward the traversal of national borders: "[T]here is a psychological phenomenon that consists in the belief that the world will open to the extent that frontiers are broken down" (21). Fanon

asserts that this belief is at root an error and that the colonized subject’s faith in transcending a physical barrier between nations, between the colonizer and the colonized other, is a fantasy that is insufficiently attentive to the internalization of those barriers, the mimetic relation between the physical structures of colonialism and the psychic structures that they produce.

One of those structures is the body schema, which Fanon describes in strikingly Merleau-Pontian terms:

The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of uncertainty. I know that if I want to smoke, I shall have to reach out my right arm and take the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table. The matches, however, are in the drawer on the left, and I shall have to lean back slightly. And all these movements are made not out of habit but out of implicit knowledge. A slow composition of my self as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world—such seems to be the schema. It does not impose itself on me; it is, rather, a definitive structuring of the self and of the world—definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world. (110–11)

The body schema creates a “dialectic” between the body and the world. It has been suggested that this is an impossible structure, for if relation is what produces a body, then the body itself cannot be one of the relata. But this structure—my body creating itself through its interactions with the world—is only untenably paradoxical if we understand the body as an indivisible substance.⁵ What Fanon’s text shows us is that the body is not, in this way, singular, but consists of different regions of being interleaved with one another. We see this most clearly when aspects of the body begin to crumble, which Fanon describes as the effect of the white man’s gaze on the body of the man of color:

Below the corporeal schema, I had sketched a historico-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me not by “residual sensations and perceptions primarily of a tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, and visual character,” but by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories. I thought that what I had in hand was to construct a physiological self, to balance space, to localize sensations, and here I was called on for more [. . .]. Assailed at

various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema. In the train, it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. I was given not one but two, three places. (111–12)

The “various points” at which Fanon’s body is assailed are located along axes of race and gender. He is “sealed into that crushing objecthood” and “abraded into nonbeing” (109) through the scene of interpellation that takes place on the train, the child who exclaims “Mama, look, a Negro!” an interpellation that will cast him as triply conscious of being racialized while simultaneously denying him gender: his being seen as black prevents him from being seen as a man. Indeed, normative manhood is characterized by a certain anonymity, a social designation confirmed by the company of other men, an ability to meld into the throng of other men: “All I wanted was to be a man among other men. [. . .] I wanted to be a man, nothing but a man” (112–13). This very anonymity is shown to be a prerogative of racially unmarked manhood, which only white men may enjoy. Race in this instance works precisely to block recourse to this anonymity, an anonymity that Fanon shows us to be allocated through relations of social power.

Consciousness of the body in this way, Fanon will suggest (along with Sartre), is “solely a negating activity” and lends the body an “unfamiliar weight” (110). Fanon’s description exceeds Sartre’s, however, in his description of the effects of the racist gaze; the man of color is lent a new consciousness that *takes the place* of an anonymous relationship to his own body, just as the historico-racial schema displaces and takes the place of his corporeal schema. What is foreclosed with this movement is the body’s interiority, and the body that Fanon describes is primarily characterized by its lack of interiority, which is thereby shown to be a cultural achievement rather than a naturally given attribute of the body. The body Fanon describes is *all* surface: “Where shall I hide? [. . .] My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored [. . .]. Where shall I find shelter from now on?” (113–14), this last suggesting that even the possibility of imagining a future springs from an anonymous bodily interiority, its loss constricting time itself.

The body that is delivered back to Fanon through the lens of the world is transformed into the place where life *cannot* hide away, whose capacity for holding and hiding an anonymous life becomes irretrievably

diminished to the extent that the black man “cannot take pleasure in his insularity” (51). It is not just the body in its visibility that is targeted by the racism projected at it, and that projects it in turn, a body marked by otherness that is forced into relentlessly surveyed objecthood, but the body in its innermost interiority, a region often posited as beyond the reach of the poisonous effects of an objectifying gaze. Fanon and Merleau-Ponty both insist that anonymity is not just a retreat into the occasional luxury of unsurveyed privacy; it is the foundation of our lives as social beings, and the condition of relation itself, surprising as that may seem. In order to belong to the world, Merleau-Ponty suggests, I must exist as an anonymous being for the other, and he or she for me:

My life must have a significance which I do not constitute; there must strictly speaking be an intersubjectivity; each one of us must be both anonymous in the sense of absolutely individual, and anonymous in the sense of absolutely general. Our being in the world, is the concrete bearer of this double anonymity.
(Phenomenology 448)

I want to conclude by suggesting that Fanon and Merleau-Ponty’s figurations of bodily interiority can offer promising directions for theories of social construction. We have seen in Merleau-Ponty a description of how one kind of gendered self, faced with a prohibiting power, might retreat into the interiority of the body, and we have seen in Fanon a further explication of the conditions of that retreat, where a differently gendered and raced self, faced with a more intense and more diffuse prohibiting power, finds access to that interiority foreclosed. I want to assert that there are important implications for thinking all kinds of gendered and raced subjectivities and that these psychic and bodily topographies can help us understand gender theory to refer not only to what is read on or done with the surface of bodies, but as a means by which we might ask whether and how bodily interiority is achieved and what kinds of liberations or sufferings are occasioned by that achievement or its failure.

One of the questions that gender theory teaches us to ask is: of what does bodily being consist? An answer gestured to here might be: of an outside and an inside in complex embrace—regions of the body that we easily have or are, and deeper regions of the body that are not quite wholly recognizable to us, or even as us. Bodily interiority thus functions as a way to withdraw from a form of social constitution that would constitute us simply as exterior and exposed surfaces for the play of social power.

It suggests that our very capacity to withdraw or to retreat—to decide, in effect, the spatial and temporal coordinates of that exposure—is also conditioned by matters of gender and race, and differently. If the body is “the place where life hides away,” then understanding this interiority can help us come to know, and perhaps finally retrieve, the life that hides there, the life that cannot find a way to hide there, and the life that stays only hidden there.

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Notes

- 1 I refer here to Lacan’s notion of the undifferentiated state of the infantile body. Lacan posits bodily coherence as a cultural achievement rather than a natural state, though the process by which the *hommelette* achieves his anticipatory bodily coherence is visual rather than tactile.
- 2 For a reading of the body’s parts as symbolic, imaginary, and material objects, there is no better source than Judith Butler’s *Bodies That Matter*. Butler’s aim there is “to rethink the physical and the psychical” as categorical descriptors of gendered embodiment (65), and my own account of the equivocal nature of bodily inhabitation and perception is deeply informed by that text.
- 3 For a more thorough account of Schilder’s theorization of the body schema, see my “The Bodily Ego and the Contested Domain of the Material.”
- 4 This quotation and those that follow come from Merleau-Ponty’s posthumously published work *The Visible and the Invisible*, in which he develops a theory of “flesh.” He uses this concept to completely dismantle the distinction between object and subject, between materiality and ideality, between the visible and the invisible. “Flesh” is emphatically *not* meant to describe what is material in opposition to what is immaterial, but designates, rather, the join between them.
- 5 I am indebted to David Hoy for helping me think about theorizations of the body within the phenomenological tradition, especially the paradox and possibility of embodiment as a dialectical relation.

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