

Introduction

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Although he was formally trained as a philosopher, Merleau-Ponty, who occupied the chair of child psychology at the Sorbonne at the time of his death in 1961, would himself be considered an interdisciplinary scholar by contemporary standards. Neurophysiology, gestalt and developmental psychology, political theory, literary and aesthetic theory, anthropology, and linguistics were familiar terrains that he actively drew upon in developing his phenomenological descriptions of perception, language, political life, art, literature, and history, all of which elaborated, in excitingly original and different ways, the primacy of the lived body in our everyday experience. For this reason, it should not surprise us that the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty has had a profound influence not only upon continental philosophers, but also upon literary theorists, cognitive scientists, architects, anthropologists, feminist theorists, psychoanalytic theorists, critical race theorists, and cultural theorists, some of whose work is included in this volume. For Merleau-Ponty, as for his teacher Edmund Husserl, the attempt to provide a comprehensive description of any given phenomenon leads one inevitably outside of the domain of philosophy proper to all the other disciplines that can help us to understand the “what” of its appearance. As Merleau-Ponty observes in the preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception*: “philosophy itself must not take itself for granted, in so far as it may have managed to say something true . . . (xiv)” and he argues that philosophy, the sciences, and all other disciplines, depend upon a prereflective embodied experience that provides the basis for all human inquiry. The essays that follow take up Merleau-Ponty’s Husserlian challenge to “return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*” (1962: ix) and they enter into dialogue with Merleau-Ponty through a variety of disciplinary avenues to explore the intertwinings that dynamically join us to the shared world of our concern.

In part I: “Ontological and Developmental Concerns: Difference and the Other,” Elizabeth Grosz, Lawrence Hass, and Talia Welsh advance our understanding of how Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, his view of alterity, and his conception of human development can meaningfully address the always shifting

boundaries between self and other, as well as between bodies and the world they inhabit. In “Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, and the Question of Ontology,” Grosz reveals fundamental affinities between Merleau-Ponty’s ontological conception of the flesh and Henri Bergson’s ontology of becoming. Regarding the feminist implications of their work, Grosz argues that:

Merleau-Ponty and Bergson, while being unable to account for or elaborate new concepts of woman or the feminine, may nevertheless prove indispensable in helping to formulate how we might know differently, how we might challenge and replace binarized models (of subject and object, self and object, consciousness and matter, nature and culture) with concepts of difference, what the objects of our representational and epistemological practices might be if they were undertaken with this concept of difference, the difference in being that is becoming, the difference in subjectivity that is biological openedness, this difference in the world that is life, were a guiding principle. (26)

By tracing the enduring influence of Bergson on Merleau-Ponty, and by emphasizing their relevance for theorizing difference as becoming, biological openedness, and life, Grosz brings both authors into a twenty-first-century conversation about difference that has only just begun.

Lawrence Hass engages Merleau-Ponty in a productive dialogue with another of his French interlocutors, namely, Emmanuel Levinas. In Hass’s essay, the notorious “problem of the other,” a problem that has haunted philosophy at least since the Ancient Greeks but which has been an especially salient concern for phenomenologists, is addressed through an exploration of the productive tensions in Levinas’s and Merleau-Ponty’s respective views of the ontological and ethical implications of intersubjective existence. Both Levinas and Merleau-Ponty, Hass argues, have creative and substantive contributions to make to our understanding of the complex relationships we sustain with others: “Levinas,” he claims:

teaches of the binding of these relationships, of the responsibility that flows toward others from our shared mortality, of the myriad ways our ipseity is called into question by the frank regard and appeal of others. He stresses the distance between self and other that cannot be consumed, and so illuminates the very nature of generosity and respect. And yet Merleau-Ponty reminds us of another binding: that the self and others are interinvolved in living experience through the interanimation of flesh and behavior. These “intersubjective” relations aren’t the stuff of totality and they don’t eliminate the differences between us. They are, instead, the very possibility of contact and community, the opening approach to transcendent others who live and breathe, suffer and perish in their bodies and not outside of them. (40–41)

While both Hass and Grosz's essays reveal, albeit in different ways, the continued importance of Merleau-Ponty's work for contemporary scholars who are committed to an ontology of difference and becoming, Talia Welsh's essay, which concludes part I, turns directly to the question of gendered bodies, specifically Merleau-Ponty's discussion of female embodiment and development in his 1949–1952 Sorbonne lectures in psychology. Welsh seeks to address persistent feminist criticisms of Merleau-Ponty's allegedly masculinist account of human embodiment and to show how the complex intertwining of physiological factors with cultural norms and stereotypes must be acknowledged and addressed in accounting for the specificity of gendered corporeal experience. Drawing directly upon Merleau-Ponty's insights, Welsh writes: "To live is to breathe, to eat, to move. Through these behaviors we are drawn again and again into a life much larger than our own and required for our own personal flourishing. Pregnancy might be the ultimate reminder of this connection" (56).

In part II, Annemie Halsema takes up this theme of being connected through one's gendered body, to "something that is larger than oneself, being part of a community" through a close analysis of the profound resonances between Irigaray's and Merleau-Ponty's thought (72). Despite Irigaray's very critical response to Merleau-Ponty's work in her chapter, "The Intertwining—The Chiasm" in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Halsema argues that Irigaray offers a "phenomenology in the feminine," a gendered phenomenology that builds upon, rather than opposes, Merleau-Ponty's own phenomenology of the body. Irigaray's phenomenology of sexual difference, Halsema suggests, is not so much a phenomenology of the female body as distinguished from the male body, but rather "a phenomenology that reflects on being two, on relating to the other, in short: a phenomenology that is intersubjective" (76). Halsema shows how Irigaray's understanding of the "negative" dimensions of sexual difference not only serves as the basis for an intersubjective ethics but can also be utilized productively to develop phenomenologies of other embodied differences, thereby helping to combat the charge of essentialism that has so often been leveled against Irigaray for privileging sexual difference.

Bruce Young introduces the term "subject-being" in his discussion of Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray, "to designate not the self but a matrix wherein self is related to what is other than it and indeed is constituted in relation to this relation" (85). There are not one but many ways to be related to otherness, Young continues, and "these constitute different forms of subject-being, each of which opens up different possible ways of being a self" (85). Young argues that fear of otherness constitutes the dominant form of subject-being in contemporary Western culture and he creatively demonstrates how the "ontology of noncoincidence" Merleau-Ponty develops in his later work offers a positive, alternative conception of otherness that provides the foundation for Irigaray's

own “language of the lips.” According to Young, the symbolic that Irigaray proposes “within which it becomes possible to ‘speak (as a) woman’ is not a semantics private to women, but a syntax that facilitates a dialogue of noncoincidence—that is, effective and articulate interaction between people who are different” (92). By illustrating the close connection between Merleau-Ponty’s and Irigaray’s projects, despite the latter’s privileging of sexual difference and the former’s lack of attention to its corporeal significance, both Halsema and Young provide us with new ways of thinking about the ethical implications of the differences that serve to distinguish self from other.

The two chapters that comprise part III of this volume explore the ways in which Marcel Proust and Gertrude Stein respectively enact, through their literature, the chiasmatic relationships Merleau-Ponty describes between the visible and the invisible, and the inside and the outside. Patricia Locke, in “Among the Hawthorns: Marcel Proust and Merleau-Ponty,” closely examines Proust’s leitmotif of the hawthorns, which first make their appearance at the outset of Volume One of *Remembrance of Things Past, Swann’s Way*, “to show how nature gives itself to Marcel as artful, as a living church, as a symbol of life in death, and as an impetus to sexual awakening” (107). Locke eloquently traces the ways in which the visibility of the hawthorns evokes, for the young narrator, the intangible invisibles that are central to his own existence. Chief among these latter is the very movement of temporality itself, the dynamic ways in which the rhythms of the past are taken up in the present and call forth the future; indeed, in homage to Proust, Merleau-Ponty declares: “the *true* hawthorns are the hawthorns of the past” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 243, quoted in Locke: 107). For Locke, both Proust and Merleau-Ponty reveal that “the truth in art is necessarily screened and partial. It is a wounding that comes from life experiences, but it restores life in an aesthetic transfiguration” (106).

Justine Dymond offers us another means of literary access to the “wounding that comes from life experiences,” namely via a journey through several of Gertrude Stein’s writings. In the process, she explores both the promise as well as the limits of Stein’s own linguistic experiments. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of subjective experience as always informed by the intersubjective horizons out of which it arises, Dymond reveals how Stein disrupts these familiar horizons in her work. More specifically, by reading the “inside” through the “outside,” detaching the signifier from the signified, and destabilizing our customary referential assumptions in the process, Stein makes us more aware of the presuppositions that we are continuously making about language, meaning, and the social world in our everyday lives. Dymond uncovers a tension in Stein’s work, however, between her attempt to unmoor language and meaning from their sedimented histories so as to produce new interpretative possibilities that are nonheteronor-

mative, and Stein's repeated invocation of racial stereotypes that produce (over)determined and fixed meanings that reinforce the degradation of the racialized other. As Toni Morrison suggests in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, foregrounding and deconstructing an author's uncritical use of racist stereotypes is essential to understanding the continuing pervasiveness and power of such imagery in the western literary tradition. Through Dymond's own recontextualization of Stein's work, we can see how, "Stein's narrators and her formal experimentation cannot fully undo the racially embedded meanings of modernity's racializing legacy" (125). This, in turn, exposes the perils of reifying "the constitutive power of language to construct subjectivity as an inside created by an *othered* outside" (125).

The essays that comprise part IV, "Ethical Challenges: Recognition, Reciprocity, Violence, and Care," are directly concerned with an implicit question raised by Dymond's critical analysis, namely, the extent of our individual and collective responsibility for the types of relationships we sustain with others. Kelly Oliver's chapter, "Beyond Recognition: Merleau-Ponty and an Ethics of Vision," counterposes Merleau-Ponty's view of the chiasmatic relationship between vision and visibility to several of his intellectual interlocutors' view of the gaze and its implications for both subjectivity and intersubjectivity, including Sartre, Hegel, Descartes, Freud, Lacan, Levinas, and Irigaray. Oliver also allows several other voices to enter the conversation, theorists and practitioners who share Merleau-Ponty's "insistence on embodied subjectivity" (175) including J. J. Gibson with his ecological optics, Emile Durkheim and his understanding of social energy, and Dori Laub who introduces the notion of the "inner witness" that developed out of her therapeutic work with other Holocaust survivors. Weaving central insights from these various theorists together, Oliver shows how they help to explain and affirm our infinite "response-ability" not only to other human beings but also to other animals and our environment. Ultimately, Oliver argues for an "ethics of vision" that moves "beyond recognition," beyond the conflictual understandings of the relations between self and other that have marked the phenomenological, existential, and psychoanalytic traditions, thereby opening Merleau-Ponty's own work up to "its own most promising engagements with otherness, and in the spirit of his double-vision, we see that subjectivity itself is necessarily both political and ethical" (149).

Merleau-Ponty, Sally Fischer argues, "has been able to deconstruct the notion of the human being as a transhistorical metaphysical constant, and has opened up an understanding of the body-subject that leaves room for different bodies, or different bodily styles of existence, variously inscribed" (153). She views Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body-subject to be particularly useful for feminist theorists' attempts to move beyond oppressive sex and gender binaries that presume that there are only two possible forms that bodies

may take and two possible styles that they can and should embody. Despite the fact that Merleau-Ponty never published a formal ethics, Fischer claims that “his phenomenology of embodied intersubjectivity . . . can serve as a fruitful ground from which to build an ethics of interpersonal relations” (153). Her chapter focuses on how Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the embodied self as decentered from herself and from others generates, through dialogue, an “ethical pact with the other.” This pact, Fischer concludes, “requires that we keep the dialogical circle open to the disruptions of our own perspective by the other, and at the same time, aim to facilitate a non-totalizing dialogical communion in which we can dwell in our sensuous everyday existence” (164).

Greg Johnson shares both Oliver’s and Fischer’s emphases upon the ethical importance of keeping dialogue open through an acknowledgment of the otherness of the other, and he argues that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of reversibility offers an optimal framework for accomplishing this goal. Through a critical examination of the well-known debates between Seyla Benhabib and Iris Marion Young concerning reversibility and reciprocity, Johnson highlights the importance of avoiding the Scylla of solipsism on the one hand (where I am forever trapped within my own perspective), and the Charybdis of a false universality on the other hand (where I presuppose the transparency of others’ perspectives and, ultimately, their reducibility to the understanding that I have of them). Ultimately, Johnson argues that an ethic of reciprocity, in a Merleau-Pontian sense, is founded upon a primary relationship of reversibility between myself and the other, and that the latter, as Merleau-Ponty depicts it, and, as feminist philosophers have shown us, “does not assume a completely mutual understanding but recognizes the other in a way that can understand their sufferings so that in our response we can choose to recognize this otherness and not eradicate it” (184–185).

The focus of chapter 11 by Janice McLane is on the ways in which the reciprocity Johnson describes is rendered impossible for women through their active silencing in patriarchy. This produces what McLane calls an “existential stutter,” a woman’s lived experience of “distance from herself, from other persons, and the world” (194, 198). She distinguishes this oppressive patriarchal silencing of women from the “fecund” silence Merleau-Ponty discusses in *The Visible and the Invisible*, “the silence from which language arises” (200). This latter silence, she argues, requires that we “enter more fully into reversibility, the doubled nature of a self connected to others” (200). Women can achieve this goal, McLane suggests, by “entering the place we already live,” that is, by mining the expressive possibilities latent in gendered experience, thereby reclaiming women’s voices.

Maurice Hamington shows us how the intertwinings of our bodies with the world and with other bodies, as described by Merleau-Ponty throughout

his work, is an indispensable resource for contemporary feminist ethics of care. More specifically, Hamington argues that Merleau-Ponty's corporeal-centered epistemology itself reveals "the embodied basis of care" (204). By examining closely four key features of this epistemology that Merleau-Ponty discusses in depth, namely, perception, foreground-background focus phenomena, habit, and the flesh, Hamington shows how "Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body provides an epistemological foundation for an embodied notion of care" (216). In so doing, Hamington's work complements and adds to the critical insights of Oliver, Fischer, Johnson, and McLane, persuasively demonstrating the important contributions both Merleau-Ponty's earlier as well as his later work can collectively make to contemporary ethical theorizing and praxis.

Part V, "Sedimented Meanings: Conservation and Transformation" focuses on the diverse social forces that help to constitute the meaning of the habits we have formed, our individual and cultural identities, and the buildings whose bodies shelter our own. My chapter, "Can an Old Dog Learn New Tricks? Habitual Horizons in James, Bourdieu, and Merleau-Ponty," explores these authors' oftentimes ambivalent accounts of habit as both necessary to preserve social stability (i.e., maintaining the status quo) and as an equally crucial ingredient in achieving genuine individual and social change. Opening with a passage from Proust in which he identifies habit as a "skilful but slow-moving arranger," I argue that Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the intersubjective, embodied dimensions of habit offers "a way of accounting for the creative aspects of habit that cannot be done justice to by either James or Bourdieu" (233). And yet, both James and Bourdieu's emphases on habit as a class-based phenomenon enrich Merleau-Ponty's view of the habit-body to give us a more comprehensive picture of how habits function to consolidate as well as potentially transform the meaning of individual, cultural, and social existence.

Rashmika Pandya considers how the meaning of our experience is continually transformed as we become habituated to our world. Following Merleau-Ponty, she describes how stylistic differences among individuals with varying cultural experiences are expressed as unique ways of "singing" the world. Pandya critically analyzes Merleau-Ponty's claim that "one never does belong to two worlds at once" (1962: 187) from an autobiographically informed perspective and argues that it is through the unity of narrative that we construct our identities, identities that perpetually negotiate and integrate cultural differences (without erasing them) into a coherent whole. Influenced by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's concept of "imaginary identities" that "suggest a space created between cultures and traditions," she argues that "this space is not only apparent in those of us who have left our ancestral homes to create new homes elsewhere but is increasingly the state of all of us in a global world" (243). Pandya offers a close reading of Merleau-Ponty's gestural theory of speech in

order to show how the “expressive function of language always transcends the purely structural aspects of a language” (258). The “‘oblique passage’ from one language to another,” she suggests, “opens the possibility that we may be able to incorporate various worlds in our notion of self” (259).

Rachel McCann’s “Entwining the Body and the World: Architectural Design and Experience in the Light of ‘Eye and Mind’” is the concluding chapter of the volume and it eloquently reveals the ways in which architects inhabit the (imaginary) spaces they design, integrating past, present, and future, self and other, vision and movement, body and world. McCann cites Merleau-Ponty’s reference to painting in “Eye and Mind” as a “carnal echo, a formulation that locates generative power within the active and intersubjective relationship between human beings and the surrounding world” (266) and shows us how architecture itself functions as a carnal echo of our embodied experience in the world, an echo that is differentially repeated across subjects and across time and that reverberates in turn in the durative, dynamic quality of buildings themselves. By creatively extending Merleau-Ponty’s insights regarding painters and painting, vision and visibility to architecture, McCann is also able to counter the criticisms of theorists such as Irigaray who take Merleau-Ponty to task for allegedly privileging vision over the other senses. This is because architecture provides a kinaesthetic experience of the building’s own depth, its multidimensionality that we access directly not only through vision but through the very movement of our bodies in space, integrating all of our senses and entwining our bodies with the space we inhabit. As McCann illustrates, the carnal echo we experience as we move through the space of the building allows us to interrogate simultaneously “the larger world and the recesses of the self” (265).

As I hope to have demonstrated throughout this introduction, despite the diversity of approaches and themes taken up by the authors in this collection, there are also important resonances that unite the various chapters together. Most notable among them, I would argue, is the importance of Merleau-Ponty’s intersubjective ontology as a foundation for contemporary theorizing about bodies, their complex interrelationships with other bodies, and with the world(s) that we jointly (yet differentially) inhabit. The chapters in this volume reveal the enduring influence of Merleau-Ponty’s thought not only upon philosophy but also upon feminist theory, literary theory, psychoanalytic theory, cultural studies, and architectural theory and practice. Each essay, in the spirit of Merleau-Ponty’s own work, opens up new problems that cannot be anticipated or resolved in advance, but which are dynamically enacted in and through the acts of writing and reading. These interdisciplinary encounters will hopefully find their own “carnal echo” in the reader’s experience, revealing the depth and complexity of the “wild being” that, for Merleau-Ponty, unites us to one another in the flesh of the world.

Works Cited

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