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# THE SERIOUS WORLD OF CIS: REFLECTIONS ON TRANS ANTAGONISMS, CHILDHOOD, AND GENDER FREEDOM

MEGAN BURKE
*Sonoma State University*

## I. THE SERIOUS WORLD

On February 22, 2022, Texas Governor Greg Abbott confirmed Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton's Opinion No. KP-0401, which authorizes the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to investigate parents who allow their transgender children to utilize gender affirmative medical care (Abbott 2022). Central to the opinion was the labeling of standard affirmative care as "child abuse," which came from Texas DFPS Commissioner Jaime Masters in August 2021. At that time, Master's (2021) wrote the following to Abbott in an official statement: "Genital mutilation of a child through reassignment surgery is child abuse, subject to all rules and procedures pertaining to child abuse . . . Generally, children in the care and custody of a parent lack the legal capacity to consent to surgical treatments, making them more vulnerable." Abbott's authorization of Paxton's opinion also imposed reporting requirements on all licensed professionals who have direct contact with children *and* the general public, in effect turning the entire state of Texas into a mandated reporter of adults who affirm trans kids. A second consequence of Abbott's move is that all parents who support the transitions of and affirmative care for their trans children are framed as "child abusers."

Since 2015, there has been a drastic increase in anti-trans legislation in the United States, much of which specifically targets affirmative care for trans kids. Arkansas's House Bill (HB) 1570, named the Save Adolescents from Experimentation (SAFE) Act, which passed in July 2021 and is currently tied up in legal challenges from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), was the first law in the nation to criminalize physicians for administering gender-affirming hormones or puberty blockers to trans people under the age of eighteen, that is, to trans kids. The 2022 Texas opinion is, in one respect, just another iteration of HB1570. Yet, in targeting parents and the general public, the Texas opinion throws into relief the social conditions of *cis gender* and so, too, the way it is legislated not just by governments, but by people in our everyday lives. This everyday legislation of cis gender is perhaps nowhere more visible than it is in Abigail Shrier's (2020) *Irreversible*

*Damage*: a trans-hostile book that works to prevent trans identification among kids.[1] Like the Texas opinion, Shrier insists that affirming trans kids irreversibly damages their existence and encourages parents to prevent their children, particularly their trans sons, from transitioning.[2] While Shrier's work may be an extreme manifestation of the everyday authorization of cis gender, one need only look at persistent articles in the *New York Times* preoccupied with questioning to what extent trans kids should have authority over their own lives. A January 2023 article titled "When Students Change Gender Identity, and Parents Don't Know" is perhaps most explicit about the "problems" of the authorial voice of trans kids, suggesting that when formal policy respects the wishes of trans kids without having to consult a child's parents, it is parents who suffer. Such policy, the article highlights, "violates their [the parents] own decision-making authority" (Baker 2023). The *Times* article insists that when the interests of parents and those of their kid do not align regarding gender and desire for and practices of transition, the parents should have more say than they currently do. Ultimately, consistent across these various forms of anti-trans legislation is the denial of trans kids' wishes and unwavering support for adults who are "frustrated" by trans-affirmative enthusiasm. This resolute support of such parents is central to the authorization of cis gender.

Writing some seventy years earlier, Simone de Beauvoir's existential phenomenological considerations of childhood bring to light how a child's subjectivity becomes normative through the imposition of values by adults. More specifically, in the second section of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir (1948), citing Descartes, states: "Man's unhappiness . . . is due to his having first been a child." This unhappiness, she suggests, is a result of the fact that the child finds himself enveloped in "a serious world," "the characteristics of the spirit of seriousness," she writes, "is to consider values as ready-made things." In this serious world, the child lives, learns, and plays under the authority of adults. "The real world is that of adults where he [the child] is allowed only to respect and obey" (35). At this point in the text, Beauvoir considers how childhood sets one up to eschew moral freedom as an adult. She argues that the child is apprenticed into the serious world, and so rewarded, punished, and praised on the basis of how he acts "beneath the sovereign eyes of grown-up persons" (36). Beauvoir takes issue with this adult world, the serious world, and suggests that it undermines the possibility of the realization of moral freedom, a distinct form of freedom through which, according to Beauvoir, we will ourselves and others free. Later, drawing on Rousseau, she insists that "the child has a right to his freedom and must be respected as a person" (141).

Beauvoir's (2010) consideration of childhood and adolescence at the beginning of Volume II of *The Second Sex* offers a feminist account of the serious world, highlighting how the spirit of seriousness is central to the institution of patriarchal gender and the affective attachments that prescribe an existentially destitute and materially exploited existence to

[1] Elsewhere I consider the everyday legislation of cis gender through a phenomenological consideration of the habit of assigning gender (Burke 2022).

[2] It is important to note that Shrier refuses to name the children in her book as trans sons, or trans boys, and instead relies on the socially and parentally conferred gender assignment, i.e., "girls," taking such an assignment to be "healthy," "non-damaging," and "natural."

those raised to become women. The serious world, neutered of its gendered dimensions in *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* becomes the patriarchal world in *The Second Sex*. The patriarchal world, as a serious one, is the world of adults that children must obey and submit to. This submission is not insignificant. Beauvoir opens "The Girl" chapter with the claim, "[t]hroughout her childhood, the little girl was bullied and mutilated" (Beauvoir 2010, 341).

## II. TRANS ANTAGONISMS AND COERCIVE BECOMING

One way to read the emergence of trans antagonisms that target childhoods is as a new iteration of the classic moral panic targeting "deviant" populations for the sake of securing the white, heteropatriarchal nuclear family. The "moral panic reading" is instructive, but it does not get at how these new trans antagonisms are structuring subjectivity. That is, what is this gendered panic doing to kids exactly? Or, more specifically, *how* exactly is it securing the norm in their lives? The purpose of this paper is to provide an answer to these questions. More specifically, I understand the moral panic over trans childhoods to be reinstituting and securing a pedagogy of cis gender, or a coercive method of gender rooted in an assignment, conferred first by adults onto children, that anchors gender to physiological difference and orients individuals toward specific desires and habits. This pedagogy underlies and institutes the serious world of cis.

To account for what the serious world of cis is and does, I turn to Beauvoir. I first draw attention to what she shows us about how adults impose the serious world onto children and what this does to them. For Beauvoir, seriousness not only leads children to become serious themselves, but it forecloses the possibility of moral freedom. Then, I highlight how seriousness underlies Beauvoir's account of becoming in *The Second Sex*. In contrast to the more common reading of becoming that emphasizes its denaturalizing gesture, I read Beauvoir's account of becoming as a claim about how the serious world works. I argue that her description of becoming in Volume II of *The Second Sex* shows us how gender is fastened to and enforced in lived experience by adults to produce and maintain an unethical social order, that is, the serious world. In my view, Beauvoir's account shows how the institution and maintenance of normative gender is predicated on the authorial power of adults to gender children. Accordingly, I suggest that we understand the institution of cis gender—a particular socially constituted, historical arrangement, and lived institution of gender—to rely on the spirit of seriousness, which is maintained by and sanctions the authorial power of adults.[3] Following Beauvoir's critique of the serious world, it is possible to grasp the moral injury of becoming and enforcing cis gender.

[3] This notion of "cis gender" resonates with Jules Gill-Peterson's (2021) account of the cis state wherein "cis" is not an identity category, but an operation of power.

This reading of Beauvoir is a trans reading of her work. It builds on her work yet centers the reality of trans experience in ways she did not.[4] Whereas in *The Second Sex* Beauvoir is concerned with what happens to the girl whose social destiny is to become a woman in the serious world, my interest is in the event of this child's gendered assignation. In other words, I am interested in the authorial structure of her gendered becoming. It is, to take a cue from Marquis Bey's (2022) critique of cis-ness in *Cistem Failure*, to which I will return, to read Beauvoir's account of becoming as a key dimension of cis sociality. On such a reading of Beauvoir, it is possible to see that her account of becoming is not merely a denaturalized account of gender. It is, rather, an account of how normative gender comes to take a hold of and generate subjectivity. The becoming she describes is a coercive method of gendered subjectification. Importantly, this coercive gendering is not just rooted in patriarchal norms as Beauvoir's analysis in *The Second Sex* highlights. As Bey details, coercive gendering is a white norm of gender that animates realities of expropriation and the use of white gender as a means of eliminating "deviant" and "ungovernable" racialized others. It is thus important to keep in mind that securing the authorial power of adults to gender children is also always a technique central to various legacies of power.

Given that age is a legal, social, historical, and political phenomenon that structures lived experience in different ways, a note about my focus on trans children is needed. Like Beauvoir, I understand childhood to be a situation with both developmental and sociopolitical contours. Who counts as a kid, who is treated as a kid, and who gets the safety of childhood, is dependent on a variety of factors. Trans kids, because they defy social expectations of gender, live in a particular situation that raises important questions about when and to what extent kids more generally should have authority over their (gendered) lives. While sociologists Tey Meadow (2018) and Ann Travers (2018) discuss the recent emergence of the category of "trans kids" as produced by a variety of social, individual, institutional, political, and clinical forces, Jules Gill-Peterson (2018) shows that trans childhood is not a new phenomenon. In *Histories of the Transgender Child*, Gill-Peterson details how the archive of trans childhoods has been obscured, erased, and the possibilities for trans kids regulated and institutionalized in ways that render their histories invisible. What today's trans kids share with the trans kids of the past is that they are "left to fend for themselves in a culture that suffers from being unable to imagine children with a richly expressive sense of who they are" (viii). Insofar as trans childhoods undermine and resist this power, they challenge the serious world of cis. Their challenge to seriousness is one reason trans childhoods are under attack. For this reason, it is important to articulate the conditions of possibility and forms of sociality that allow children to accomplish themselves

[4] I do not take trans existence to be a reality Beauvoir demonstrates concern about. In "Who is the Subject of the Second Sex?", A. Alexander Antonopoulos (2017) sees it differently. He argues for a reading of Beauvoir as aware of trans experience and further argues that transmasculine experience of embodiment haunts Beauvoir's account of sex difference in *The Second Sex*. In my view, it is true that Beauvoir references trans phenomena in *The Second Sex*, as well as in other texts, but I do not think these references suggest her focus, philosophically or politically, is trans experience. I make this point not as a criticism of her work, but as an acknowledgement of what her project in *The Second Sex* is and what it is not.

as they imagine, that allow them to live gender in ways that cultivate freedom.[5] Accordingly, I conclude with a brief consideration of gender freedom.

## III. CHILDHOOD AND THE SERIOUS WORLD

In her pivotal article, "Beauvoir and Sartre: The Philosophical Relationship," Margaret Simons (1986) underscores that Beauvoir's existentialism is characterized by her "commitment to understanding the individual within the context of their childhood experiences" (176). This commitment holds true for Beauvoir's conception of moral freedom. In contrast to ontological freedom, Beauvoir's conception of moral freedom underscores that genuine freedom is a matter of how we assume our existence in relation to others (Arp 2001). For Beauvoir, it is not just that we are freedom; rather, we must will freedom. Moral freedom is not, however, an egoistic orientation; willing freedom must prioritize the intersubjective bond. We are free when we cultivate self-other relations that hold open a future of possibilities for all existents. In other words, authentic freedom relies on the pursuit and realization of ethical bonds with others. Beauvoir understands the lived realization of moral freedom as the benchmark of an ethical existence, thus underscoring that how we engage others in the pursuit of our existence is of the utmost importance.

Notably, in both *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir (1948, 2010) stresses the importance of childhood on one's ability to assume one's moral freedom as an adult and she insists it is the responsibility of adults to affirm the freedom of children. She understands moral freedom to be an achievement dependent on one's concrete situation, social-psychological development, and a relationship with adults that secures for the child an open future. In other words, an individual's realization of moral freedom is, in large part, dependent on one's childhood (Busch 2005).

The primary discussion of the intersubjective conditions of freedom in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* prioritizes the situation of childhood. In Part II, "Personal Freedom and Others," Beauvoir (1948) begins by highlighting that childhood plays a primary role in the moral attitude we take up and the choices we make later in life. The character types she outlines in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*— the sub-man, the serious man, the nihilist, the adventurer, the passionate man, and even the free man— are adults with a childhood past that "left ineffaceable imprints" (40). That is, one would not become a sub-man had his childhood not, in some way, prepared him to assume such an existence. In other words, it is in childhood that one's future moral disposition is cultivated. Accordingly, Beauvoir understands the situation of a child as morally distinct from that of adults. Children's

[5] In *The Second Sex,* Beauvoir writes: "How, in the feminine condition, can a human being accomplish herself? What paths are open to her? Which ones lead to dead ends? How can she find independence within dependence? What circumstances limit women's freedom and can she overcome them?" (2010, 17). Following Beauvoir's line of thinking about women's relation to freedom, in this paper I am motivated by similar, but distinct questions about lived possibilities of (gendered) freedom: How can trans kids accomplish themselves? What paths are open to them? How can trans kids assume their independence within dependence? What circumstances limit their freedom?

freedom is cultivated in the moral world of adults wherein children learn how they should behave and who they should become, while being able to grow up without the burdens of responsibility.

What is striking about her account is that she describes how childhood sets one up to eschew moral freedom as an adult because of the child's position in "the serious world" or the "real world" of adults. The child, she writes, "feels himself happily irresponsible. The real world is that of adults where he is allowed only to respect and obey" (Beauvoir 1948, 35). Living under the serious world, the child is sheltered from responsibility, and thereby escapes the anguish of freedom, living in what Beauvoir calls "a state of security" (37). According to Beauvoir, it is only through the developmental achievement of adolescence that a child sees the artifice of the serious world; its values are not objective facts but are human-made. The anguish of freedom now becomes a burden for the adolescent child. "What will he do in the face of this new situation?" Beauvoir asks (39).

One may be prompted, as Lior Levy does (2016), to read Beauvoir as suggesting that children not only lack but are also incapable of moral agency insofar as she positions moral consciousness as a developmental achievement. In my reading, however, Beauvoir offers us an account of the pitfalls of adults who act as gatekeepers of the moral realm. Beauvoir never claims the "serious world" is an ethical world. It is a world full of moral values that children are expected to abide by. Her concern with this expectation is clarified later when she writes, " in practice raising a child as one cultivates a plant which one does not consult about its need is very different from considering it as a freedom to whom the future must be opened" (1948, 142). In not consulting a child about their needs, in enveloping them, smothering them with ready-made values and images of who they become, Beauvoir insists that most children become adults who do not realize moral freedom. In doing so, she thus recognizes the moral standing of children, but still puts the responsibility on adults for creating the conditions in which children can assume their freedom. The developmental achievement of moral freedom is, then, about ensuring that children do not bear the burdens of responsibility generated by the adult world. The problem, however, is that the serious world in which she seems to claim most adults live is not an ethical world, hence the adolescent rebellion. It is on this front that Beauvoir moves from a description of the serious world to a prescriptive claim: what adults must do is secure an open future for children while respecting their freedom. The kind of "safe shelter" adults should create is not one in which children are suffocated by the values of the adult world; it is one in which children have a future of indeterminate possibilities.

On this point, Sally Scholz's (2010) reading of Beauvoir's account of childhood in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is instructive. Scholz, tracking Rousseau's influence on Beauvoir, draws our attention to the normative dimension of the adult-child relationship, arguing that for Beauvoir this relationship is often paternalistic but should be an opening up of freedom. Scholz makes the distinction between childhood as an "apprenticeship to the serious" or as an "apprenticeship to freedom" under the tutelage of adults (402). As Scholz explains, a child is apprenticed to the serious world when they are trained to be what they are labeled by adults. For Beauvoir, Scholz argues, this apprenticeship involves adults working to fix a child in the desire to be, as opposed to the desire to disclose being—a key distinction

in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. This amounts to a kind of affective orientation through which the subject either eschews ambiguity or assumes it— such that a child learns to abdicate freedom for a static identity (Scholz 2010, 402).[6] The serious world is thus not the kind of world that apprentices children (or adults) to the freedom of becoming, that is, to the desire to disclose being. They learn to submit to being through an apprenticeship into the desire to be, an orientation in the world rooted in fixed meanings. Such an apprenticeship may not allow for moral freedom, but it does allow for the maintenance of a social world in which values are predetermined, allowing adults to continue to flee freedom and live in modes of bad faith. An apprenticeship to freedom would, in contrast, hold open possibilities for a child; it would not limit a child to the games, images, or scripts of the serious world.

Because moral freedom is an intersubjective condition, it is adults, particularly those directly responsible for a child, who largely determine what training a child will receive. Beauvoir suggests that most children are apprenticed to the serious world. In childhood, they play the "game of being serious" with such importance that they "actually become serious" (1948, 36). When the serious world begins to crumble in adolescence, when a child begins to challenge the values of the serious world and is faced with moral choices, it is still "always on the basis of what he has been that a man decides upon what he wants to be" (40). Ultimately, for Beauvoir, the lived orientation of the serious world is likely the world an adolescent has recourse to.

It is in *The Second Sex* that Beauvoir (2010) offers a more concrete account of how adults intervene in and thwart children's moral freedom through apprenticeship in a gendered assignation.[7] Her descriptions of childhood show how the affectations of adults, and parents in particular, are central to gendering of children as boys and girls. She notes time and time again in the "Childhood" chapter that both boys and girls are alienated from their freedom by what is assigned to them. They go along with expectations they regret (and Beauvoir insists this is especially the case for girls) because it is what gets children approval and flattery from adults. In the "Childhood" chapter, in particular, Beauvoir makes clear that, even in the face of children's resistance and negotiation, adults nonetheless win out.[8] The almost originary intervention of others that inaugurates children's social destiny as a gendered subject is, then, a matter of how adults apprentice children into gender.[9]

More specifically, Beauvoir shows how a boy's training orients him toward freedom while a girl's training positions her as a doll in the serious world. The girl is cultivated

[6] Elsewhere I consider the distinction between the desire to be and the desire to disclose being in relation to trans subjectivity (Burke 2020).

[7] On this point, I agree with Levy's (2016) reading of Beauvoir's account of childhood.

[8] It is not the case that adults *always* win out. My point here is not that trans kids have not and do not establish gendered possibilities for themselves, merely succumbing to adults. Rather, as I discuss in the next section, I wish to highlight that the serious world *intends* to be enveloping and suffocating to the extent that it is likely to win out.

[9] In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler develops their theory of performativity that both builds on and criticizes Beauvoir's notion of "becoming a woman." Yet, Beauvoir's phenomenological account of the engendering of childhood resonates with Butler's account of normative constraint. Beauvoir's phenomenological account underscores in ways that Butler's does not how norms come to be lived and how they are experientially constituted.

like a plant without needs and she comes to live in an oppressive infantile world where a ceiling of possibility hovers over her, limiting her horizon of possibility. In a passage that echoes *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir (2010) writes: "The sphere she belongs to is closed everywhere, limited . . . as high as she climbs, as far as she dares to go, there will always be a ceiling over her head" (311). This closure is one instituted by adults through the conferral of ready-made gendered meanings and values that deliver children into a gendered subjectivity that forecloses freedom.

Even as Beauvoir recognizes children's ontological and moral freedom more concretely in *The Second Sex*, she still asserts a moral difference between adults and children. She writes: "The burden of freedom is not heavy for children, because it does not involve responsibility; they know they are safe in the shelter of adults" (2010, 308). Still here, for Beauvoir, the adult world should shelter children from full responsibility for their actions, allowing them the freedom to play, in order to, as she says in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, "expend . . . existence freely" (1948, 35). Adults, then, do have a moral status that children do not, but this does not make adults morally superior. Rather, according to Beauvoir, the moral difference is that adults are responsible for making possible the child's relation to moral freedom. The problem is that adults tend to enforce the serious world.

## IV. BECOMING AND THE MUTILATION OF FREEDOM

In the first chapter of *Cistem Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender*, Bey (2022) draws attention to the significance of childhood in preempting trans possibilities. For Bey, childhood is a time of indeterminacy and experimentation, a "rich site of how stuff gets worked out," and a rich site for the working out of one's gendered subjectivity (1). For Bey, this indeterminacy is a condition for the possibility of gendered experimentation. Except, as Bey writes of their own experience, this indeterminacy can be violently targeted. Any indeterminacy was "terroristically, pummeled away from emerging" (2). "I was made cis" (16). They continue, "I surely was not born this way, which is to say on this side, cis, etymologically. I was very deliberately, very meticulously, crafted through violent means to remain on this side" (18).

It is this point that leads Bey to conceptualize cis not as an identity, but as a violent architecture through which we become gendered subjects. They write, "we are all, because we have been, at every turn, coaxed and goaded and pummeled and threatened and required to erect a very constructed architecture" (18). In contrast, and in response, transness is posited as anarchitectural, a "project of dismantling and remaking" (4). Transness "offers an extensive vocabulary for expressing *unbecoming*" (4; emphasis added). One of Bey's most important claims about the operation and institution of cis emerges from this claim about transness. As a vocabulary for unbecoming, transness reworks the becoming of cis.

I want to pay attention to Bey's distinction between cis becoming and trans unbecoming. For Bey, being made cis is a mode of structural and rigid becoming, a life beholden to mandates of gender, mandates that begin, quite violently in childhood. It is a becoming of

"being a good and proper subject" (Bey 2022, 10). In Beauvoirian terms, it is a becoming of the desire to be, an existence rooted in static meaning and fixed values. Cis is becoming on the grounds that it forms the subject through an enclosure of possibility rooted in the logic of a "coercive assignation," a "constructed declaration," an assignation "imbued with a sovereign diving decree" (16). In contrast, as an unbecoming, transness is a rejection of the rules and grammar of gendered becoming, a moving elsewhere. For those who undertake this anarchitectural project, their unbecoming is, Bey posits, a not-becoming as transness is not rooted in the authorial power of others.

Beauvoir's notion of becoming is often read as a claim about what gender is—an inessential, contingently made and lived phenomenon. Such a reading revolves around the born/becoming distinction advanced in the most famous sentence of *The Second Sex*, i.e., "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1949, 13). Far from an essential feature of human existence, Beauvoir's born/becoming distinction posits that gender is not natural, but rather a making of the self. Bonnie Mann's (2018) reading of Beauvoir suggests that Beauvoir does not give us an account of what gender is, but rather what it does. For Mann, Beauvoir's feminist phenomenological account of becoming a woman is an exposition on how the structure of dominance and subordination inheres to norms of gendered existence such that one comes to live an existentially destitute and exploited existence. Although it certainly seems to be the case that Beauvoir says something about what gender is, Mann's point is that Beauvoir is most interested in what becoming does to a subject. When read in this way, becoming is not only an ontological claim; it is also, and perhaps foremost, a political claim about the operation of becoming. To become a woman is to be bullied and mutilated into a ready-made value system, that is, to come into being through a coercive assignation.

Beauvoir's remarks about the specification of children as girls (or boys) by adults, that is their becoming gendered, highlights the coercive mood of the becoming. In her discussion of the apprenticeship the little girl receives, Beauvoir (2010) writes,

> women given the care of a little girl are bent on transforming her into women like themselves with zeal and arrogance mixed with resentment. And even the generous mother who sincerely wants the best for her child will, as a rule, think it wiser to make a "true woman" of her, as that is the way she will be best accepted by society. (295–96)

Given no choice, the little girl, reared by women, is made into a woman. She becomes a woman as a result of the intervention by others. For Beauvoir, the content of this intervention is characterized by its spirit of seriousness. The little girl is given orders to obey. Beauvoir describes it in this way:

> she is given other little girls as friends . . . books and games are chosen for her that introduce her to her destiny, her ears are filled with the treasures of feminine wisdom, feminine virtues are presented to her, she is taught cooking, sewing, and housework as well as how to dress, how to take care of her personal appearance, charm, and modesty; she is dressed in

> uncomfortable and fancy clothes that she has to take care of, her hair is done in complicated styles, posture is imposed on her: stand up straight, don't walk like a duck; to be graceful, she has to repress spontaneous movements, she is told not to look like a tomboy, strenuous exercise is banned, she is forbidden to fight; in short, she is committed to becoming, like her elders, a servant and an idol. (Beauvoir 2010, 296)

This intense mediation of a child's life by adults that Beauvoir draws attention to discloses the intentional mood of becoming. The horizon of becoming is not indeterminate but fixed. And it is fixed not by the girl herself, but by adults. Or, as Beauvoir puts it, the girl "is committed to becoming" (296).

Significantly, Beauvoir understands being committed to becoming as a form of violence; a mutilated self emerges from becoming. This mutilation colludes with the shelter of safety adults provide, operating to limit a child's agency such that the drama of "the eternal feminine" animates her life more and more the older she gets. Even if a girl rejects, despises, or protests who she is apprenticed to become, she often resigns herself to it because of the overwhelming pressure of those around her. Time and time again Beauvoir references that the girl protests who adults expect her to be. But her protests to it are routinely dismissed. So, Beauvoir insists, the girl resigns herself and assumes her existence as a woman. In other words, the girl gives herself over to a gendered project not because she is without the capacity to become otherwise, but because she is enveloped by the one breathed into her by others. Her capacity for self-authoring is already mutilated.

Accordingly, the girl's becoming is a making of subjectivity structured by coercive assignation, inaugurated by the imposition of gendered meaning by adults onto children that adults deem to be girls. This resignation is also rooted in seduction. For Beauvoir, the little girl is enticed by others, especially adults, to assume herself as a relative existence; it affords her recognition in the eyes of others. It is how she establishes her worth, as well as offers her a way to resolve her mutilated existence.

For Beauvoir, a woman lives a mutilated existence because she is severed from her transcendence. As the description of childhood makes clear, this severance occurs in large part because of how she has been treated by adults in childhood. This is not to say the girl is a mere passivity. As Jen McWeeny's (2018) reading of *se faire objet* underscores, a girl's mutilation does not merely happen to her as if she is a passive object; rather, her mutilation is a matter of what the girl makes of herself. However, if the "Childhood" chapter is any indication of how *se faire objet* becomes one's lived experience, the intervention of adults is undoubtedly significant. As Beauvoir describes it, parents and adults apprentice the girl into her impending self-mutilation. The early years of her life are mediated by adults to the extent that she will come to live out the drama that has been laid out for her. Of course, on Beauvoir's account, by adolescence the girl still does not fully accept or submit to the "*assigned* destiny," but she does not actively refuse it either (2010, 300; emphasis added). She lives divided. What does not waiver, however, is the expectation by others, and adults in particular, that she will live out the meanings assigned to her. The expectation

is that she will become a woman.[10] At least initially, it is not the girl who commits herself to the project of "woman"; rather, it is adults who commit her. The girl is seduced by adults into the desire to be, which roots her in the serious world through the project of becoming a woman. Because of the rewards that come with assuming herself as a woman, the seduction is successful. Her mutilation is, as Beauvoir puts it, "imperiously breathed into her [by others] from the first years of her life" (2010, 283).

The damage waged by this becoming is ontological and moral. That is, a child's subjectivity is perversely structured in ways that rupture their capacity to assume the ambiguity of being human, which in turn, compromises living moral freedom. When narrating her childhood in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Beauvoir (1959) accounts for her experience of agency as a girl and she underscores her childhood skepticism about the values of and meanings central to the adult world, even though she nevertheless accepted the rules of the adult world. She describes her experience of their "black and white" values, their "bony-structured concepts," of how "myths and the stereotyped ideas prevailed over truth," and how she was "encouraged in this misconception [of the adult world] by grown-ups" (17). As she describes the static values of her white, bourgeois, Catholic rearing, Beauvoir echoes the language of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. She was encouraged to partake in the serious world and she admits that she came to accept "without question the values and the tenets of those around me" (14).

It is possible to understand the ethical significance of the impact of the serious world's values through one of her early childhood memories. At five years old, on a walk with her Aunt Marguerite, Beauvoir is surprised that she is not being patronized. Aunt Marguerite "hadn't the remotest idea how to talk to me," she reports. This experience leaves an impression on young Beauvoir asserting, "I made up my mind that when I was older I would never forget that a five-year-old is a complete individual, a character in his own right." We can understand what it means to recognize a child as "a complete individual" by paying attention to how Aunt Marguerite relates to Beauvoir. In the encounter, Aunt Marguerite does not presume to already know who five-year-old Beauvoir is. Thrilled by this, she writes, "I suddenly wondered: 'How does she see me?' and felt a sharp sense of superiority: for I knew what I was like inside, she didn't" (13). This encounter with Aunt Marguerite exposes the artifice of the serious world and offers a different possibility of adult-child relationships for the young Beauvoir. It is not, however, the adult-child relationship that prevails in her childhood. Rather, like the children in *The Second Sex*, and the girl in particular, it is the serious world that offers shelter and conditions the possibility for becoming as a mode of subjectivity that works to fix her being. Becoming as a fixing of being is how the spirit of seriousness gets dialed into subjective life.

The connections between Beauvoir's account of childhood and Bey's are striking as both underscore the way adults assign (cis) gender to kids who are then left to negotiate those ready-made meanings and values. What Bey shows, however, is how a child may fail

[10] There are certainly ways to become a woman that do not entail the closure of possibilities. The point here is that just because one has been assigned "girl" by adults does not mean that the negotiation of that closure of freedom *requires* the child to stay a girl and become a woman—that could be one option available, but it *should not* be the only option available.

to live up to the assignment, which often, Bey insists, has to do with one's racial positioning in the normative architecture of gender. Their childhood was one in which indeterminacy and experimentation were foreclosed through the gendering of racialized blackness, through the "rules, codes of conduct, expectations, and coercions" (2022, 3). That is, their existence was shaped by, practically fixed even, the white ideals of cis gender.[11] Accordingly, cis gender is a determination not just of gendered existence, but also always of racialized existence. Relatedly, in her account of the authorial power of medicine and gender clinics, Gill-Peterson argues that cis gender was birthed about seventy years ago, as a new form of racialized gender. Cis gender came into existence, she shows, through the disqualification of trans of color life. To highlight this racialized emergence, Gill-Peterson (2018) draws attention to the racialized medicalization of transness in general and trans childhoods in particular. She shows how "[m]edicine made of children's living bodies proxies for experimental alteration . . . not by listening to children's desires or demands for gender self-determination but by making them into the raw material of medical techniques" (28). The result was that the only children that were allowed to be trans in the gender clinic were white. Thus, only by the rules and values of the "adult world" were trans childhoods deemed possible, and even then, the gender clinics were rooted in the logics of value-extraction, acquisition, and forced disappearance central to multiple and overlapping histories of domination and subordination. In other words, the racialized medicalization of transness that made only some trans childhoods possible were still generated by white ideals of cis gender. What is consistent here across Bey and Gill-Peterson's work is that it is gender idealized by white people that becomes the (im)possibility for trans existence. Only insofar as "trans" can fit the white, cis schema, which is to say, only insofar as it can be contained as a becoming that fixes being, is it authorized. Accordingly, it is possible to view the serious world of cis as one that institutes a whole range of oppressive social practices and intersubjective conditions that mutilate freedom.

## V. MORAL FREEDOM AS GENDER FREEDOM

I have argued that a key dimension of the mode of becoming Beauvoir (2010) describes in *The Second Sex* is its spirit of seriousness. My claim is that this becoming is a key characteristic of cis sociality, a particular materialization of the serious world. That is, the gendering of childhood that Beauvoir describes is inaugurated by the authorial power of (white) adults and perniciously maintained by apprenticing children into serious, ready-made genders. This power and the continuous intervention adults make in the gendered lives of children realizes a flawed moral relation between adults and children. It is not, however, that Beauvoir thinks children should bear the full burdens of freedom. Like her view in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she continues to commit that children should be able to expand

[11] As one of the anonymous reviewers aptly noted, normative gender is most often gender as it is idealized by white adults. These idealizations mark the genders of non-white people as inappropriate. Such demarcation is a condition of possibility for the criminalization of, violence against, and expunging of people of color.

freely—the capacity to do so is central to their relationship to moral freedom. What is distinct about the discussion of children's moral standing in *The Second Sex*, however, is that it specifically discloses how the assignment of gender in childhood conditions the closure of moral freedom. Far from offering a safe shelter, becoming as a fixing of being makes moral freedom impossible. In effect, Beauvoir's account insists that adults should take care not to condition a child's life in a way that fixes their existence via the assignment of gender.

This reading of Beauvoir's conception of the relation between the imposition of gender by adults onto children and its perversion of moral freedom stands in stark contrast to Shrier's (2020) insistence that children are seduced into transgender identity by false narratives of freedom. In *Irreversible Damage*, Shrier accounts for the contemporary rise in trans boyhood among adolescents as, following physician-researcher Lisa Littman's (2019) pseudo-scientific notion of Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria (ROGD), a social contagion and craze. Although ROGD has no backing from reputable health organizations, Shrier, like Littman, is convinced of its existence just because more adolescents who had previously appeared to be girls, especially to their parents, are coming out as trans. In a panic, Shrier and Littman ask: Why is this the case? What has happened to the "girls"? Shrier's answer is worth quoting at length:

> [T]he phenomenon sweeping teenage girls is different. It originates not in traditional gender dysphoria but in videos found on the internet. It represents mimicry inspired by internet gurus, a pledge taken with girlfriends—hands and breath held, eyes squeezed shut. For these girls, trans identification offers freedom from anxiety's relentless pursuit; it satisfies the deepest need for acceptance, the thrill of transgression, the seductive lilt of belonging. (2020, xxx)

Ultimately, for Shrier, the rise of trans boyhood among adolescents is a result of being seduced by trans people on social media, people she pejoratively dubs "trans influencers." This seduction, Shrier insists, preys on the bodily and affective insecurities of teenage "girls," offering access to a false world of freedom. In existentialist vernacular, it is to say that trans identification offers a way to escape the burdens of a "girl's" adolescence. According to Shrier, this escape is a pathological and inauthentic flight. Often comparing transness to anorexia and cutting, she insists that these teenagers are not really trans. Rather, they are engaged in a kind of contagious self-harming as a result of being seduced by other, usually older, trans people. According to the social contagion theory of ROGD, these adolescents are exposed to trans masculine subjectivities and are tricked into believing they are trans as a result.

On Shrier's account, the result of this "trickery" is "irreversible damage," an explanatory and cautionary concept central to anti-trans views. Framing trans possibilities as damaging fuels resistance to therapeutic interventions for trans kids and encourages adults, from parents to care providers, to refuse to believe a kid is trans *just* if he says so. For Shrier, "unsuspecting parents" are up against the "monstrous ideology" of trans affirmation. In reality, she claims, parents are the ones who truly know who their kids really are (172). This sentiment is exemplified by the book's opening epigraph, a Billy Joel

lyric from *She's Always a Woman*: "She hides like a child/But she's always a woman to me." At the end of the book, Shrier (2020) positions the "victimized" parents as the gatekeepers of freedom, insisting that they must work tirelessly to shelter their kids from the lure of trans identification. As she writes: "Girls who've been sold the promise of metamorphosis hold in their hands a bill of goods. But they retain one last redeemable asset: the parents who have never stopped worrying and still hope for a call" (220).

Cassius Adair and Aren Aizura offer an important critique of Shrier and ROGD, more generally, refusing to back away from the claim of seduction and reframing transness as a kind of contagious gendering (2022, 46). They write:

> As hordes of anti-trans feminists yell about the "contagion" of rapid onset gender dysphoria (ROGD), it may feel difficult to admit that in fact, yes, many of us discovered we were trans through being seduced by a trans person . . . Or, at the very least, by finding a trans person unbearably hot. (45)

At this political moment, centering contagion and seduction in a trans-affirmative account of subjectivity is a tricky line to walk; as Adair and Aizura point out, ROGD advocates and anti-trans feminists weaponize the seduction narrative. Yet, they also point out that it is not particularly radical to talk about desire as central to identity formation (47). As a result, they ask: so, what if transness is contagious? Their reading of trans identification shows that, like all gendered subjectification, desire is central—a point that Beauvoir's account also underscores. As Adair and Aizura make clear, there is nothing inherently pathological about the desire to assume a trans existence; the pathology narrative is just that, a narrative used to propel trans hostility and delegitimize transness.

Given Beauvoir's (2010) claim about the mutilation of girls' freedom in *The Second Sex*, which begins in childhood and manifests acutely in adolescence, some readers of Beauvoir may be inclined to think that the desire to become a boy is in truth, or at least could be, an effort to assume one's transcendence in bad faith. Beauvoir herself even notes that there are various times in childhood when boys desire to be girls because boys are "frightened by the harsh independence they are condemned to," and when girls desire to be boys because girls are dissatisfied with their integration into the feminine world (286). To read Beauvoir's account of childhood as capable of suggesting the view that girls are likely to be seduced into a trans masculine subjectivity because it affords them freedom might not be wrong. I follow Adair and Aizura (2022) here insofar as I don't see the desire to become trans as pathological or problematic. From a Beauvoirian framework, any becoming is an authentic pursuit of freedom only if it is the desire to disclose being, one that enables and cultivates the intersubjective condition of freedom. As I have argued elsewhere, from a Beauvoirian perspective, trans first-person authority is an ethical avowal not merely because it is a self-willed project, but because it is a self-authoring that is a condition of possibility for ethical self-other relationships (Burke 2020). While Shrier (2020) is emphatic that kids absolutely do not have the capacity for legitimate and thus ethical self-authoring, Beauvoir suggests it is adults who corrupt the possibility for children's ethical self-authoring. The "irreversible damage" that Shrier claims to be realized through trans identification among adolescents

is, on Beauvoir's account, inaugurated by the imposition of gender by adults onto children they deem to be girls.

While it is not my intention to suggest that Beauvoir was explicitly working to make trans childhoods possible, her work does offer an important cautionary tale about how the serious world is instituted and reanimated through a particular structure of adult-child relationships, a structure that, in my view, is a key feature of the precarity and impossibility of trans childhoods. Abbott's (2022) formal authorization of KP-0401 and the views espoused by Shrier (2020) frame adults who affirm trans kids as "child abusers" not on the grounds that they merely let children play around with gender. Rather, it is adults who listen to and affirm a child's self-defined gender who are deemed abusive. For Abbott and Shrier, as well as their followers, good adults should not give in to a kid's demands for a new name, for different pronouns, for a chest binder, or any other therapeutic intervention that realizes a trans identification. In their view, good adults should anchor children into the serious world of gendered being. Their conception of gender subjectification relies on a structure in which, when it comes to gender, it is adults who know, while children are "allowed only to respect and obey" (Beauvoir 1948, 35).

This is not to say that trans children do not already exist, but rather that most children are still, often heavy-handedly, apprenticed into becoming cis. Securing this structure of adult-child relationality is a driving force behind contemporary trans antagonisms in the United States, which is, as Gill-Peterson (2021) argues in "The Cis State," a means to secure the gender of the white nationalist state. Gendering children in this way thus animates the serious world, and adults thwart if not entirely shut down that possibility of living moral freedom. This connection between gendered rearing and the (im)possibility of moral freedom makes clear the constitutive relation between moral freedom and gender freedom. The heavy ceiling of the serious world of cis is not a safe shelter for moral freedom.

By gender freedom I do not mean an individualistic, neoliberal conception of self-defined gender, wherein freedom is realized if one has the capacity to be the author of one's own gender. Rather, I am thinking about gender freedom as a condition to not be authored, to not have one's existence take root in a ready-made image. Without the social and interpersonal conditions in which kids can assume an existence in which their gendered future has indeterminate possibilities, children will have their moral freedom curtailed. Ultimately, reading Beauvoir with trans childhoods in mind makes clear that gender freedom is necessary to moral freedom, a claim I take to be particularly urgent in the face of ever-increasing trans antagonisms. A Beauvoirian ethics of gender freedom suggests adults should not impose gender onto children but should rather open a horizon of gender indeterminacy.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Gender freedom can be understood as the social practice of un/gender self-determination, a practice that undoes the serious world—its static meanings, ready-made images, and

values. As Eric Stanley (2014) writes, a trans conception of gender self-determination is a matter of relationality: "it is not the individual but a collective self, an ontological position always in relation to others and dialectically forged in otherness, that is animated" (90). Gender freedom, then, is not an individual endeavor; it is a kind of sociality, an institution of new ways of being with, of un-becoming and re-becoming with one another. Trans visions of gender self-determination thus lay bare the ruse of liberal and neoliberal conceptions of self-determination and essentialist conceptions of gender.[12] Our gendered lives are reliant on our relations with others, including the very structure of those relations. As my reading of Beauvoir underscores, the cis-gendering of existence is dependent on a particular relational structure between adults and children wherein adults have authorial power over the gendering of existence. In the face of persistent anti-trans social and political efforts that legislate cis gender, it is imperative that a practice of gender freedom rooted in the refusal of this adult-child relationality thrives.

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[12] See also Dean Spade's (2006) trans conception of gender self-determination in "Compliance is Gendered: Struggling for Gender Self-Determination in a Hostile Economy." In this work, Spade makes clear that gender self-determination is not a matter of affirming the liberal self-willing subject. Rather, Spade is clear that creating conditions in which self-determined gender is possible is a matter of examining "how the rigid regulation of binary gender is a core element of participation in our capitalist economy, how the hyperregulation of poor people's gender and sexuality has propped up that system, and how this has resulted in disproportionate poverty and incarceration for poor, gender-transgressive people" (232).

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# THE "CIVILIZATION OF THE UNIVERSAL":[1] THE INTERSECTIONAL, DECOLONIAL, AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL REVISION OF PHILOSOPHY

SHANNON HOFF
*Memorial University*

We emerge to critical thought in interaction with the limitations of the worlds we inhabit, but we can also bear their destructive traces and enact their exclusions in spite of ourselves.[2] Aiming for generality, we can arrive instead at a disavowed parochialism, a "universality" that is suspiciously intimate with and defensive of the contingent specificities of our ways of life. Thinking can thereby become a tool for concealing parochialism, immunizing destructive social habits from criticism, and preventing perception of and engagement with that which could build our capacity for generality.

It is particularly the decolonial critique of Eurocentrism in philosophy and intersectional analysis and its critique of feminism that have illuminated this critical problem and inspired this paper.[3] Decolonial critique targets what Santiago Castro-Gomez calls "zero-point hubris": "the imaginary according to which an observer of the social world can situate themselves on a neutral observation platform that, in turn, cannot be observed from any point" (2021, 8). Coloniality is thus, as Nelson Maldonado Torres argues, the "systematic negation of sociality and ordinary forms of interhuman contact" (2012, 262) in favour of the imposition from outside of principles construed as universal. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989) shows how theory and antidiscrimination law are dominated by a "single-axis framework" that, as Elena Ruíz (2018) notes, produces "social, institutional, and

[1] Souleymane Bachir Diagne (2013) attributes this phrase to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Léopold Sédar Senghor following him.

[2] I am grateful to Jennifer S. Simpson for her generosity in discussing this paper with me, as I am to the Critical Perspectives in Phenomenology Research Group—particularly Susan Bredlau, Kym Maclaren, David Ciavatta, and Laura McMahon.

[3] While Crenshaw (1989) coined the specific term, the idea has been developing and circulating in Black feminist thought for a long time: see, for instance, the work of the Combahee River Collective (1982), bell hooks (1984), and Angela Davis (1983). For analysis of this history, see Kathryn Sophia Belle (2011).

juridical systems that are structurally unresponsive to the needs, situations, and concerns of historically oppressed communities, and in fact may be the source of harm" (Ruíz 2018, 341). "Single-axis thinking" has encouraged feminists, for instance, to perpetuate the oppression of certain women in its complicity with anti-Black racism (Davis 1983), transphobic oppression (Bettcher 2021), capitalism (Fraser 2013), ableism (Hirschmann 2012), and "colonial feminism" (Ahmed 1992) or "gendered Orientalism" (Abu-Lughod 2013), as those dominant within the group-formations that stand to benefit from struggle against oppression hoard its successes (Táíwò 2022).[4]

The point of this paper is not to do the situated, practical analysis that Ruíz flags as the focus of intersectional work, but rather to show specifically how philosophy should self-consciously revise its practices and universality be reconceived so as to answer to the risks of zero-point hubris and single-axis thinking. In the first section, I explore phenomenologically the lived experience of being situated within a perspective, rehearsing the argument that situatedness produces in us a partiality and "single-axis thinking" that separates us from others who live in different terms. I distinguish, however, the phenomenologically revealed partiality of perspective associated with our basic existential situation from the historical, practical domination that renders certain forms of partiality general and powerful in defining the terms of social reality. In the second section, I show that we can inhabit the irreducibly partial specificity of our basic existential condition in ways that do not *prevent* but *enable* the effectiveness of struggle against and theoretical descriptions of domination. In other words, partiality is inevitable, and it often admits of political organization that conceals or expands it, but it is possible for us to live our partiality in a way that does not simply operate according to the necessarily one-sided terms by which we are inducted into being human. Through partiality, the meaning of the experience of others can become concrete to us. Here I will show that thinking itself must be reimagined: it is not a matter of a choice between specificity and universality, for it is within and through the crux of the specific that we catch a glimpse of the horizon of universality.

At the heart of human experience, the issue of the simultaneously enabling and inhibiting character of specificity is a richly developed point of study in the tradition, and thus, phenomenological reflection on how experience unfolds can contribute to analysis of this problem. This paper relies in particular on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1964a) "The Philosopher and Sociology" for its insight into, first, how we are initiated into meaningful experience by specific forms of life, and second, how communication and a particular kind of universality remain possibilities for us even in our inhabitation of determinate and mutually unfamiliar forms of experience. The paper's ultimate commitment is captured by Merleau-Ponty's

[4] These failures have inspired self-conscious use of the term "feminisms," so as to avoid implying that there is a unified feminist movement. Leaving the term singular can imply that women who find aspects of their experience challenging because of their gender but not in significant other ways have the most legitimate proprietary claim to it, that the constitution or nature of this domain is settled, and that it has established criteria for entry. For a perspective on why to use the singular term, see Cheryl Johnson-Odim (1991).

claim that "superficially considered, our inherence destroys all truth; considered radically, it founds a new idea of truth" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 109).

Because the paper's theme is specificity and its relation to thinking, it is important to identify where my efforts toward philosophical thinking have found their origin and impetus. I am a white, middle-class settler woman without, as Walter D. Mignolo calls it, "the colonial experience and political interest propelled by the colonial wound" (2009, 170). My efforts themselves are a colonial artifact, a by-product of my implication in the dispossession and subordination of others. In answer to Socrates' profound question to Cephalus, I have inherited wealth, not made it (Plato 1968, 330a). My aim is to make the inevitably flawed effort, against the grain of my cultivation, to think not from the terrain established by "centrisms" but to think of and with the exteriority projected by them, to attend to the scenes of profound injustice to which all are accountable: entrenched economic exploitation; the organization of the globe according to racist, colonial, and ableist priorities; the ongoing suppression of genders and sexualities that do not reflect the priorities of the generic heterosexual man. We are enveloped in systems that suppress and exploit human power, and our efforts to struggle against them require thinking with others, with the exteriorities these systems constitute. My desire is to investigate the living realities of human experience that make shared effort in this regard both difficult and possible.

## SPECIFICITY AND ITS AMBIVALENCE

Who we are as human individuals is profoundly a function of others and the availability of specific worlds to us. This interdependence renders us specific and one-sided, reflecting the priorities of those who induct us into humanity and the characteristics of the specific environments we inhabit, which support and dissuade different activities and attitudes. The worlds to which we adapt do not have the same dimensions as what we might project as the "actual" world beyond any actual experience, or as the worlds of others, yet their specificity tends to be somewhat invisible to us.

Merleau-Ponty captures the sense of this specificity when he observes that the "individual drama takes place among *roles* which are already inscribed in the total institutional structure, so that from the beginning of his life the child proceeds—simply by perceiving the attentions paid to him and the utensils surrounding him—to a deciphering of meanings which . . . generalizes his own drama into a drama of his culture" (1964a, 112; emphasis in original). "Attentions" and "utensils" are the vehicles of specification that circulate around us: forms of human behaviour and material expression of historical priorities that demand we assume them in order to be counted as a piece of the real world.

There are many dimensions to this specificity. It is familial, reflecting our intimate community, its lineage, its style of inhabiting the world. Who we are unfolds as a response to the specificity of our familiar others. Specificity is cultural, stamped by the qualities of its contextualizing environment. We speak a certain language, use a certain generation's slang, manifest trends in how we dress, make a living in specific ways, and so on. While there are significant differences *within* cultures, we nonetheless have a basic familiarity with

cultural options that qualifies us as "insiders," a status hard won by others. Specificity is also political; societies have made specific decisions about operation and self-organization that render them different from others, though their functioning depends on treating many of these decisions as not contingent but necessary.

Our interpretations of reality settle into the grooves made by these more primordial interpretations, yet it is only by participating in specific worlds with specific others that we develop as participants in "reality." The development of the capacity to *make sense* bears the traces of particular forms of sense-making and how these forms are demonstrated to us, and any perspective we take on this inheritance is mediated by it. We implicitly reflect what has always been demonstrated to us as "normal" even when we explicitly take ourselves to reject it. While this can seem and be oppressive to both insiders and outsiders, it is not simply an oppressive matter: only by being embedded in organized systems of meaning do we develop and become capable of relating to further others. Further, no such context could include everyone; location is necessary, and it depends on exclusion.[5]

Importantly, I am using "we" here in a way I construe to be universal. This is the case for all of us, *and* it renders us irreducibly different from each other. We share the condition of specificity, and so our experience diverges. And this unshareability is only exacerbated by the fact that our specificity is not transparent to us.

Merleau-Ponty gives the term "perceptual faith" to the epistemic orientation to the world that develops in this condition. This is the faith that "we see the things themselves, the world is what we see": it is a trusting "contact" that precedes and "exceeds [reflection's] power of comprehension" (1968, 3; 1964a, 104). Thinking emerges on the basis of this primordial contact, in which the distinction between true and false is already meaningful to us and others, and the world is already real. Thinking cannot disavow the original condition of perceptual faith and can never grasp it in the way it actually happens. It can only point to it in the mode of what Merleau-Ponty calls "hyper-reflection," which would put "to itself the problem of the genesis of its own meaning" (1968, 38, 12). "Objectivism" in thinking, as Merleau-Ponty's critique goes, takes the true to be the objective and takes knowing to be that which exposes its true reality, and in so doing disregards the lived experience of integration between experiencer and object, the original, non-reflective contact out of which objects of reflection and reflective powers emerge and to which they owe an undischargeable debt. It disavows the murky ancestry of thinking.

While we can expose phenomenologically the non-perception of the lived present, the decolonial critique of Eurocentrism and the intersectional critique of feminism expose the *politically constituted* non-perception of the lived present.[6] Alongside the philosophical critique of objectivism extends a political critique of domination: reflection operates on the basis of a disavowed history of domination. The scene behind the scenes that phenomenology illuminates, while a necessary condition of experience as such, is in turn shaped by a specific political history. While the condition of specificity is universal, forms of specificity are

[5] See Jacques Derrida (2005) for extended discussion of this point.

[6] Thanks especially to David Ciavatta for help in clarifying this distinction.

organized differently in relation to each other, and the way they are organized differently shapes how we live them.

This organization entails different epistemic capacities and orientations for different kinds of people. While those whose specificity links them with the dominant ways of life can be ignorant of the specificity of others, the converse is typically not the case. Given the power associated with dominant ways of life, familiarity with them can be the price people pay to make their way in the world. One thinks here of W. E. B. Du Bois's (2015) notion of "double-consciousness"[7] and of James Baldwin: "ask any Negro what he knows about the white people with whom he works. And then ask the white people with whom he works what they know about *him*" (1993, 103; emphasis in original). To use Lewis Gordon's (2006) powerful metaphor, to live on the basis of the dominant code is to have the cat's reach over the mouse: the cat has a sphere of influence that goes well beyond the immediate coordinates of tooth and claw. Its reach "extends to the area over which it can move faster than the mouse; thus, run though the mouse may try with all its might, the cat will seem to pop up everywhere" (2006, 42). The shared familiarity of the dominant code is an effect of dominance. Another's orientation to the world must in some sense become familiar to me—as that by which I orient myself—if the reality it projects is the reality I am forced to reckon with.

The phenomenological story here is complex. Inasmuch as all experience in taking shape becomes specific, it is a felt, familiar interiority that projects a familiar sensible world around itself and to which it feels attached. It is experienced as distinct from what seems to be an unfamiliar exteriority, which is the specificity of others' interiority and their projected, familiar world. In this historical situation, however, some experience has come to mark other forms of experience and the worlds they inhabit as perpetually exterior in relation to the interiority of the dominant, projecting a world for all, having its sense of the strangeness of others count for all, projecting its sense of familiarity upon all, and displacing suppressed experiencers from their own interiority and projected world.[8] No wonder, then, that Frantz Fanon observes that "the dreams of the colonial subject are muscular dreams, dreams of action, dreams of aggressive vitality . . . During colonization the colonized subject frees himself night after night between nine in the evening and six in the morning" (2004, 15). This would presumably be a felt consequence of experience being projected as exterior and severed from its felt familiarity and uninhibited projection into the world.

[7] W. E. B. Du Bois writes:

> it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (2015, 5)

[8] See also Enrique Dussel (2002) for the language of "exteriority" in relation to Eurocentric modernity.

There are two factors here: first, displacement from the interiority of one's perspective; and second, reduction of one's world—"the ever-non objective to which we are subject," to use Martin Heidegger's words—to a lifeless object, and to, as Fanon calls it, a "phase in the dialectic" (Heidegger 1993, 170; Fanon 2008, 111). Ordinarily, the interiority of my perspective projects its own exterior world, such that that exteriority is lived as mine and thus functions as the other side of my interiority. To live myself, then, is to live my world. But worlds too become projected as exterior, as object, and in the context of racist colonialism, as essentially or intrinsically so, as in principle uninhabitable as they are. There is a difference, then, between (1) that form of dim, inaccessible exteriority we project simply by inhabiting a specific perspective from experience and (2) worlds that have been fashioned as intrinsically exterior, which continue to be projected as such by global institutions and sustained by "centrisms" that link genuine knowledge, action, and world-inhabitation to certain kinds of lives and render others marked.

Reflection on our specificity must be part of our critical orientation to political problems because our critique can produce unjust effects of its own and empower the forces that suspend certain forms of experience in perpetual exteriority. All critique aiming at more just social arrangements inevitably propels us to generalized understandings of human experience: what is needed or wanted and why, what is desirable and undesirable, bad and good. It is inconsistent with critique to refuse to reflect on this inevitable partiality of these generalizations. The world has been built to answer to certain forms of specificity above others. We are inevitably trained in these priorities and they are entrenched further by our failure to perceive them and our actions on their terms.

There have been significant efforts to expose these interpretive dysfunctions, particularly by those cultivated to perceive them because these dysfunctions are felt as constraints in their experience. Domination has been characterized as the power to render specificity invisible. As María Lugones (2003) argues, the dominant social position projects a culture for everyone *else*, whereas it postures itself as postcultural (as one can see, for instance, in popular use of the term "ethnic food" to designate food from Mexico, China, or India but not from England or Canada). The world reflects the interests of the dominant as general, giving them access to mechanisms of publicity and power and disinclining them to acknowledge their favoured status. As Fanon shows, those attached to dominant communities often have the privilege of living far away from the violence that is the condition of their way of life.[9] Further, the communicative practices that would foster improved interpretive function are impoverished because of entrenched segregation, the habitual alliance of the powerful with their own, the impoverishment of educational contexts that should induct us into the rich experience of imaginative communication, and the unrecognized heritage of racist Eurocentrism operative in these contexts, which, as Aníbal Quijano notes, has repressed "colonized forms of knowledge production . . .

[9] Fanon observes that this violence "governed the ordering of the colonial world . . . tirelessly punctuated the destruction of the indigenous social fabric, and demolished unchecked the systems of reference of the country's economy, lifestyles, and modes of dress" (2004, 5–6).

modes of producing and giving meaning . . . the imaginary, the universe of intersubjective relations with the world" (Quijano 2000, 541).[10]

Let us take feminist interpretive dysfunction as a further example. Crenshaw diagnoses the way that feminism's strategies often "reinforce the subordination of people of color," such that feminist policies tend to benefit white women (1991, 1252). Naomi Zack observes that women of color can be oppressed by white women, and their oppression in turn by men of colour can be an "indirect result of white racism" (2007, 196). Haunani Kay Trask (2008) warns against race-based activism in Indigenous contexts, since dividing a people by race can divide them from each other,[11] and Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that "it is an *irrelevant luxury* for Indigenous women to prioritise white feminist issues over Indigenous issues" (2008, 363; emphasis added). These problems result from the pairing of existentially inevitable partiality and politically constituted hierarchies. It should be clearly *contrary* to any feminist project to work against those who suffer from sexist oppression, to contribute to the disempowerment of others, to undermine the resources that empower people in their opposition to oppression, to make universal claims that do not apply universally in ways that undermine struggles against oppression. We transgress the boundaries of another's specificity theoretically, when we speak in a universal register of things illuminated by our specificity, and politically, when we spend political resources "here" and reduce their availability elsewhere, and when we advance political transformation without perceiving its destructive impact on others.

Entrenched in specificity, however, we may wonder *how* it is possible to oppose our tendencies toward interpretive dysfunction, perceive how we are hierarchically situated, and practice good reflection and communication. Is the specificity of situation an insurmountable obstacle to a broader awareness, to the intelligibility of other forms of life? Intersectional and decolonial forms of criticism identify the specific, violent consequences of false claims to universality, and in doing so seem to imply a hope: that it is possible to perceive beyond the confines of our situations, to grasp truths illuminated by others, to notice "single-axis thinking" and "zero-point hubris," to see how our situations are structured by hierarchical relations that render certain voices neutral and others accented, and to act on the basis of that improved perception. In other words, one may be able to claim, "since I/we can express this truth to you, its significance extends beyond its meaning for me/us, who are specifically situated, and becomes a matter of general interest, a claim to truth."

Merleau-Ponty's (1964a) invocation of a *Weltwissenschaft* in the face of *Weltanschauung* is an insistence on the possibility of this broader awareness. The idea of a *Weltanschauung* or "worldview" captures broadly the existential point thus far: we are situated in specific worlds that shape our perception. But "the *Weltanschauung* philosophers miss everything" because they have "no *Weltwissenschaft,*" no "science of world" or "world-knowledge,"

[10] See Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014) for a discussion of how educational spaces and practices can be places of critique and movement toward justice.

[11] Cited as "H. K. Trask's presentation on 'Native Hawaiian Sovereignty Rights'" by Annette M. Jaimes (2008, 323).

which would involve working to *comprehend* the immediate sense of lived familiarity, to thematize our specific links to a specific world, to grapple with our "worldedness" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 103). We are not, he says, "in time, in space, in society, as an object is in a container"; rather, we can "become conscious of" this link to our world and pursue "an understanding of what [we do]" (1964b, 49). Following Merleau-Ponty, I will argue that thinking must steer clear of two false alternatives: the idea that we can access reality as such through rationality exercised individually, and the idea that specificity simply hems us in, stonewalling thought's aspirations to generality. I will argue that the third way demands a "situation of dialogue,"[12] the careful structuring of which is required if it is not to reiterate the problems it is invoked to resolve (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 51). If principle is always and only expressed in specific, embodied forms, which are thereby meaningful in ways that cannot always be directly perceived, communication is required as its supplement, for the principle's expansiveness can only be grasped through dialogue across these forms. If thinking beyond specificity is guided by others, then, as Souleymane Bachir Diagne notes, "only in a postcolonial world can the question of the universal truly be posed" (2011, 8). Or, to invoke Torres's provocative words: if "the fundamental axes of reflection about human reality are grounded in the human-to-human relation," then decolonization is "first philosophy" (2012, 261).

## "RATIONALITY IN CONTINGENCY"[13]

The situation of dialogue is founded on two fundamental characteristics of experience, which I will discuss in turn in this section. First, our experience unfolds for us as an experience of being one among many, of being inside an interpersonal reality in which interaction guides us to sense. Transformative dialogue with others becomes a possibility for us insofar as it is an extension of this aspect of our basic constitution as experiencers. Second, thinking is linked fundamentally with determinacy, insofar as each of us draws on local mechanisms available to us to give expression to meanings we experience as non-local. Given the importance of the local and familiar mechanism for our sense of the principle, the possibility of universality lies in dialogical exposure to other local mechanisms that are different from our own, and to their power to express and reflect meaning.

### The Experience of Oneself as "One Among Many"

Recently, I asked approximately thirty-five students in an introductory philosophy class (five of whom were racialized, and most of whom were from Newfoundland and Labrador, a province in Canada) to talk about the experience of being judged critically by others. Some of the students spoke in articulate detail of the anxiety and frustration inspired by the idea of being an object in someone else's view. On the basis of that rich discussion, we turned to consider

[12] Merleau-Ponty attributes the phrase "situation of dialogue" to Eugen Fink.

[13] This phrase comes from Merleau-Ponty (1964a, 111).

the possibility of being met routinely with that kind of consciousness in others, making a transition to Fanon's (2008) account of being confronted at every turn with the white person's interpretive overreach of him. Made alive to the challenging character of the perspectives of others, those participating found resources from withintheir own experience with which to register both the significance of Fanon's experience and, where relevant, the difference.

This is an example, I suggest, of what Merleau-Ponty calls "rationality in contingency" (1964a, 111). What is shared, the "rationality," is this: experience is a matter of negotiating one's sense of self in tandem with the views of others upon oneself.[14] We see in Fanon's experience how this intertwining with others can be a significant psychical and physical threat, whereas in other forms of experience it can be less charged. In both, however, experience essentially *comes with the meaning* that it is only a variant of experience: experience unfolds inside an intersubjective reality in which we are learning, through our interaction, how to make living sense of a concrete situation. Inherent in every perspective is the meaning that it is one among many, that it is intertwined with the perspectives of others, and that its character is *to be expanded*; experience originally involves the spontaneous "imaginary variation" of one's own perspective in response to others (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 100). This is a structure of experience as such, even when unacknowledged, even though as a structure *of experience*—as something inevitably determinate—it is always expressed in determinate ways.

The primordiality of communicative interaction is the very reason why experience is specific; by virtue of our intertwining with specific others, we become different. We *share* this interpersonal constitution of perspective and thus there is a "rationality" or logic here: we all experience our perspectives as limited and one among many; we are all initiated into the practice of coordinating our perspectives with those of others. Because of this rationality, the ways we are human are specific and contingent. And philosophical investigation of this rationality, if it is to be thorough, must be paired with investigation of its specific and contingent effects.

This very structure of perspective inducts us into the possibility of relating to further, unfamiliar others. Another person is not someone whose situation is laid bare to us through our own absolute and private powers of rationality, *nor* is she absolutely inaccessible in that only the external facts and not the meaning of her situation are available to us. These are the false alternatives spoken of above: that rationality exercised privately could give us reality or that one-sided specificity renders us mutually opaque. The other person is rather someone who, like me, is grappling with her status as *one among many*, learning with others how to discern the sense of her lived situation, oriented from an "inside" toward an "outside," open (whether willingly or unwillingly) to being transformed by new forms of interaction. The determinate condition that made me specific is where my capacity to connect across difference comes from, and the possibility of a shared understanding exists

[14] This is also G. W. F. Hegel's (1977) point: self-consciousness is itself but also an *other being*, and it has its "unity" in this "duplication" (§178). I invoke Hegel here because of my conviction that his philosophy, despite its implication in racist and colonial thought, can also be mobilized for thinking through the themes of this paper, insofar as he is a profound thinker of ethical specificity on the one hand and historical transformation on the other. See also Shannon Hoff (2018).

for us if it makes itself known in the determinate terms of our experience. Determinacy is the very route through which one can become alive to the meanings of another's determinacy. One is neither the "absolute spectator"—the "rationalist philosopher" who sees from a universal point of view—nor the arm's length "sociologist," who assumes that all they can access in a foreign context is the external "fact" of the matter (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 109). Our situation "is what links us to the whole of human experience, no less than what separates us from it" (110); it is our training for insight into the experience of others. We develop the capacity for understanding at the price of misunderstanding; for the "small fee" of partiality, we cultivate the capacity for insight. To put it in the terms of John Russon's (2017) analysis, determinacy is a site *of exposure*.

Uday Singh Mehta (1999) similarly argues that it is parochialism that we share: our lived, non-reflective entanglement with our own situations, the way the world meaningfully "hangs together" for us. Against the abstract universality of liberalism, he defends the possibility of a concrete universality *on the basis of* this parochialism, a universality rooted in what it "feels like" to be inside our own experience. Since everyone is "deeply and hence not provisionally *invested*" in the "conditions through which [they] may understand and experience life" and the "modes of experience by which things hang together," we cultivate the possibility of sharing when we aim to discern, through how things "hang together" for us, the sense of unfamiliar specific attachments as they are lived "from the inside" (26–27; emphasis in original). Mehta proposes a cosmopolitanism appropriate to the universal inhabitation of specificity—a cosmopolitanism not of reason but of sentiment—in which, through "conversation, which has as its purpose the understanding of the sentiments that give meaning to people's lives, wider bonds of sympathy can be forged" (22).

The project of developing a broader understanding is initiated when I pursue the sense of myself as "one among many" that operates inside my experience, when I "awaken within myself," as Merleau-Ponty writes, "the consciousness of this social-which-is-mine." He argues that the "interior" that philosophy brings us back to "is not a 'private life' but an intersubjectivity that gradually connects us ever closer to the whole of history" (1964a, 112). To be me is to have navigated the perspectives of others, expanding and contracting in relation to them; it is that determinate history that sets me on a path toward thinking. In inhabiting this situation, I have reason as "a summons and a task," as merely latent, and requiring the "dimension of coexistence" in order to "be changed into itself and brought to explicit consciousness" (110, 113, 110). It is a summons and ongoing task because meanings always express themselves in determinacy and are therefore fated to an inexhaustible unfolding appropriate to the inexhaustible character of determinacy; this is because my capacity for rationality itself will always be expressed inside the determinacy of my own condition as "one-among-many." Intrinsically linked to contingency, rationality depends (and has always depended) upon my exposure to the many of which I am one. Others too exist in this original answerability to the perspectives of others, and insofar as we share this we are not simply alien. I pursue thought as a living response to the existence and operation of others in me.

Unsurprisingly, Merleau-Ponty adds a bodily dimension to this argument, arguing that

the very externality of bodies provides the possibility of genuine encounter with another perspective. Because I am

> invested individually with an exterior through which [I] become visible . . . all the other person sees of me—all my facticity—is reintegrated into subjectivity, or at least posited as an indispensable element of its definition . . . [We] no longer know [our]selves to be subject in relation to [our] individual selves, but in relation to one another as well. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 106–07)

What the other person sees of me changes me; *how I appear to them* is formative of me; I take shape around their view because it moves me to adjust myself; I am intrinsically, inherently sensitive. My very own experience dispossesses me of myself; it is not my property or under my sway.

To insist that we can arrive at comprehensive knowledge prior to this dispossession is to assert a claim to possession of thought that we have no right to assert. What we do know, however, is that it will continue to take the shape it does in relation to the freedom of others, since it has always taken shape in that way. And to insist on a fundamental separation from others due to our differences is also to maintain a *dishonest possessiveness* in relation to our own experience. In fact, others, and their interaction with and perception of ourselves as bodies, govern our unfolding: "the social is not simply an object but to begin with my situation" (112).

This point has a further significance that is another instance of a *politically illuminated* extension of a phenomenologically illuminated point. If experience essentially comes with the meaning that it is only one variant thereof, and if it unfolds inside an intersubjective reality in which we are learning how to make living sense of a concrete situation, then *those by whom it is not lived as such* are being trained into unreality, and *those by whom it is lived as such*—those in whose experience this point is thematized—are being cultivated to perceive reality (though if the way this point is thematized in experience is significantly oppressive and/or violent, it can have its own destructive effects on the capacity to perceive reality). The reality that is projected by the experience of those who inhabit the sense that their experience is a *variant* is more genuine than the reality projected by the experience of the dominant whose domination depends on not acknowledging variation. Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) "mestiza consciousness" and Lugones's (2003) "world-travelling" resonate here: those who have the sense of their experience as a "variant" find that reality shows more of itself within their experience than it does in the experience of those who live it in such a way that denies the reality of the interiority of others. This is not to defend living in terms of "double consciousness" (Du Bois 2015) or to argue that such a perspective automatically generates greater insight—a problematic argument if oppression is harmful—but to see that the experience of variation is more hospitable to the horizon of universality than the lack thereof. As Anzaldúa (1987) observes, universality comes closer as a possibility when we "link people with each other—the Blacks with Jews with Indians with Asians with whites with extraterrestrials . . . transfer[ring] ideas and information from one culture

to another" (Anzaldúa 1987, 107). Specificity and universality are inevitably paired; my situation opens the world for me, and the situations of others have the capacity to expand my sense of what it is that I see dimly through my own. Thus, any universal will be, as Aimé Césaire claims, "enriched by all that is particular" (2010, 152). We can contribute to each other's power to grasp generality, and doing so is a possibility because the sense that circulates in our situation does so as a function of the existence of our "first" others, their views on us, our receptivity to them.[15] Merleau-Ponty writes that "the philosopher may no longer speak of mind in general, deal with each and every mind under a single name, or flatter himself that he constitutes them," but must maintain consciousness "of the open and successive community of *alter egos* living, speaking, and thinking in one another's presence" (1964a, 106, 110; emphasis in original). Thinking is supported by relations, by the "community of *alter egos*"; it requires "other minds." This is especially important when we inhabit a history that has violently suppressed what is unfamiliar to the dominant perspective.

We are always negotiating our sense of self in relation to the perspectives that others have on us. These perspectives do not end where anyone would arbitrarily say they do, and their existence on the horizon calls for a certain kind of orientation to reality: it is always bigger than can be grasped, and we are always situated at the experiential centre of perspectives that exceed us. What is outside—the perspectives of others upon us, the reality projected by their interiority—shapes our interiority, our sense of our own selves, and calls for an ongoing reckoning. We should cultivate occasions for communication that would propel this practice of reckoning, taking shape around the views of others, expanding the social that is our situation, the dimensions of human reality in its complexity, our educational and communicative contexts.[16]

Because the social is "my situation," the outcome of improved communication is as much *finding out* who we are as it is of revising our sense of ourselves. I think of a discussion session at Memorial University focused on Indigenous relations and research. After the participants introduced themselves, Max Liboiron, co-host of the session, highlighted the rich significance of introductions, observing that we are accustomed to introducing ourselves in terms of our sense of what is salient for us, whereby we can actively conceal

[15] This is not to say that we should all become something like "cosmopolitan tourists," using the goal of knowledge to justify a kind of incessant engagement. If, to put it in Torres's words, "the fundamental axes of reflection about human reality are grounded in the human-to-human relation," this does not simply justify ongoing pursuit of opportunities for human-to-human interaction (Torres 2012, 261). Doing so would undermine human-to-human interaction by challenging the conditions of existence of specific communities.

[16] As Simpson describes it, "engagement with the theories and practices of co-resistors is powerful because it often illuminates colonial thinking in myself, and it demonstrates different possibilities in analysis and action in response to similar systems of oppression and dispossession" (2017, 66).

important dimensions of who we are that do not typically show up for us.[17] Who I am is not simply my vision and priorities, but also how I have been cultivated in and projected by specific historical patterns and structures and who I am in relation to the others situated there, which I may not perceive. I had not introduced myself as "settler," but doing so may have reflected an attempt to wrestle with the "zero-point hubris" that disavows the significance to our own experience of others' experience of us; an attempt to avow the role that relations play in our formation; recognition of the fact that the dynamic between communities may have more to do with the constitution of our situations than our own actions do. But this dynamic has historically offered little cause, as Chelsea Vowel observes, for the majority to refer to itself as such. Using the relational term "settler," however, could aid in opening the possibility of discerning this relational history (2016, 16). Here again it is evident that interaction with others can give us a more accurate sense of ourselves, since our situation is constructed by what is outside of it. The *intimacy* of the question "who am I?" is *belied* by the fact that it is answered from the outside, by the unfamiliar.[18]

More broadly, then, the theoretical work of philosophical reflection relies on the practical work of cultivating contexts of communication. Since praxis, however, will always be the occasion for setting prejudices in motion, care must clearly be taken here. One must avoid requiring extraordinary labor from already exploited people, and cultivating communicative contexts in such a way that the terms and desires of the dominant are once more at centre stage. *How* we develop such contexts will also bear the marks of our specificity.

We have discussed the interpersonal constitution of the inward domain and have found in experience, where the tyranny of the familiar has taken root, the capacity for connection with unfamiliar others. Let us now turn, however, to the idea of universality as such, with the healthy suspicion of a rationality that would masquerade as universal while suppressing certain forms of experience, yet with openness to the possibility that the idea of universality could still be meaningful.

## Principles in and of Situations

Jehangir Saleh, once a Master's student in philosophy working on Merleau-Ponty, had cystic fibrosis and died in 2013. Saleh (2011) wrote a blogpost in which he tried to speak to the frustration doctors had expressed to him because they did not but wanted to understand what his experience was like. On the surface, he says, these doctors are right: they don't

[17] The session was co-hosted by Liboiron, who at the time was Associate Vice-President of Indigenous Research, and Catharyn Anderson, then Special Advisor to the President on Indigenous affairs and now Vice-President (Indigenous) at Memorial University. See Liboiron for a related discussion of the complexities of citation: "it is common to introduce Indigenous authors with their nation/affiliation, while settler and white scholars almost always remain unmarked . . . This unmarking is one act among many that re-centres settlers and whiteness as an unexceptional norm, while deviations have to be marked and named" (2021, 3n10).

[18] Not everyone is mobile in this way, however, so the very content of this paper invokes a limit to its thesis: for those who inhabit bounded communities, the standard of openness may be out of place, though it will presumably still have relevance regarding the differences that show up within that world.

know what he is experiencing; they don't feel his pain or his sadness when a friend with cystic fibrosis passes away. He also observes, however, that the premise that experience cannot be shared means being trapped within it, with doctors on the outside. So Saleh works to describe what cystic fibrosis is like by relating it to an experience that others also have, that of mopping the floor:

> I've mopped floors . . . Except, for me, the floor is my body. I get up in the morning, and inhale a bronchodilator. Then I inhale a mucolytic. This takes up about 35mins. Then, 30mins of postural drainage, followed by 10mins of breathing techniques. Then I inhale an anti-biotic, and then some anti-inflammatory medications: approx 2 hrs total. Then my day starts: I become a grad student. I write papers. Talk to students. Prepare for seminars. And then I come back home, and do this process all over again. All of this feels a bit like mopping a floor. The floor gets dirty, so you mop it up. The next day, the floor is dirty again: you mop it up. You're never going to, once and for all, mop the floor. You're never going to mop the floor in a way to end all floor mopping . . . And this is what it feels like, for me at least, to go through my medical routine . . . I clean things up. And then I come home . . . and again, clean things up, again. (Saleh 2011)

With this description, Saleh grabs hold of something within the experience of another that facilitates connection with his. This example, I suggest, captures the meaning of Merleau-Ponty's claim that, "superficially considered, our inherence destroys all truth; considered radically, it founds a new idea of truth," as well as his claim that philosophy operates as "consciousness of rationality in contingency" (1964a 109, 111). To share something of his unshared experience, Saleh invokes a shared meaning inside of the experience of another.

We always find ourselves within situations in a lived world, and our discernment of "rationality" should not be construed as a matter of departing from them—particularly because we then deny their powerful role in cultivating our sense of what is rational—but as a matter of something to which they themselves inspire us. Merleau-Ponty writes that situations are "the source of our curiosity, our investigations, and our interest in . . . other situations" (110). In perceptual faith, we inhabit our situations also in terms of the living sense that they and we are real, and that the unfolding reality projected by them beyond them is also real. The extension of the real beyond me is given to me *in* and *by* my pre-reflective intimacy with the world. I experience myself as an inside in relation to an outside, and I am always grappling with the relation.

Speaking operates similarly, as a matter of local dynamics and exposure through them to what is beyond them. In being born, we enter into a specific language, and we desire to comprehend and become comprehensible to specific others. Local language-users constitute for us an initial, limited domain of comprehensibility, but they, and language itself, propel us beyond it. Words, gestures, meanings are translatable, legible, audible; they project the horizon of universal shareability because they can in principle be understood, though they will never be universally shared. But it is the specificities of enunciation that form the very crux in which the possibility of translation arises. We grow into language

by using words others also use, speaking as they speak, which means our linguistic habits simultaneously enclose us in specific groups and cultivate our ability to sustain exposure to others. If others' use of words affects ours, if the way they speak changes how we wield language and what we say, then we are opened to others and dispossessed of ourselves by sharing in language. In other words, language too is the "exterior through which [we] become visible," that through which others and their views on us are "reintegrated into subjectivity" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 106–07). We do not simply plant ideas in the world outside of us through language, but with it the perspectives of others enter, shape, and unfold inside of us. It is as though others are in our mouths, revising our speech from within.[19]

Thinking and language always involve duality, insofar as their expansiveness is cultivated *in situ*, or insofar as meanings, principles, and translatability are generated from within situations and communities of enunciation. Actual thinking, as Merleau-Ponty notes in "From Mauss to Claude Lévi-Strauss," "moves back and forth between experience and intellectual construction or reconstruction" (119). The "first principles" that are arguably the business of philosophy are the first principles *of empirical reality* and *discerned inside of empirical situations*, and thus principle and empirical situation can never be unpaired; the philosopher and the sociologist belong together. The general is always tied to—always forged in the crux of—the situational. Thinking is always this two-sided matter; we are never absolute spectators armed with abstract universal philosophical principles, and never simply involved with external, contingent facts, but with externality as the expression of meaning. We talk about things poorly and irresponsibly if we talk about them without reference to their context or presume that they are without context, but also if we imagine we are locked in determinacy. To navigate this two-sidedness and operate "in the dimension of coexistence," philosophy should not permit itself dishonest abstraction from the situations in and by which it is inspired, but bring them self-consciously into its operation, its practitioners showing their situational markings or origins and how communicable meanings are born there, rather than allowing themselves to operate as the "unexceptional norm" (Liboiron 2021, 3n10) or acquiescing to the idea that it is impossible to think with others due to a purportedly mutually incommunicable determinacy. In what follows, let us first explore some concrete ways in which this dimension of coexistence can be navigated, at which point we will be able to diagnose some historical failures to do so.

First, the fact that we act in specific ways to fashion our situations in interaction with principles and meanings should alert us to the *meaningfulness* of one-sided specificity as expressive of principle and also therefore to the possibility that different forms of specificity, even if they appear to us as alien, could be expressions of either similar meanings or different meanings that would be compelling to us but are underdeveloped in our own worlds. *Differences* can be the very mode in which *similarities* are expressed, as well as the *concealment* in unfamiliarity of things that we could potentially care about, so we should not be misled by difference into thinking that it simply manifests a gulf between us. Regarding similarities, think, for instance, of clothing; we inherit cultural styles, and yet through them

[19] Merleau-Ponty's description of dialogue in the *Phenomenology* is helpful here: if "speech accomplishes thought," then thinking essentially has others and externality on its horizon (2013, 370).

we express rebellion, conservativism, creativity, shyness, pride, cultural criticism, and so on. While styles can be different, the meanings and motives behind them can be shared, and so it is wrong to think of different forms of clothing simply as expressions of alien unfamiliarity. Regarding concealment: determinate forms of life tend to emphasize and thus support the complex and detailed development of certain principles and meanings while suppressing the emergence of others, such that mutual exposure can involve engagement with meaningful elements of significance that do not easily grow in the soil of our own worlds.[20] As a *rule*, the only way we can express meanings and principles is through the different, determinate means at our disposal. When shared, such meanings can take different expression elsewhere; when shareable, or open to being explained and understood, the unfamiliar determinacy of our expressions requires communicative clarification.

Second, however, meaning is not simply independent of its expression, and does not necessarily remain unchanged when "it" is expressed differently. Encounter with the determinate expressions of others could deepen our sense of the meaning being expressed. Rather than fixed, principles and meanings shift and expand in interaction, with their fullness lying on the horizon, not in our hands. Engagement with others and their determinacy could be the way we have of working out and discerning the depth of the principles and meanings that move us, since others can reveal greater expansiveness latent in principles we grasp only partially. Our interest in and commitment to the principle or meaning could itself be the means by which we come to appreciate the less shared specificity of the other situation, because it may also be honoured and affirmed there. The point here is to imagine neither that we share nothing nor that we could determine the content of what is shared prior to actual engagement, but to approach unfamiliar situations and those who inhabit them with the sense that only they can reveal the expansiveness of principles we hold dear and potentially illuminate to us competing or supplementary others. Think, for instance, of Lugones working through Marilyn Frye's discussion of "loving perception" and "arrogant perception," describing the perception of women of color by "White/Anglo women" and thereby revealing dimensions to the meaning of these forms of perception that Frye herself did not, dimensions that build its interpretive power (2003, 5). Mobilizing her determinate experience for the expansion of a concept or meaning, Lugones's very practice is loving—inducting an idea into a

[20] Thus, Hegel observes that a principle is developed in and through the relations of the existence of a determinate way of life, by being clothed

> with all the wealth of its existence; the shape in which it exists is a people into whose morality, constitution, domestic, civil, and public life, arts, international relations, etc. this principle is built, and the wholly specific form of concrete history is stamped on every aspect of the people's external life. This is the material which the principle of a people has to work through, and this is not the business of one day; on the contrary, there are all the needs, skill, relations, laws, constitution, arts, sciences which this material has to develop in accordance with this principle. (1985, 44)

Such principles depend on their development by the concrete, which cannot work through all possible principles of significance to human beings.

context in which it can be more fecund. This may be the "civilization of the universal" of which Diagne (2013) speaks: the universal itself has a trajectory, where the shape it initially takes is a mere shadow of the reality it may have if it is expanded in interaction with further determinacy. Césaire speaks of enrichment of the universal by the particular:

> Provincialism? Not at all. I am not burying myself in a narrow particularism. But neither do I want to lose myself in an emaciated universalism. There are two ways to lose oneself: walled segregation in the particular or dilution in the "universal." My conception of the universal is that of a universal enriched by all that is particular, a universal enriched by every particular: the deepening and coexistence of all particulars. (2010, 152)

This "civilization" and "enrichment" of the universal makes its productive effect known also in relation to problems, such as the problem of capitalist exploitation. Capitalism is not exhaustively perceptible by one kind of perspective, for instance by those who have experience with how it takes advantage of and interacts with sexism. The scope of the problem can only be revealed through illumination of the various determinate situations with which it interacts. Capitalism feeds on oppressed communities, whether they endure ableism, heterosexism, racism, sexism, colonialism, or religious intolerance, and it benefits from non-connection among those who struggle against these various forms of oppression. For each, understanding how capitalism interacts with the other forms may be indispensable for discerning how opposition to it should be enacted. If capitalist exploitation is a piece of the infrastructure of both sexism and racism, for instance, then effective opposition to sexism may require collaboration with anti-racist groups against capitalist exploitation. We misconstrue that against which we struggle if we conceive of it only in terms of our own struggle; if it is systemic, it is broader than is manifested in our own experience, and opposition to it works best if we understand how it functions with regard to others.

A third tool for navigating the two-sided reality of determinacy and meaning is communication. If one-sided specificity does not state its meaning on its own, it implicitly posits the need for communication among those who give meaning expression in different ways. Such communication is not simply the assertion of one's own meaning in the communicative context, but, as Laura McMahon (2021) argues, a responsive, dynamic experience that involves understanding others through *one's own* behavioral resources but also coming to understand oneself differently through exposure to the experience of others.[21] Communication is the medium by which meanings are revealed, and so we require guidance into specific, unfamiliar modes of expression of meanings. Since these could become our meanings too, however, this communication should be taken as potentially transformative and not simply the transfer of fixed truths. The possibility of thinking well lies on the horizon of the construction of good communicative practices, and insofar as

[21] McMahon writes that "these projects of understanding the other and understanding oneself cannot in truth be separated: we learn to understand others in *their* own context . . . by drawing on our own experiential behavioral resources, and we come to better understand ourselves—in manners that do not leave our categories of understanding and by extension our own identities intact—in light of the experiences of others" (2021, 82; emphasis in original).

we are committed to thinking, we are committed to cultivating those practices. This is Merleau-Ponty's "second way to the universal": rather than the overarching universal of a "strictly objective method," it is a "lateral universal" of, shall we say, an interpersonal, communicative method, which is acquired "through ethnological experience and its incessant testing of the self through the other person and the other person through the self" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 120). The nature, method, and content of this communication is therefore not ours to define. Mehta rightly notes that negotiation of the boundaries of those who participate in the conversation is "constant and unsuppressible," such that "no algorithm can be offered in advance" (1999, 43–44).

In sum, all of us draw on *mechanisms available to us locally* to give expression to *meanings and principles we experience as non-local*. Each of us has an "expressive palette," a collection of resources linked to a broader cultural reality to which we unreflectively turn for expression. Changes to this palette are the exception rather than the norm; generally, we deploy its resources to express our commitments, announce who we are, and live our everyday lives, and other meanings become intelligible to us if they make themselves known in ways that fit this palette.[22] The fact that the resources upon the expressive palette differ, however, does not necessarily entail significant differences at the level of the commitments expressed through them, and should propel us to communication rather than to private observation of differences from afar. While there may be general differences of commitment expressed here, it is likely that the differences in palette will encourage the non-perception of similarity and the over-perception of difference and discourage the dialogue that would allow the meaningfulness of different commitments to emerge.

This relation between principle and specificity also offers a means of diagnosing the ways in which thinking has been elaborated in terms of destructive "centrisms." Denial of the intrinsic relation between the principled and the specific has been central to the colonial project, for one, and to the political thinking of those affiliated with colonial power. Principle is thought simply transferable to alterity and specifiable in advance of encounter with unfamiliar specificity. "Liberal imperialism," as Mehta calls it, "relentlessly attempts to align or educate the regnant forms of the unfamiliar with its own expectations" (1999, 18). The principle of inward subjectivity, of subjective freedom, is particularly useful as an alibi concealing the destruction of externality. As Quijano (2000) argues, modernity is not simply a matter of a transformation in the domain of subjectivity or the individual ego, but it *is coloniality*. Its focus on the individual ego conceals the importance, and thus

[22] Hegel similarly notes that

> whether something is understood or not, whether our consciousness explicitly takes hold of a content, finds and knows itself in what is an object for it, all depends on whether the object comes home to us in the shape of our accustomed metaphysics. For our metaphysics is made up of relationships familiar to us; they are the net holding all our particular insights and ideas, and they are known only in so far as they can all be caught in it. . . If anything is to be intelligible. . . it must be brought back to a [person's] metaphysics, to the organ of [their] soul, to accordance with [their] sense. (1985, 34)

facilitates the destruction and desacralization, of the determinate practices, traditions, and institutions that constitute the specific formative ground and expressive palette of non-Western subjectivities, their induction into global powers constituted and controlled by the so-called West, and the use of the construction of race to justify Western domination.[23] Merleau-Ponty similarly argues that "liberal ideas belong to a system of violence" and are particularly effective in concealing this reality and preventing struggle against it (1969, xii). The ideal of equality, for instance, is invoked to oppose the real work of *producing* equality (think, for instance, of how "all lives matter" does this).[24] Fanon describes the practices for which the dreaded "Western values" are mobilized: "non-violence" for maintaining the status quo, "individualism" for undermining collective struggle, and so on (2004, 8, 23, 11). Thinking is never a matter of accomplishing universality by sacrificing specificity; rather, principles are worked out—they emerge as meaningful—in the dimension of specificity. They are a necessary pair.

Given the intrinsic relation between principle and situation, attempts to be responsible will inevitably be the occasion for setting our prejudices in motion and asserting our own perspectives.[25] We set interpretive partiality in motion when we act, and so such action must always be accompanied by the self-conscious effort to think its externality and by respect for the others who have the power to perceive our action differently than we do. Awareness of finitude should motivate engagement with a situation that is open to the horizon beyond it: namely, action with the support of a communicative context, action that is open to being "called in." At the most basic level this means that our response to any moral or ethical demand that inspires action is never perfectly discharged, even after action is "completed."[26] Since we are called by our situations to act without being able to grasp action's full significance, and since we inhabit a dynamic human context in which the ground is always shifting beneath our feet, we require others around us—whether in texts or in person—who perceive differently than we do. Philosophy must be enacted as a matter of exposure and transformation rather than as authoritative self-assertion: as initiation, request, invitation. This renders the idea of universality a lateral and horizonal notion, and it demands a commitment not to lead with one's assumptions but to have them be exposed, to oppose the temptations of abstraction and the private consultation of one's own mind, to do the practical labor required for the production of lateral universality, and to engage widely, beyond one's specific community.

There is a further point to notice here. While thinking and speaking can be wielded in ways that are aggressive and exclusionary, they are in principle expansive and infinitely hospitable, not decreased by the inclusion of what was previously unthought and unspoken.

[23] In Mehta's terms, the guiding question should be: what is the "relationship that a body of ideas imagines between itself and the world?" (1999, 17).

[24] This example is John Russon's, made in a 2018 guest lecture in a class at Memorial University on Merleau-Ponty's *Humanism and Terror*.

[25] Consider Davis's (1983) example of how a campaign against sexual violence conducted mostly by white women was the occasion for the mobilization of their racism, as it invoked their assumption that Black men were particularly sexually violent and Black women hyper-sexual.

[26] This is the "hyperbolical ethics" of which Derrida (2001) speaks.

Ontologically singular, they can be shared without decrease, unlike money, oranges, or houses. Relatedly, they do not tolerate competition but inspire distribution, since their possession by others enhances my own.[27] Yet we are not in charge of the ways in which we may change through interaction with what is unfamiliar, and thus we should avoid the assertion of philosophical authority and the glorification of existing knowledge and, rather than allowing this knowledge to lead the way in the mode of assimilation of what is other, letting the interaction itself lead us, in the name of the philosophical weight and significance of determinacy.

Our specificity situates us inside of structures designed to protect some from injury and conceal the injury of others. This, as well as our lack of individual effort and care, bolsters destructive prejudices of perception. But our specificity is not simply an obstacle to identification with others; rather, it is the very condition under which the sense that emerges in another's experience can come alive in ours. With work, our specificity can be mobilized to support our capacity for reckoning with that of others: through the felt character of ourselves as "one among many," where other perspectives are deeply implicated in the development of our own, and through the intrinsic connection between the specificity of situation on the one hand and the generality of thinking and language on the other. To register the challenges presented by the intersectionality argument and the critique of Eurocentrism is to register the way reality is diversely constituted, to expand communicative space, to act and speak in a way that reflects awareness of the externality we project in our very acting and speaking. These critiques themselves allow for the explicit political enlargement of the phenomenological point: we live our familiar "interiors" differently, as some of them are construed as fundamentally exterior. For philosophical and political reasons, thought and action must be directed toward the space of communication, where we struggle to preserve the possibility of the mutual exposure of perspectives, encountering these perspectives in person, on the page, and in the imagination so that we can be meaningfully expanded by them and more faithful to reality, and thus not useless in answering to the need for the world to be different. The hope that we can do so is meaningful insofar as we are in principle capable of making "outsiders" alive to the situations in which we find ourselves, capable of becoming alive as "outsiders" to the meaningful situations of others, intrinsically internally sensitive to the transformative effects of others—though greater effort is required by those who have been marked by history as perpetual insiders.

[27] See Plato's *Lysis*, particularly Socrates' questions to Lysis and Menexenus about their relative age, wealth, appearance, justice, and wisdom, which evoke the idea that while age, wealth, and appearance differentiate people from each other and can inspire competition, justice and wisdom are shareable and increase thereby (1997, 207b8–d3). Diemut Bubeck similarly argues that knowledge is "a public good," not "a private good fought over in an antagonistic zero-sum game," whatever the practical limits to its accessibility (2000, 193). Miranda Fricker notes that reason is that in which the "powerless" ground their counterclaims against the powerful, and "is not diminished by the cynical insouciance of others" (2000, 151).

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# BOOK REVIEW
## THE POLITICAL LOGIC OF EXPERIENCE: EXPRESSION IN PHENOMENOLOGY BY NEAL DEROO (FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2022)

MOLLY KELLY
*Emory University*

What distinguishes critical phenomenology from classical phenomenology, and can classical phenomenology be considered political in any robust sense? In her contribution to the *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology* volume, for example, Lisa Guenther argues:

> Critical phenomenology goes beyond classical phenomenology by reflecting on the quasi-transcendental social structures that make our experience of the world possible and meaningful, and also by engaging in a material practice of "restructuring the world" in order to generate new and liberatory possibilities for meaningful experience and existence. (2020, 15)

In moving "beyond" classical phenomenology, Guenther's project is not a reparative one; rather, she questions whether critical phenomenology might serve as an abolitionist praxis, "even if that means abolishing itself in the process" (2022, 42).

In contrast to Guenther, other scholars maintain that classical phenomenology already provides tools and concepts necessary for critical political praxes. In *Home and Beyond*, Anthony Steinbock resists characterizations of phenomenology as merely being descriptive or reflective. He argues: "Because the phenomenologist is caught up in generativity . . . [p]henomenology becomes a *participation* in the sense development of an intersubjective historical structure that is in the process of generation as we describe it and as we bring it about" (1995, 268; emphasis in original). Through this concept of generativity, Steinbock describes generative phenomenology as "a critical reflection on the historicity of essence," one that always already critically implicates the phenomenologist in the disclosure and unfolding of the world (268).

It is here that Neal DeRoo's 2022 book, *The Political Logic of Experience: Expression in Phenomenology,* enters the scene. Like Steinbock, DeRoo not only maintains that a political reading of phenomenology is possible, but essential, as phenomenology is an

inherently political endeavor. While DeRoo is not the first to argue this, what makes his book so compelling is where he locates this political core: in the logic of expressivity. With technical skill and meticulous care, DeRoo forcefully demonstrates why a critical reading of expressivity is necessary for political thought: put simply, expressivity is the force that drives experience itself, and to miss the political core of expressivity is also to miss how an account of expressivity proves necessary for politics.

In responding to what is an ambitious and thoughtful book, I cannot hope to do justice to all of DeRoo's claims. I will, however, attempt to trace its central themes and arguments. In his introduction, we begin with a knot: at the core of experience, DeRoo argues, there lies a phenomenological knot of knowing, being, and doing. This knot is inherently expressive and experienced as an asymmetrical, generative unity. The central task of the book, then, is to "[clarify] the role expressivity plays in *how* we experience so that we can reveal the inherently political nature of experience and of phenomenology" (2022, 10–11; emphasis in original). Doing so, DeRoo claims, will help us "untangle the knot at the core of lived experience . . . by explaining how the knot is tied" (13).

The book is divided into six chapters, each explicating different relations of expressivity. Enacting the very sort of generativity DeRoo aims to describe, the chapters build upon (and ultimately, transform) each other. Chapter 1 begins with an exegesis of Edmund Husserl's *Logical Investigations* and the distinction between indication and expression. Whereas indication merely "points" towards the reality of something else (e.g., smoke indicating a fire), expressions mean something: in other words, they comprise a phenomenal unity with that being expressed. The meaning of an expression is not experienced as separate from the "thing" it describes but is phenomenally one with it. For example, when reading the word "cat," I do not experience its meaning through a connected act of judgment. Rather, I "live through" the expression so as to "live in" its meaning. As DeRoo clarifies: "Here, meaning does not merely attach to a separately existing physical substrate or vehicle; rather, in expression, the meaning is phenomenally one with the expression that expresses it" (29). This, in turn, helps to explain the "how" of phenomenality. Returning to the knot, the ontological threads at the heart of experience (i.e., the "being" of the expressed) cannot be separated from the epistemic ones (the "knowing" of the expression) or the practical ones (the "doing," or the expressing).

While DeRoo thus takes Husserlian expression as his starting point, he does not do so uncritically. Following Jacques Derrida's (2011) famous critique in *Voice and Phenomenon*, DeRoo remains skeptical of the expressed-expression dyad that Husserl provides and questions how and where expressing functions, or how we ought to explain the relation of expressivity. Additionally, he questions what role the subject plays in this relationship, denouncing Husserl's implicit assumption that expression is "a particular kind of act purposefully performed by subjects" (DeRoo 2022, 30). To address these concerns, DeRoo turns to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on mutual asymmetry and his notion of "flesh" to develop a threefold account of expressivity, or an expressed-expression-expressing triad. Inspired by Steinbock's work, DeRoo introduces a generative account of expressivity that "transcends and precedes the constitutive power of the subject" (40). Here, we begin to see the political force of DeRoo's project: expressivity is not the work of a single subject but

articulates how the subject comes to be constituted in and through facticity—not despite it. This is not to reduce expressivity to historicism, however. Rather, DeRoo's framework demonstrates how our experiences of the world are at once constituted in and through the generative force of expressivity while also transforming it in turn.

From this foundation, chapter 2 explores the expressive relationship between subject and body. If the subject is best understood as an unfolding of the generative force of expressivity, so, too, might we question how the subject is expressively constituted in and through sense. Riffing on Sara Heinämaa's work, DeRoo calls for a reconceptualization of *Leib* and lived bodies as "material-spiritual expressions of the particular world(s) we occupy" (2022, 48). In other words, expressivity compels us to move beyond a dualistic notion of the sensuous-spiritual toward an expressive understanding of spirituality as flesh. Qua flesh, this material-spiritual unity "is primordial, before the distinction and division between physical and psychical, between exterior world and interior mental life" (53). This then ties into chapter three's focus on the relationship between sense and sensings, or "*Empfindnisse*," which DeRoo notes is "a portmanteau of *Empfindung*, sensation, and *Erlebnisse*, lived experiences" (57). *Empfindnisse* are not a mode or faculty of sense controlled by the subject. Rather, DeRoo describes sensings as supra-subjective: "we are constituted within a sense that is simultaneously within us and exceeds us" (67). Reading together the works of Alia Al-Saji and Karen Barad, he explains why this matters for understanding the political. As a process that is not "controlled by the subject," sensings confirm "that the subject is always already taken up in a larger context that is not merely epistemological, but political, supra-subjective, historical, and so forth" (70). Sensings thus productively destabilize the boundary between epistemology and ontology, such that the knot of phenomenality "is always already the intertwining of being and meaning" (76).

DeRoo explicates the expressive relationship between the transcendental and the empirical in chapter 4, and between subjectivity and objectivity in chapter 5. Chapter 4 will prove particularly interesting for critical phenomenologists. Guenther argues that phenomenology requires an analysis of the quasi-transcendental structures of power and oppression, and DeRoo's discussion of the transcendental function of empirical conditions provides rich tools with which to do so. Through the phenomenal logic of expressivity, DeRoo describes the transcendental "not as the (logical) conditions of possibility of empirical experience, but as the parallel (sense-bestowing, 'sensing,' etc.) axis, dimension, or level expressed in and through that empirical experience" (95). The transcendental is not a difference of content, then, but a difference of axis, highlighting the topological elements of DeRoo's thinking once more. Given this relationship between the transcendental and the empirical, he argues that "any transcendental analysis must necessarily account for the political context of the empirical conditions in which the transcendental is operative." He thus concludes: "[t]his is just to say that transcendental phenomenology is always, necessarily, critical phenomenology, and that critique is a fundamental aspect of transcendental phenomenology" (108). Here, however, important questions arise: what, exactly, is meant by "critique," and is critique sufficient for bringing about the liberatory and abolitionist ends that many critical phenomenologists desire?

Chapter 5 elaborates on a notion of the subject as a function performed within the expressive unity of flesh (DeRoo 2022, 119). Echoing notes of the Shannon Sullivan vs. Silvia Stoller *Hypatia* debate,[1] DeRoo works to carefully clarify the nature of intentionality in this chapter. Against a reading of intentionality as being projective or objectifying, he writes: "Phenomenology, by contrast, does *not* posit an X as the correlated object of consciousness: consciousness is consciousness of . . . but not consciousness of X" (122; emphasis in original). Intentionality is thus understood as a mode of engagement not with a particular object, but with "a particular (differential) relation that generates self and world as expressions" (122). Using the transcendental-empirical account of expressivity developed in chapter 4, he argues that the intentional subject is thus a "nexus of located subjective functions" (127). In doing so, DeRoo's writing takes on an almost topological tenor, one that reminded me greatly of Martin Nitsche's work in transitive-topological phenomenology. For example, in *Methodical Precedence of Intertwining*, Nitsche argues that Husserlian intentionality is best understood as a form of interpretation, or as a passive/active process of re-localization wherein phenomena are re-localized within ever-changing fields of meaning (2018, 23). Reading DeRoo's work with Nitsche's, then, we can see how the intentional subject re-localizes (and is re-localized through) a nexus of expressive functions.

In light of the transcendental-empirical analysis in chapter 4, in what follows, I return to this review's introduction to consider the status of critique in DeRoo's work. In a recent article, "Abolish the World as We Know it," Guenther outlines two primary forms of critique. The first is reparative, and seeks to "salvage, fix, or 'improve' something, motivated by the hope or belief it could become a better version of itself" (2022, 28–29). The second is abolitionist. As Guenther explains: "here, one engages in critique in order to bring about the end or collapse of a structure that one believes to be inherently problematic and beyond repair." Guenther uses the example of an abolitionist critique of slavery, wherein the goal is not to make slavery more just or less harmful, but to end the practice "in all its forms" (29). Returning to DeRoo's book, if critique is a fundamental part of transcendental phenomenology, what is the work that critique aims to accomplish here? Is it reparative, abolitionist, or something else entirely? And if we accept that transcendental phenomenology is always already critical, what sorts of praxis does it lead us toward?

In posing these questions, I do not mean to suggest that DeRoo's use of "critique" is an oversight. Rather, by reading DeRoo and Guenther together, critical phenomenologists can dig deeper into the forms of "work" that DeRoo's text might call for. In chapter 6, for example, DeRoo begins to provide us with tentative answers to these questions. There, he explores the expressive relationship between the transcendental-empirical and the political,

[1] Here, I am referencing Sullivan's argument that Merleau-Ponty's concept of projective intentionality is not useful to feminist projects. In "Feminism and Phenomenology: A Reply to Silvia Stoller," Sullivan writes: "[t]he problem with projective intentionality as a description of human experience, as I argued in my earlier paper, is that it tends to construe one's being-in-the-world as an activity of projecting one's intentions, values, and meanings onto objects and others in one's world" (2000, 184). Stoller disagrees with Sullivan's reading, arguing that Merleau-Pontian intentionality is not the unidirectional projection of a single subject, but is a situated and participatory process (2000, 179). Like Stoller, then, DeRoo's work resists characterizations of Husserlian intentionality as being unidirectional and solipsistic.

or between community and culture. Turning to Husserl's lifeworld, DeRoo explicates the concept's peculiar double meaning: it describes both the transcendental ground of all meaning and its individual actualizations in particular worlds by particular communities (2022, 139). Utilizing DeRoo's concept of the knot, we can understand this transcendental ground not as a collection of individual "I's," but as a kind of primordial knotting, or as a transcendental "we" that precedes voluntary social groupings. Such an understanding has important consequences for politics. As DeRoo clarifies: "Politics is therefore not primarily about the voluntary acts of subjects within the polis, but about the politeia that constitute both the polis and the people who are its constituent parts" (145).

This discussion of politics leads DeRoo to a thoughtful critique of universal human rights discourse that could be fruitfully paired with Dean Spade's (2015) *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. DeRoo's critique of universal human rights is not necessarily reparative. Instead, DeRoo uses transcendental phenomenology to demonstrate how human rights discourse may be inherently problematic and irrevocably tied to colonial logics, thereby encouraging readers to think beyond the democratic legal framework of "rights" toward other forms of work, perhaps including Spade's call for "alternative methods of meeting human needs and organizing political participation" (2015, 49).

In relativizing subjectivity and questioning the desirability of universal human rights, however, DeRoo is careful to note that phenomenology must not devolve into relativism. To address this concern, he writes: "we need a philosophical field or subdiscipline whose task is to articulate precisely how communities, societal institutions, and the like are constitutive of individual persons, not purely transcendentally or purely empirically (as may, e.g., be done in sociology), but in a transcendental empirical fashion" (2022, 149). DeRoo does not appeal to transnational/anti-imperialist feminist ethics here, but there are fruitful resources in these works that further bolster this line of argument. In *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic*, for example, Serene J. Khader explores how we might develop an anti-imperialist feminist ethic that refuses the colonial logics of Western feminism. She explains: "Anti-imperialist feminists in our time can neither retreat into the local nor refuse to make moral and political judgments. The way forward can only be to articulate a normative position that criticizes gender injustice without prescribing imperialism" (2019, 2). Like DeRoo's work, then, anti-imperialist feminist ethics would support transcendental-empirical analyses of power without hypostatizing particular communities or succumbing to missionary politics.

To conclude, we return to the knot once more. In his final chapter, DeRoo writes: "the phenomenological knot at the core of human experience is always tying, untying, and retying the strands of knowing, being, and doing in and as phenomenality itself" (2022, 173). Having sufficiently articulated these dimensions, DeRoo reiterates his earlier claim that "phenomenology provides us a unique way of untangling that knot by articulating differentiations that are initially experienced as a unity" (159). To describe this work as an "untangling," however, risks misrepresenting the critical insights that DeRoo's account provides. Namely, that the phenomenological knot at the core of experience cannot be understood as a combination of distinct threads capable of ever being fully untangled.

DeRoo himself acknowledges this sort of risk in his discussion of "[t]he double bind of expressivity's linguistic expression" (2022, 170). He writes that phenomenologists working to articulate expressivity's phenomenal logic are faced with two choices:

> Either articulate claims clearly, in which case, they will not be adequate to the expressive claims they want to make; or, articulate those expressive claims adequately via nonpredicative language, which . . . often means poetically, through means of literature of even the purposeful use of nonsense, in which case they will not be recognized as philosophically serious. (170–71)

Responding to this double bind, DeRoo's book attempts to carve out a third path through his critically transformative reading (or rereading) of expression. Following this third path, we could perhaps say that DeRoo's "knot" is Borromean: made of topologically linked elements that may be articulated but never separated. While this language may likewise prove insufficient, DeRoo's book teaches us it is nevertheless imperative that we try. And I would venture to say that *The Political Logic of Experience* not only tries, but ultimately, succeeds in articulating the epistemological, ontological, practical, and political dynamics that inextricably unite experience and politics.

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