

Spring 2016

# Bodily Vulnerability: Critical Phenomenology and an Examination of Gendered Motility

Tayler Bunge  
*Regis University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/theses>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Bunge, Tayler, "Bodily Vulnerability: Critical Phenomenology and an Examination of Gendered Motility" (2016). *All Regis University Theses*. 703.

<https://epublications.regis.edu/theses/703>

**Regis University**  
Regis College  
**Honors Theses**

# **Disclaimer**

Use of the materials available in the Regis University Thesis Collection ("Collection") is limited and restricted to those users who agree to comply with the following terms of use. Regis University reserves the right to deny access to the Collection to any person who violates these terms of use or who seeks to or does alter, avoid or supersede the functional conditions, restrictions and limitations of the Collection.

The site may be used only for lawful purposes. The user is solely responsible for knowing and adhering to any and all applicable laws, rules, and regulations relating or pertaining to use of the Collection.

All content in this Collection is owned by and subject to the exclusive control of Regis University and the authors of the materials. It is available only for research purposes and may not be used in violation of copyright laws or for unlawful purposes. The materials may not be downloaded in whole or in part without permission of the copyright holder or as otherwise authorized in the "fair use" standards of the U.S. copyright laws and regulations.

**BODILY VULNERABILITY: CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY AND AN  
EXAMINATION OF GENDERED MOTILITY**

**A thesis submitted to  
Regis College  
The Honors Program  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for Graduation with Honors**

**by**

Taylor Bunge

**May 2016**

**Thesis written by**

Tayler Bunge

**Approved by**

---

Dr. Rebecca Vartabedian, advisor

---

Dr. Mark Bruhn, reader

---

Dr. Nicholas Myklebust, reader

**Accepted by**

---

Dr. J. Thomas Howe, Director, University Honors Program

---

**Date**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	4
I. INTRODUCTION	5
II. THE BODY IN THE WORLD: SUBSTITUTION, REFLEXIVITY, AND ANCHORING ONESELF	10
III. THE SELF AND THE OTHER: CO-CONSTITUTIVE IDENTITIES AND NAVIGATING A SOCIAL EXISTENCE	32
IV. GENDERED MOTILITY: THE INHIBITED INTENTIONALITY OF BEING	47
V. CONCLUSION	64
BIBLIOGRAPHY	70

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Rebecca Vartabedian, whose supervision and wisdom went far beyond the call of duty and helped guide this project from its humble beginnings to its ultimate endings—and most importantly, who planted the initial phenomenological seed not so many years ago.

Dr. Myklebust, for being so excited about my work (and most other things). Dr. Bruhn, for all the passion and energy on this project and so many others before it.

Dr. Narcisi, Dr. Zenzinger, Dr. Taylor, Dr. Hicks, Dr. McGill, Dr. Bowie, Simone de Beauvoir, John Russon, Iris Young, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty for influencing my thoughts and values.

Drs. Howe and Kleier for the support and guidance of the Regis College Honors Program.

Friends and family, roommates and coworkers. Kai Li and Matt, for listening.

And Mom and Dad, for instilling within me a thirst for knowledge—for providing opportunity and guidance all this time.

*“It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting.”* –Simone de Beauvoir

*“I wanted to write what I remembered to be true.”* –Judy Blume

## INTRODUCTION

This is a project, at its core, deeply rooted in my lifelong love of women’s stories, founded on my realization that the vast majority of philosophical traditions either lacked these stories or a recognition of the female experience. This project began when I was 8, reading *Here’s To You, Rachel Robinson* at the kitchen table on a summer night, Judy Blume’s distinctive first person I narration more familiar to me than, sometimes, even my own voice. This project began when I first encountered Merleau-Ponty’s *The Phenomenology of Perception* in my first continental philosophy course. It began when I faced trauma, depression, and post-assault anxiety so viscerally and with such befuddled rage that I found company and solace only in feminist movements and theory.

This project began like most moments in my life, as a story, one with a discernable beginning and several pointed moments of intrusion. It began as a humble quest in understanding value, meaning, and worth as they pertain to my individual reality, realizing what deserved my attention and what unstoppably navigated its way into my life without consent. To explain why this project emerged requires explaining what was important to me at the time of its conception as well as the importance of phenomenology to the reality of human experience. This story begins and ends with the body, but most particularly the body I know best: mine. The body is

that of a woman, young, short, medium build, long hair, skin tone and attributes reflective of my Asian ethnicity. These descriptions are my body, the site of identity through which I engage, act upon, remember, and incorporate the world into a cumulative expression of my continuous being: consciousness. It was upon this body that an act of violence was committed by an unknown presence, an incident from which I realized that certainties about my body (sex and gender) solicited from that other individual a response: an attempt to inflict upon my body a physically violent, sexually-charged reaction.

Such language and description is indebted to the phenomenological tradition, most particularly the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his text *Phenomenology of Perception*. His proposal of the body-consciousness positions my body as described above in a state of intentional motility, a subject for others and object in the world. I found phenomenology most unexpectedly; it came when I needed it, and at the time when it could afford me the most comfort and sustainability. It offered me an alternative perspective on my own ontological account of the world, an alternative perspective on my account of my own body, but synthesized in a unique package of work and ideas that inspired a reconsideration of my quest for self-understanding.

Phenomenology is neither a mystical pronouncement of sense experience, nor is it an attempt to de-mystify the affected reality of everyday life through reason and fact. It is neither empiricism nor rationalism, but engages sense experience and objectivity in a unique way that makes allowances for the limitations of both disciplines. It is understood as something that does not suggest there is an objective world which we inhabit, but rather positions us as objects among other objects in a co-constitutive framework of subjectivity. I look to Drew Leder who, in his text *The Body in Medical Thought and Practice*, makes a useful distinction between the



“inanimate” body of medicine to the Cartesian body of animation and existence to help define a useful, applicable understanding of phenomenology. According to Leder, “Descartes locates life within the body itself,” defining a living body as something of an “animated corpse, a functioning mechanism” (Leder 19-20). In essence, the Cartesian framework of ontological experience is the man in the machine—life within flesh. But if, Leder asks, the body is a machine, to what extent do Descartes and the majority of modern medicine account for the profundity of subjective experience that bears authenticity in its given accounts? To what extent does the Cartesian corpse allow for a lived reality that is influenced by body materiality as much as it is psychosocial values of the world?

For Leder, the phenomenological body is best understood as “not a thing in the world, but an intentional entity which gives rise to a world... while the body has a subjective role, it is also a body-object, a material thing. The eye is both the seat of an existential power, and an apparatus involving cornea, lens, and optic nerve” (Leder 27). When we contemplate our experiences of reality we are prone to limit our experiences between either the world as an existential creation from within our subjectivity, or the world as a science perceived by our body, the apparatus. The function of phenomenology is thus to maintain both opposition and recognition of these two reactions, to reposition consciousness within the realm of one’s individual interactions, specifically interactions with and through their body. Alternatively, in Merleau-Ponty’s words from the *Phenomenology of Perception*, “Consciousness is originally not an ‘I think that,’ but rather an ‘I can’” (Merleau-Ponty 139). He states this to explain “motricity [as] original intentionality”: our ability to and decisiveness in doing is the definitive framework of consciousness (Merleau-Ponty 139). I can, therefore I am, and thus our physical world becomes our connectivity to shared consciousness, to intersubjectivity, to community, society, and a

physically-recognized social existence. Through our body, we are within the world, and thus experience is not a conscious soul operating a mortal shell of flesh, but rather all that it means to be your physicality.

Yet despite the richness of phenomenology, despite its acute attention to the first-person lived experience, I felt there was a lack. A trained English major, I was looking for narratological holes, gaps in the story. There was a missing piece in the phenomenological act of giving an account of one's neither empirical nor rational experience, but rather one's expression of the experience of locating "existential power" within the body. Phenomenology purported to tell the varying stories of consciousness, to make allowances for subjectivity of human experience, but based its discipline in the assumption that I "can."

Standing on the after-side of a traumatic event, I was embedded in the distinct realization that if forcibly controlled and assaulted, I could not. I could not run freely in my own space, I could not operate as a sexual being on my own terms, and thus I felt impaired, handicapped. How could I accurately resume beingness realizing that, now, my body was a site through which violence might be implemented upon me? My identity was interrupted, the narrative of my life was re-evaluated by an outside source entirely escaping my control. My intentionality was restricted, mandated by some other individual's expression of what they could do to my body without my consent. I did not accept this body as my identity, and could not bear a reality in which I was defined by the violence through which I had been forcefully situated as vulnerable. In this rage and within the steps of my own processing, I found that my story was one which complicated Merleau-Ponty's supposition that within situatedness, the body-consciousness creates a reality. This, my own experience and response to the framework of phenomenology, was the lack in the phenomenological story.

This lack implied something profoundly distinct about my experience as opposed to the experience of the standard philosophical white male subject. It was in realizing that the conditions of my situation, being female, being of color, being a minority in a world often ruled by expressions of the majority, that I realized the phenomenological narrative ought to make allowances for the distinct experiences of women, and the distinct experiences of experiencing gender, in order to pursue a true authenticity.

This thesis is an exploration of the roots of vulnerability as explained by the tradition of phenomenology. In the following pages I explore the structures of reality created for and by us with our interactions within the phenomenal world. I observe subjectivity created by the body-consciousness in the world as a fundamental root of self-understanding, expressed by the *Phenomenology of Perception*. This thesis will function as a response to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological tradition by offering an alternative, more equitable account of what it is to recognize a vulnerable body experiencing the world giving a full account to intersubjectivity and authenticity. I invoke the work of John Russon, Simone de Beauvoir, and Iris Young, among others, to forward my analysis and criticism of the phenomenological framework of beingness.

CHAPTER ONE  
THE BODY IN THE WORLD:  
SUBSTITUTION, REFLEXIVITY, AND ANCHORING ONESELF

The phenomenological tradition offers a perspective on human existence that centralizes bodily experience as the foundation upon which existence is explored. The purpose of valuing a phenomenological analysis over another philosophical school of thought is due to the way it respects an individual's corporeality. The body is a site of expression and experience: I dress myself, exercise, walk, eat, and engage my senses, and just as I do this, I also can adjust these actions in a way that is self-conscious, and thus I *am* my bodily enactment and my bodily enactment is me, whether natural or affected. The body, also, is also a site of violence and vulnerability; such traumas that occur upon the body affect a person's subjective experience of the world. A phenomenological perspective will re-locate the importance of one's lived, continuous experience of reality within their corporeality and, thus, enable a constant consideration of someone's reality that respects the unavoidable immediacy of one's physicality.

But to consider my own account of my bodily enactment, my experience of "I" in the world, required is a recognition of my gendered self and my gendered body, particularly in a world which values gender as a root of interpersonal experience. Considering my gender thereby *requires* a re-consideration of the usefulness of a phenomenological perspective on vulnerability, for vulnerability is an experience accounted for by bodily motility as well as by consequences of differentiated bodies and thus differentiated motility. I find that *because of* the experience of gender by any given individual in the world, vulnerability is not and cannot be experienced objectively the same. Because gender is an experience, we recognize that a phenomenology of

gender is also a necessary alternative perspective in the face of standard phenomenological analysis.

In this chapter, I will examine the phenomenological framework of an individual's existence as proposed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty to establish a frame of reference for understanding my alternative interpretation of a gendered, vulnerable body. My examination begins with an analysis of pieces of his work in Part One of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, "The Body." He introduces linguistic concepts and terms standard to his work to provide a methodology from which I can speak about the body phenomenologically. Important to recognize in this particular section is that Merleau-Ponty accounts for the body as recognizably without a description of sexual difference, a factor which much of feminist phenomenological thought in recent years has recognized and which my account of a gendered, vulnerable body seeks to correct. Linda Martín Alcoff's recognition of the shortcomings of Merleau-Ponty's work stems most notably from the work of Iris Marion Young and Judith Butler, and Alcoff negotiates the various feminist thinkers' commentaries of Merleau-Ponty to reveal that his "existential subject... is masculine, [and] his account of sexuality is patriarchal heterosexuality" ("Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Theory on Experience" 265). What a "patriarchal" and "heterosexual" phenomenological account means *is not* that as a discipline phenomenology stands invalid in accounting for experiences of gender, but rather the opposite, in that requiring explanation of the self in the world to be rooted in bodily experience would, thus, *require* a further explanation of *different* bodies experiencing the world. Bodily difference is interpreted socially by recognition of gender, and thus a gendered analysis of Merleau-Ponty's "existential subject" requires a continued, developed reworking of an "existential gendered subject." In the analysis that follows, I engage Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "I can" first-person subject to further analyze this

framework under a gendered perspective. I begin by recognizing his account of perception as the passageway into his terms of anchoring and substitution, and ultimately I conclude this chapter with a brief explication of the concept of ambiguity, a passageway that will introduce a discussion about the implications and potential disturbances that arise via interpersonal gendered relationships.

### BODY-CONSCIOUSNESS

The implications that arise when thinking of oneself as a corporeal being are limitless. There are two simultaneous actions taking place in this process, firstly that one is thinking in such a way that one can *regard* oneself, and secondly that one is a corporeal being tied to the physical world. Recognition of self takes place continuously and intentionally, with and through one's tangible existence. From these implications we can express that our bodies provide continuity for the identities we present to the world. It is given that there is no other way for the consciousness of a human to exist within the shared reality of other humans without the means of physicality: the means of bodily matter *through* which to be in the world.

Human consciousness exists because of the immediacy of the body. By this we ought to understand the body as the body-consciousness, as the union between our corporeal substance and our continuous identity as co-constitutive. Such is the framework of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy in which he placed himself at the forefront of the phenomenological tradition by examining the body engaging not only with the world, but with *others*. Merleau-Ponty's work in this area came as part of a lingering quest in the contemporary French intellectual community regarding existence and meaning, and the questions he was asking were those that try and determine how we recognize ourselves, how we conceptualize our

being, and how our interpersonal interactions with other beings and with the world create a field of subjective experience.

The body for Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception* is our “point of view upon the world,” and in regarding our bodies as such, we become one of the physical “objects of that world” (Merleau-Ponty 70). We are engaged in interactions that extend upon our objective situatedness, and thus engagement becomes the root of our subjective experience. Sensation is the tracking point, so to speak, of how we account for realizing ourselves in the world. Sensation is an experience, and understanding sensation demonstrates that the things of which we are aware are objects *for us*, because sensation does not give an account of what is objectively accurate, but what is subjectively *perceived*. Merleau-Ponty states early in his text,

We are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in detaching ourselves from it in order to shift to the consciousness of the world. If we were to do so, we would see that the quality is never directly experienced and that all consciousness is consciousness of something. This ‘something,’ moreover, is not necessarily an identifiable object. There are two ways of being mistaken regarding quality: the first is to turn it into an element of consciousness when it is in fact an object for consciousness, to treat it as a mute impression when it in fact always has a sense; the second is to believe that this sense and this object, at the level of quality, are full and determinate. And this second error, just like the first, results from the unquestioned belief in the world. (Merleau-Ponty 5-6)

Ultimately this introduction by Merleau-Ponty demonstrates a rejection of the formerly unquestioned belief in an objective world, a rejection of rationalism that is not quite empiricism, and similarly a rejection of the latter that is not quite the former. Reality and the things in it which are perceived by us are not “full and determinate” upon our initial sensations of them. The

world in which we live is a reality conceived by our perceptions. We are not within it, but rather, it is a compilation of objects *for* us. Reality is dependent upon subjectivity because consciousness is a constant, intentional bodily engagement via myself to the objects in my reality, and vice versa. Reality is not simply a thing in which I am situated but rather the composition of my back-and-forth interactions between those things. Upon perceiving something, it is a flaw, Merleau-Ponty argues, to assume that thing is “an element of consciousness” when it instead exists as an object *for* consciousness. When I perform an action in the world such as walking down a street, the street as it readily exists is an object for my consciousness, not a *piece* of it. It is existing and I respond to it. We learn to discern and distinguish separate objects as provided by perceptions via separate sensations.

Yet it is not a lifeless body which enacts and records these sensations, though, activities which situate us as objects in community; the body is *in fact* the body-consciousness, a continuous process of being aware that you are being. In other words, the body is the physical manifestation of how we subjectively experience our objectivity, as he states, “I grasp my body as an object-subject” (Merleau-Ponty 97). I act and I observe; I enact my own existence by both experiencing my own bodily enactment and recognizing that I am also an object for others. Consciousness is both enacted and recognized. An object, for Merleau-Ponty, is defined loosely as “only [admitting] of external and mechanical relations among its parts or between itself and other objects” (Merleau-Ponty 74). I can sense myself as present and I simultaneously *am* present. When I perform an action I am aware both of what I am performing *and* that my presence in the world, in that moment, is a mechanical action observable by an outside party. Awareness of consciousness and of others’ consciousness is not, however, an ability to succeed in detachment from the immediacy of one’s conscious reality. It is not, for instance, “stepping



out” of one’s present reality and observing oneself in action, at a distance. It is, however, understanding that perceptions are the framework of one’s immediate and constant reality. I recognize, for instance, a street upon which I walk both as a street in itself and as a street for me, but it is only the latter qualifying remark that makes the street relevant to my personal reality. I discern it as a street, a road, a marking point of civil engineering, but receive it not as that, but as something upon which I move. This is its importance to my perceptive qualities: how I use it, how it allows itself to be used by my reality.

This act of discerning objects as they are received by my personal intentionality rejects, ultimately, the idea that things might objectively exist. By that, I mean I do not walk down the same street as my roommate, as my father. Walking down my childhood street Reed Street is, for me, not a constant and objectively shared sensation that is shared by my father. It is, for me, a street where I learned to ride a bike, where I learned to drive, where I used to run every morning in the wintertime. It is, for my father, not necessarily a separate street but rather a differently perceived reality for we do not share the same intentionality or existence or body. Taylor Carman, in his paper “Sensation, Judgement, and the Phenomenal Field,” discusses Merleau-Ponty’s objections to the constancy hypothesis as proposed by most empiricists. The hypothesis, in short, argues that “sensations, having initially been fixed by stimuli, subsequently undergo modification by the effects of association memory” (Carman 56). It is a piece of the incorrect proposition, the “unquestioned belief” as Merleau-Ponty labeled it as discussed above, that the objects of reality are “full and determined.” The truth is, under a phenomenological viewpoint, that in perceiving we interact with the world and the world interacts with us; sensations of reality do not *enter us* and sit there, stagnant, waiting to be adapted by experience. The shortcomings of the empiricist response in the constancy hypothesis would be that the “sensations” undergo

modification rather than *perception* adapting to new senses and thus creating meaning for the situated body. In this constancy hypothesis the “hardness” of a “hard” street, such as Reed Street, would feel the same as a “hard” floor, but according to Merleau-Ponty a “hard” rock feels separate from a “hard” street because bodily orientation requires intentionality in judging perceptual appearances, or rather requires an approach to a “hard” object that is different than an approach to a separate but also “hard” object. The functions of a rock are separate from the functions of a floor and so they anchor the body in different ways despite the consistency of the sensory experience. By making evident the processes of distinction through which a body attends while perceiving a thing, or a place, we can understand that there must, then, also be a larger or more cumulative process of distinction through which a body perceives the world. Perception of the world, as evidenced by this analysis, would therefore mean making distinctions about one’s self.

Being one among many objects denotes being a singular presence among a plethora of other presences; to it phrase in phenomenological terms, it is to be a “self” among “others,” or an object among other objects. The difference in being *your own* self-object is that from you extends a perspective of reality in which the other-objects reside, from which a subjectivity in experience evolves. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological observation centers on the first-person empirical perspective to redirect the study of the ethical and social experience of life towards the lived experience of the body. According to him we “enact” the body and its functions, and as an object in the world our bodies are the objects through which we subjectively engage in reality.

Merleau-Ponty’s description of substitution provides an answer as to how my experienced reality would *translate*, in a sense, the sensations of home objects and car objects into a composite experience of “street.” His definition of substitution is aided by his

establishment of “anchoring,” a concept specific to his terminology that denotes a grounding of oneself by objects within an ever-expanding field of perceptions. Anchoring processes are, thus, dependent on both our presence as well as another’s presence. We anchor ourselves in the world in order to register our consciousness in a simultaneous experience of the other’s consciousness. In his depiction of an insect who is deprived the use of one of its legs, Merleau-Ponty explains what it is to be a body capable of adaptability and situatedness against all odds and, consequently, demonstrates the immediate action of anchoring as being constant, unconscious, and continuous. With its leg tied, the insect, “in the performance of an instinctive act, substitutes a sound leg for one cut off... [and thus] a stand-by device, set up in advance, is automatically put into operation and substituted for the circuit which is out of action” (Merleau-Ponty 77-78). Initially existing in the world with full mobility of all limbs the insect is able to adjust, substituting a leg that still remains in place of the missing one in order to continue its process of moving as a subject through the world. It finds a way to anchor itself to the objects around it. The act has not changed; for this insect it is still instinctive to move and scurry about the world just as it is instinctive for human beings to move about the world, instinctive to eat and breathe and move. The body has been adapted, but because the act stays the same, the body must respond and does so intentionally. Merleau-Ponty states, “The insect simply continues to belong to the same world and moves in it with all its powers... The current of activity which flows towards the world still passes through it” (Merleau-Ponty 78). The body, in other words, finds a way to be *whole* in order to continue its subjectivity. We could assume, then, that the body is never displaced or consciously disjointed in the present, for however and under whichever conditions it exists, it mediates between the outside world and our consciousness. The body, thus, is not just the *body* but the body-consciousness as a whole—a *whole* because of its ability to respond and

complete itself. The completion is accomplished via the world, via my own conscious presence in a physical situation.

Subjectivity and substitution alongside one another in this scenario would ultimately mean that no bodies will substitute alike, but all for the same end: to situate oneself according to the surrounding objects, the “anchors.” For Merleau-Ponty substitution is a set of “phenomena which lie[s] outside the alternatives of psychic and physiological, of final and mechanistic causes” (Merleau-Ponty 77). What this implies is that the behavior of which he is speaking is not explainable via the sciences but rather through experiences; proof hinging on “causes” is not what he is studying, but rather experiences unexplainable through expected bodily behavior. If the bug exists in such a way that it requires six (or so) limbs to move in the world, it is reasonable to wonder if the same bug with five legs with full mobility (one being cut off or tied) would exist in the world in the same way. The answer, through substitution, is that the instinctiveness of the act still carries with it the same “current of activity.”

Substitution in both large and small instances proves to us that shape, size, and mobility for Merleau-Ponty are just accessories to the body which ultimately finds a way in the world to “belong to the same world” (Merleau-Ponty 78). If the physical world is unchanging in its objectivity then it is us, the movers within it, who must respond. The world required of the insect the same activity: motion. The world comprised of its objects still solicited from this insect a call to move. The call did not change; what did change were the insect’s physical means, and thus the body found a way to respond. On a larger scale, human bodily interests are the same as presented in this example. We, through instinct, produce via the body activities which allow for our existence in the world. Returning to the example of Reed Street, substitution as completion of one’s reality can also be shown to rely heavily on a person’s subjective experience alongside

another's, or in more specific terms, an inter-relating of subjectivity. My father's experienced reality translates into a separate, not necessarily alternate, experience of "street." It is the same street but as it is perceived differently it is not the same reality. Our bodily ability to create realities formed from our separate qualities of bodily sensation is explained in Merleau-Ponty's depiction of substitution, in which the varieties of bodily anchoring are shown to be an explanation for how subjectivity is the driving force behind the body-consciousness. We navigate the world beneath our own individual perspectives but these perspectives are created by individual interpretations of the world *and* are supplemented by others'; "my street" is not my father's street, but as it is my account of my experience of the street, it incorporates my experience of my father's account of "his street." Thus our creation of individualized realities is anchored not just in our own experiences, but also in the experiences of another.

What substitution goes to show us is that the body exists in a world from which it situates itself continuously, in every moment, and thus the continuity of our conscious awareness that we "are" can be explained through our bodily awareness that we "can." In speaking of the body as a sexual being Merleau-Ponty stresses the usage of the first-person description "I can" in that it defines for the human experience how bodily presence influences awareness and identity. We engage with and inform this reality by our ability *to* act, our ability to experience the world not *through* but *as* our bodies. Consciousness, according to Merleau-Ponty, is an "I can." That is, consciousness is constructed by our awareness of our motility, of our moving and moveable body. He states:

Motricity unequivocally [is] original intentionality. Consciousness is originally not an "I think that," but rather an "I can..." Vision and movement are specific ways of relating to objects and, if a single function is expressed throughout all of these experiences, then it is

the movement of existence... for it does not unite them by placing them all under the domination of an 'I think,' but rather by orienting them toward the inter-sensory unity of a 'world.' Movement is not a movement in thought, and bodily space is not a space that is conceived or represented... Consciousness is being toward the thing through the intermediary of the body... Motricity is thus not, as it were, a servant of consciousness, transporting the body to the point of space that we imagine beforehand. (Merleau-Ponty 139-140)

Consciousness, according to this presentation, no longer follows the Cartesian "I think, therefore I am," but rather instead offers, "I can, therefore I am." In motility, we are ourselves, for there is no other way to create an embodied, continuous identity than through establishing a space in which a body relates itself. We focus on the physical, perceive them, anchor ourselves within them, and are stabilized as a rooted object within other objects. The term "intentionality" is now explicitly explained as that by which we engage ourselves with physical objects of our own subjective reality, thereby creating a world, creating the expanse of our motions, and creating an "intentionally lived body."

The self which functions as an *I can* signifies a world created by subjective experience, or created by interactions. We are not alone, and our consciousness is consciousness of that which is around us. He argues, "Saying that I have a body is thus a way of saying that I can be seen as an object and that I try to be seen as a subject, that another can be my master or my slave, so that shame and shamelessness express the dialectic of the plurality of consciousnesses, and have a meta-physical significance" (Merleau-Ponty 167). *I can* be seen as an object, just as in situating ourselves we see others and things as objects from which we anchor ourselves. While the *I can* situates us on an individual level, from his statement we see that our situatedness also influences

the situatedness of others. Negotiating how we exist as an object for others and a subject for ourselves means, in other words, that we also negotiate how our situatedness will influence the situatedness of another. *I can*, for instance, walk down Reed Street; likewise, *I can* also present myself in my home as my parent's daughter, at work as my employer's employee, at school as my teacher's pupil. *I can* identify myself under these terms for I operate from a body-consciousness that finely attunes itself to the social situations in which I am present. We understand that the *I can* establishes both the continuity of consciousness based on physicality in addition to establishing one's place in the framework of practical life. Once *I can*, I can *be*, for what the body can do influences how a being makes sense of themselves. The *I can*, as I have established, is a response. "I have a body," and this body is in a world in and from which I place myself.

Responsive (or reflexive, as we might think of it) phenomenology denotes both a responder and a respondent: something or someone to which the Self answers. By "responsive" or "reflexive" I mean the relationship our identity holds which relates to present outside sources and molds itself thus, in correspondence to that source. How we conceptualize the idea of "consciousness" is influenced largely, then, by the human response to what exists around our focalized experience. On a more particular level, to specific parts of the body and specific areas of the flesh, our body responds specifically to the specific Other. By "specific Other" I mean the presence of an Other which exists in more than just its whole embodiment but rather its specific acts or usages. A pianist's fingers do not respond to a piano as a large, wooden, hollow box with ivory hammers but to its specific particularity as a musical instrument. The pianist's body responds not to the piano as a whole but to its mechanism that solicits the pianist. Between people, our flesh responds not to a handshake as one would recognize an entire body, but rather

the response is more particular between hands. The connection formed between the first handshaker (the responder) and the second handshaker (the respondent) is formed from two identities recognizing one another's bodily presence *via* the touch of two hands. Recognition aids not only in momentary observation but in continuous recollection.

This point of recognition grounds the next section of this chapter: "Familiarity and Meaning." While conceptualizing identity as the continuous awareness of the consciousness as it is constructed by the body, I will focus on the idea of "continuity" as a site from which the perceiving body-in-the-world presents itself and recognizes others' presentations of self. Recalling interactions and history with Reed Street not only aids in description for this project but simultaneously demonstrates the ability to recognize ongoing structures of reality that reside at the forefront of my consciousness. This next section establishes the boundaries of our perception, utilizing the work of philosopher John Russon, to place into context an individual actively perceiving their own formulated reality.

## FAMILIARITY AND MEANING

With recognition comes memory; we recognize because we remember. If our awareness of self is influenced by the *I can*, how do we, then, sustain this defined self through time and memory? It seems that establishing a timeline of consciousness is required; in other words, establishing the knowing of not just *I can* but knowing *I did*, *I am doing*, and *I will do*. Establishing the relationships between the past, present, and future not only acts as the means through which to sustain a structure where consciousness might dwell, but to remember one's self and to be continuously influenced by behaviors that have been enacted—places where I was



once situated. It is not simply that I remember Reed Street differently than my father remembers Reed Street, it is that my series of bodily engagements with Reed Street, compiled, have created a continuity through which I regard the street that he cannot and does not share.

Through Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the constancy hypothesis as elucidated by Taylor Carman we understand how we attempt a continuity of recognition of objects in our physical realities. For Carman, our bodily orientation is intentional and "constant[ly] self-correcting," which ultimately "constitutes the perceptual background against which discrete sensory particulars and explicit judgments can then emerge" (Carman 69). The constant self-correcting would lead the experience of touching a hard street to be different in make-up than the experience of touching a hard floor for the body would understand that a street functions differently than a floor, and therefore corrects itself in assuming the hardness of both objects would be the same hardness. This differentiation and discrimination of sensory experiences creates the "background" of our perceptual reality, against which we can perceive or recognize objects as "familiar and meaningful under an aspect" (Carman 57). Familiarity and meaningfulness imply not just a moment-by-moment recognition of the things at hand but rather apt understanding of the things through the continuity of existence, against the continuous background of what we experience perceptually. Things for the body become coherent from adjustment, to adaptation, to substitution, and thus to memory. In other words, the body learns to differentiate from one object with a familiar feel to another object, and from there can adapt to the way in which it approaches each object. These objects thus ground the body in a field by anchoring, via substitutive qualities, but the continuity of this process leads one to think of how this continues throughout a temporal lifetime. The basic objects of Reed Street, for example, are those of cars, homes, sidewalks, trees, mailboxes. It is not that engaging with Reed Street or with

a memory of Reed Street *requires* an engagement of those individual items in their specific, objective worldly presence—but, rather, that the familiarity of Reed Street *denotes* the familiarity of its objects, of its trees and mailboxes and homes and sidewalks, in order to establish the specific boundaries of its reality for my own conscious understanding of its value.

Contemporary Canadian philosopher John Russon complements this current conversation with work on memory and habit that elucidates much of Merleau-Ponty's foundational work with recognition. For Russon, memory and habit are not just segments of our perceived reality but rather ground us within a constant, ambiguous situatedness that is most strongly recognized by how we relate with *others*. In his 2003 text *Human Experience*, John Russon makes explicit what it is to be a human being situated in a physical world, meaning what it is to exist in your body and to undergo a subjective experience of what is outside of you. He states, "To be a body-subject, in other words, means to have an object, which means to have an other... To be a body, then, is to already be defined with reference to other vantage points: each point of figured contact defines something else for which the body has an outside" (Russon, 2003 27). Important to recognize in his work is the transition away from Merleau-Ponty's "I can"; his alternative is the term "body-subject." We must recognize Merleau-Ponty's body-consciousness as sustained by the *I can* to be dwelling in an area that does not yet acknowledge psychosocial effects of memory and inhibitory interactions. Body-subject provides for us, in its wording, the image of a responsive relationship between me, myself, my *body*, the subject of these perceptions, and most importantly *those*, the objects, the anchoring points. "Already," Russon argues, we approach existence from within a body which, itself, is within an outside world. This outside world is constructed by the "point[s] of figured contact" to which he refers: the "vantage points" (Russon 27).

These “vantage points,” pre-recognition, are stagnant in their permanence in relation to the flexibility of our subjective experience until we fix our attention upon them. Because we exist as body-subjects, there are objects extending from and around our bodies. In other words, the chair on which I am currently sitting is an object to my subjective experience of sitting upon it. Thus, in the world, I am physically situated as being *on* the chair. I am on the chair, beside the table, holding the cup. These vantage points can be understood as similar to, but not equivalent, Merleau-Ponty’s “anchoring” points: or rather, the other objects around us from which we place ourselves in the world. According to Merleau-Ponty these vantage points are understood as our call-response relationship to objects: the way we engage with the physical world.

Merleau-Ponty extends bodily situatedness into the process of concentration. He explains:

To see an object is either to have it on the fringe of the visual field and be able to concentrate on it, or else respond to this summons by actually concentrating upon it...  
 When I do concentrate my eyes on [the object], I become anchored in it... I continue inside one object the exploration which earlier hovered over them all, and in one movement I close up the landscape and open the object. (Merleau-Ponty 67)

Concentration, thinking of it through Merleau-Ponty’s terms, is what grounds us within terms of our present existence—or rather, situates us. For Russon, situatedness implies not only a present, but a past, and by realizing the ultimate importance of a person’s lived history, he accesses a reality of the body-subject that Merleau-Ponty simply does not make allowances for. I am currently situated *here*, in this room, or in this car, or on this plane. Yet my current situation is only continuous in how I regard it, not how it is a presence in my life. I am certain that for several hours I can regard myself as on a plane, from takeoff to landing. But the truth remains

that in my life, my situation on the plane was only a few hours of my existence; before takeoff, I was in the airport, before the airport, I was in a cab. Russon explains the continuous yet changing line of location as, “My location – where I am now – is ontologically first, in that it is a point of reference in relation to which I must define myself; it is a first, however, that immediately defers to the firstness of another, namely, the past; my location is always premised on there having been another before” (*HE* Russon 36). My experience on the plane is how I consider myself at that specific moment in time. Yet “on a plane” is not how I consider myself in every other moment of my life or, as a whole, my identity is not permanently “on a plane.” The fact that we can make the distinction between being *here* and having been *there* in particular locations, for Russon, necessitates “there having been another [location] before.”

Recently I was, in fact, on a plane returning from Europe to the United States. In a practical sense, my situatedness on that flight acts as inherently definitive of someone who was once in Europe but is now in the States, considering my home is in the States. With a further understanding into my time spent in Europe, and a brief understanding of my background and my experiences, one might also practically conclude that I was in Europe and after being there, I flew back. My body which was once there and was interacting with the particularities of Europe and now, after flying home, interacts with the particularities of the United States, and thus it is a body which *once* grounded itself in Europe and *now* grounds itself elsewhere. The space I inhabit is not constant, but rather constantly changing, and my recognition of that changing space as a body-subject requires a recognition of those things which were my present reality and are no longer—requires an acknowledgement of the passage of time and the process of experience.

A “life” as it is practically regarded is experienced ontologically not in moments, but rather as an accumulation of one’s past and present. Russon regards memory as the active

presence which “provid[es] a constant background to our actions” (Russon, 2003 39). We understand *actions* as the processes of concentration-and-subsequent-anchoring to objects in the world: the ways we interact with what are the objects of our present, physical situation. The present is not only the present, though, but the present with a “background” of the past comprised of memory. Memory occurs in the present, explained by Russon as “an act of present cognition,” yet occurs while wielding within it the experiences of our relationships with specific objects in the past (Russon, 2003 42). These memories “carry for us our commitments,” for once identified we are not only anchored to the objects but rather they exist *for us*. The plane in question still exists for me in my memory as that which took me from one experience to another—from abroad to home. Yet it does not exist as directly or as necessarily as it did before.

By “necessarily” I mean that I am able, now, to attend to my daily routine and life tasks without needing to remember that the United Airlines flight in December of 2014 brought me back to my present location in Denver. I am able to establish habits and, in this example, the habit would be my body existing again in a place where it used to exist, but for four months in the fall of 2014 it did not exist. From the flight I readjusted to my body being in Colorado and all of the specific requirements that situation necessitated. I habituated myself to remembering my parents’ home, my apartment, my university campus, and to re-situating my body in relation to these familiar places which expected (or solicited) specific behaviors or methods of existing from me. Respectively, I was again a daughter, a tenant, and a student, three specific existences or responses to calls that I existed less as while abroad.

Establishing concrete *here-ness* with regard to memory thus establishes habit. According to Russon:

The first result of habituation is that our directed, focused attention is freed up to direct and focus attention onto new tasks... Once habituated, the body no longer encounters an alien object with which it must contend, but rather inhabits that object and lives out of that contact... The second result [is] the environment within which we pick for ourselves a second task to which to attend is more sophisticated than the environment within which we picked the first task... Habituation, then, is the process by which we build up within our bodily life progressively more sophisticated degrees of inconspicuous behavior.

(Russon, 2003 29-30)

Every day of my life I am not acutely aware of my situatedness in my specific roles; I do not tutor children or run at the gym beneath a hyper-awareness of my responsibility as an apartment tenant. Because I am situated *habitually* as a tenant I can compartmentalize the responsibilities which accompany that role in order to regard responsibilities which accompany my other situations. Inconspicuous behavior as Russon describes it would be less aware, less consciously driven to certain tasks, thereby making physical motility and thus Merleau-Ponty's "I can" *easier*, or rather part of the unconscious. The body-subject engages the world in such a way that much of my intentionality becomes second-hand. Yet in making it more habitual it also makes it more complex, for the body-subject exists as not only a frame of bodily volition but a background from which alternate and more advanced actions might be accomplished.

The background being referred to helps ground Russon's conceptualization of a "field of reality," a largely influential piece of his philosophy which will help to inform both the conclusion of this chapter and the following chapter. He utilizes notions of situatedness as well as detachment to visualize the body as *within* certain settings of its conditions. His interpretation

of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology depicts an individual in a centralized point in a larger field.

He states in his text *Bearing Witness to Epiphany*:

As a body, I look *at* something, I balance *within* a larger world, I reach *out*, I grasp an *other*. These essential, definitive bodily powers can themselves only be defined—can only be understood—by essential reference to a reality beyond the body's immediate determinacy. This is the nature of the body; it is the power we are to be in a world.

(Russon 2009, 31)

*Within* the larger world Russon describes is where we exist, though ambiguously. Like de Beauvoir, "I grasp an *other*" that necessarily situates me in the boundaries of their own experiences, and thus situates me in the boundaries of how I experience *them*. Unpredictable, changing, and containing multitudes is the reality of the world, and the bodies within it are "essential" and "definitive." Though the body is immediately determined the world is *not*, and the body, Russon is arguing, has the "power" to craft a reality looking outward from its position in the world. The body's immediacy provides, then, our ways of being immersed not only within it but within situations, signs, relationships. Namely, the latter provides our immediate, tangible contact with people outside of ourselves. People become our anchoring points, and people form the body's means of structure in the physical world.

Structure, though, takes hold in ways aside from physicality. According to Russon, "[a] thing is a thing by sharing reality with the other things with which it resonates, the other things that echo its significance in and through their own metaphysical magnetism" (Russon 2009, 35-36). He identifies the process of sharing reality as the ways in which we, as beings to beings or things to things, unite our personal "fields of reality" with others' fields of reality (Russon 2009, 34). To exist in a world with others means that my subjectivity cannot be expressed as

objectivity. In the case of relating my experience of my childhood street Reed Street with my father's experience of Reed Street, we find that although I regard the strip of asphalt, homes, and cars as "my street" it is not objectively in the world as *my street*, nor is it objectively in the world as *my father's street*. These interpretations of reality coexist.

## CONCLUSION

The ability to accomplish "sophisticated degrees of inconspicuous behavior," argued for by Russon, implies an advanced, developed body-subject in the world that is, perhaps, not constantly and continuously aware of phenomenal occurrences—perhaps the body-subject merely exists in the reality without awareness of the composition of the reality. This is not to say Russon is returning to the constancy hypothesis which Merleau-Ponty rejects. Instead of Russon implying "inconspicuous behavior" to be behavior that is contingent upon immovable sensed objects, Russon is claiming that habituation makes sensing automatic. Intentionality is not necessarily a conscious act, in other words. If bodily situatedness is automatic then we can assume tiers to perception. By tiers, I mean those things we are conscious of sensing. While I am not conscious in every interaction of my life of my position as tenant, or my memory of Reed Street, I am, *however*, conscious of my interpersonal relationships to my father, my roommates, my significant others. These interactions are more immediate and continuously occupy my interactions at a conscious level to the extent that mere bodily anchoring does not. Interpersonal relationships, being at a higher and more conscious tier, thus influence the way in which I situate myself and *act* in the world.



These interpersonal relationships are, specifically, those of erotic and sexual bonds. While Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology depicts the body as erotic being, Russon's depiction operates on a level that identifies conditions of our sexual reality that respond to the lived, practical reality of existing in a social world. These conditions are, specifically, things such as religion, politics, socioeconomics, media, etc. The body is not necessarily free to exist without attending to these conditions, which Russon claims in both *Human Experience* and his later work *Bearing Witness to Epiphany*. The following chapter will respond to the social conditions experienced by the body-consciousness expressed by Russon and also Simone de Beauvoir as a way to respond to the *lack of* alternative social situations expressed in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. We experience social conditions as objects, I will argue, and thus as these conditions become objects for our consciousness we respond not just intellectually, but via our physical comportment in the world.

## CHAPTER TWO

## CIVILIZATION AND ITS STRUCTURAL BINARIES:

## CO-CONSTITUTIVE IDENTITIES AND NAVIGATING A SOCIAL EXISTENCE

Our society is one of rules, relationships, and expectations. Mutual agreements of specific behaviors of existence form the social contracts from which we develop interpersonal connections within a world. The body as we've understood through Merleau-Ponty can also be understood as something which, according to John Russon, leads to "the ongoing enactment of a life" (Russon 2009, 30). Thus, the work of Merleau-Ponty is foundational for our purposes of pursuing an accurate terminology of his phenomenological presentation. The goal of this chapter is to branch out from the mechanics and the acts of the body-in-the-world in order to present an account of existence that is affected by alternative realities of the *other* presented by Russon's body-subject, revealing an augmentation of Merleau-Ponty's work that focuses on the ambiguity of intersubjectivity. We, as body-subjects (to use Russon's terminology), act in society, and the world in which we find ourselves is not perfectly suited in anticipation of our response. Rather, because we understand that as body-subjects we act in response to the world, we have to understand the structures of the world to derive meaning from bodily responses. The world is unpredictable and our situatedness is constantly changing in response to this unpredictability. In other words, from Merleau-Ponty's work I am deriving the framework of intersubjectivity, or that by which we find ourselves anchored for and with others, as a way to destabilize other subsequent notions of familiarity.

Without solid familiarity emerging from all other bodies-in-the-world, or from all Russon's body-subjects, we arrive at a destination that is entirely unpredictable. We are situated,

as demonstrated by the previous work with Merleau-Ponty, but in this situatedness we find ourselves in interpersonal relationships that are not with the same grounding, formative nature as my relationship to a street, to a car, to a house. Rather, interpersonal relationships negotiate with the same anchoring and substitutive processes Merleau-Ponty suggests bodies engage for objects, but under terms that are entirely unpredictable. A primary existentialist goal is to retain freedom despite (or in the forefront of) this realized unpredictability. By freedom I mean ethical and social freedom which Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre present, responding to past strands of Nietzschean and Kantian works, among others. In seeking freedom through phenomenological terms, we must address bodily ambiguity in a pre-conditioned society. Following an explanation of Simone de Beauvoir's prominent definition of *ambiguity* my goal is to create a detailed expression of a body-subject's experience of intersubjectivity. The balance of interpersonal relationships experienced by the body-subject are thus experienced as co-constitutive relationships, as my analysis of John Russon's work will demonstrate. I will demonstrate that social conditions operate as objects separate from social relationships. Not all social relationships are created equal, though, as I argue by analyzing the various ways in which social intentionality becomes interrupted and oppressed. This chapter culminates in a discussion of sexual violence as experienced by those upon which it is enacted as well as those who witness it. Engaging the work of de Beauvoir and Russon prominently, I attempt to examine the effect interpersonal relationships have regarding bodily situatedness and ambiguity and what this effect means for bodily vulnerability.

## AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity as a state of being is described by Simone de Beauvoir under the vocabulary of “conditions.” Her 1948 text *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, particularly Part I, is concerned with how one might exist in a situation created by the stipulations of specific conditions. By “conditions” she means immediacy in both situational (atmosphere, physical) environments and social structures that, together, create the framework of our immediate reality that we experience presently and continuously. From these, we must learn to pursue a quality of life which is meaningful and directly responsive to our situations. She states, “It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting. . . . Man exists. For him it is not a question of wondering whether his presence in the world is useful, whether life is worth the trouble of being lived. These questions make no sense. It is a matter of knowing whether he wants to live and under what conditions” (de Beauvoir 9-15). She aims to rework the existentialist project which seeks to simply ask what it is to live, *why* we live. These questions ignore the ultimate reality, she states, that is understanding *that* we exist and continuing from this realization into a framework that is responsive to our immediate realities.

Subjectivity is where ambiguity takes flight within the human experience of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty’s work is that of a depiction of reality which would argue for subjective accounts of the body-in-the-world, but it is through de Beauvoir that the subjectivity of those bodies must be met by objective social functions, laws, etc. that attend to those unique subjective experiences. To phrase more succinctly, Merleau-Ponty’s intersubjective subject is an established groundwork, and being that, it is thus an objectively perceived groundwork: de Beauvoir attends to the subjectivity of the subject while acknowledging interpersonal relations between subjects must suit the needs of all parties. We experience differently from one another and inasmuch as my reality is not *your* reality, your reality cannot be subject to *my conditions*,

but rather we ought to arrive at an “ethics” that attends to, and is applicable to, *all* subjectivities. De Beauvoir states, “An ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existants can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all” (de Beauvoir 18). In other words, individual freedoms ought to and must, invoking de Beauvoir’s ethical framework, “forge” systems or structures that are announced as “valid for all.” These systems must be responsive and attentive to subjectivity. Intersubjectivity is located as the key term, here, being the mechanism by which we acknowledge another’s subjectivity and experience their expressed acknowledgement of ours. As beings coexisting with one another in a shared environment with things approached differently by each person, we must find a way to exist without oppressive structures that demean subjectivity—and less obviously, via this framework I am entitled from birth, with the means to freely exist and explore the world. Kristin Zeiler, in her paper “A Phenomenology of Excorporation, Bodily Alienation, and Resistance: Rethinking Sexed and Racialized Embodiment,” pursues an extended understanding of intersubjectivity *beyond* the mutual agreement that we *exist*. That is to say, the fact that we exist is the first step, but we must advance this thought by realizing that the world is given to us by *others*. She writes, “I am a particular body with a certain sex, ethnicity, or physical ability, and this matters for, but does not determine, my being-in-the-world... Intersubjectivity is crucial to this reasoning. We are born into a world already inhabited, shaped, and made familiar to us by others” (Zeiler 72). These *others* create the framework of our situations. Through our body-consciousness, we receive the *others*, for the body is not the entire scope of the situation but rather that which grounds us within a situation of social conditions. Zeiler’s text is a response to *The Ethics of Ambiguity* which connects phenomenological habituation with social conditioning, and thus we observe de

Beauvoir's work as expanding and supplementing Merleau-Ponty's by translating his framework of intersubjectivity of the body-consciousness into an understanding of objective pathways through which an ambiguous subject navigates.

In my analysis supplemented by Zeiler's reasoning, what is received from de Beauvoir's response to Merleau-Ponty is that which confirms the limitations of his phenomenological groundwork. That is, the *others* of Merleau-Ponty's expressed body-consciousness are not the same *others* of de Beauvoir's reality, for de Beauvoir perceives of *others* as necessarily shaping and affecting one's lived reality based upon factors not yet expressed by Merleau-Ponty, including but not limited to sex, physical ability, etc. De Beauvoir poses bodily ambiguity as a key alternative to Merleau-Ponty's objectively configured intersubjectivity.

Ambiguity, expressed by de Beauvoir, is an inability to separate ourselves from the unpredictability of the continuously perceived world. Ambiguity is also a recognition of and respect for the way in which an *other* acts as an object of your consciousness and that you act as an object of theirs; that we are never entirely whole for we are always and continuously being shaped, being formed. Just as we cannot detach ourselves from the world we cannot detach ourselves from others, also objects of the world. How we respond to the other objects of our consciousness determines, also, how we recognize ourselves. De Beauvoir states, "In his universe of definite and substantial things, beneath the sovereign eyes of grown-up persons, he thinks that he too has *being* in a definite and substantial way" (de Beauvoir 36). In other words, others' existences make us trust our own existence, for what we see and understand in the other we have more reason to see and understand in ourselves. If I validate the existence of my roommate as my roommate, a friend with whom I share communal space and divide private space, I also simultaneously recognize that she validates *my* existence as *her* roommate with the

same qualities. Co-validation means, in other words, that our significance does not dwell in the self, nor in the other, but in the constant interaction and integration of the self-other in union. This is also recognized as having an “openness to others,” which Zeiler depicts as the core of human existence:

In the perspective of phenomenology of the body, human existence is characterized by a bodily openness to others... This bodily openness is basic to human interaction. This is also the starting point for the present discussion. We not only ‘give’ bodily habits, gestures, and postures in general. As gendered beings we also give gendered patterns of behavior to others that we ourselves have been given by still other others. (Zeiler 73-4)

What we “give” to others is a large, determining factor of our ambiguity, Zeiler attests, and likewise what others give to us is just as determining.

For a socially contextualizing example of this framework of ambiguity, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* de Beauvoir equates the worldly conditions in which black slaves existed to be infantile in how they were treated/regarded and, thus, how they grew to regard themselves. She argues, “To the extent that they respected the world of the whites the situation of the black slaves was exactly an infantile situation. This is the situation of women in many civilizations; they can only submit to the laws, the gods, the customs, and the truths created by the males” (de Beauvoir 37). This argument bears two crucial pieces to examine: firstly, that the black slaves had to *respect* the world of the whites thereby securing their position in the racial hierarchy, and secondly, that women “can only submit” to the structures created by the opposite sex. “Can,” rather than simply “do, implying a clear spectrum of ability and limits on the possibilities of volition. “Can only,” implying a restriction on emotional or social volition—in other words, the ability to choose one’s social conditions has been eliminated due to, in the former case, the

structures of the “whites” and, in the latter case, the structures of “the males.” In this scenario, the males are giving patterns of behavior, for bodily openness is met with an unpredictable form of response that is ultimately received. The significance of these instances is the revealing fact that intersubjectivity also acts as the passageway for creation—determinism, in the sense that the other supplies us with determining factors of self. Kimberly Hutchings, in her article “The Ambiguous Ethics of Political Violence,” paraphrases De Beauvoir’s depiction of ambiguity to “ultimately refer back to the ways in which to be human is both to be and not to be subject (autonomous agency) and to be and not to be situation (identifiable with both the world and others)” (Hutchings 124). In de Beauvoir’s example a woman is physically full and complete, as a phenomenology of substitution explains. A black male is physically full and complete. Yet the submission of their “autonomous agency” into the customs of the *other* reveals that a singular body is not fully formed in and of itself, but in being (and not being) “situation,” it is the accumulation of all with which it interacts as ambiguous. To utilize similar terms, we can now understand Merleau-Ponty’s body-consciousness subject as existing in his philosophy without making allowances for the experience of also being socially constructed as an “other,” of being both subject and object simultaneously.

Russon, in his text *Bearing Witness to Epiphany*, concludes that a free life is constructed via erotic life, or rather erotic relationships with other people in the world with us. It is an important distinction to make between being a body situated in the world and being a body among *many bodies* situated in the world *together*. Russon’s understanding of interpersonal bonds offers, I believe, a way of recognizing intersubjectivity as an anchoring procedure. His response to de Beauvoir’s presentation of ethics is similar: “Ethics is characterized by the ambiguity of self and other” (Russon 2009, 87). Understanding Russon’s description of



ambiguity aids in understanding his description of erotic attachment, from which we can ultimately determine the value of the ethics he subsequently presents. Russon states, “We are ambiguously rooted in reality. We are immersed in a body, things, signs, and other people and detached from them all. Each of these things is itself an ambiguous reality that simultaneously draws reality up into itself and bleeds out into the rest” (Russon 2009, 44). His idea of *ambiguity* draws primarily on his concepts of detachment and determinacy, and might in another way be described as the unpredictability of our continuous physical existence in a world of tangible, perceivable things.

By detachment, Russon means that the phenomena our bodies encounter are not a part of us, but rather comprise the area in which we exist. Returning to his concept of a “field of reality” as expressed in the preceding chapter, I would like to succinctly explain a “field of reality” as that which unites us with the *other*, or rather that through which our spatial fields interact with the spatial fields of the *other*, creating the framework for detached intersubjectivity. If we are to imagine ourselves as the centralized focus “within a larger world,” as he states, we simultaneously imagine the *other* in their own “larger world.” It is from the intersecting points of our larger worlds that we share subjectivities, that we negotiate our realities with the “other,” and in turn create fields of realities that are inherently *also* fields of other realities. Intersections of realities are examined in the following section as a way to engage with de Beauvoir’s conversation about ethical freedom.

## EROTIC ATTACHMENT

Russon's philosophy, like de Beauvoir's, explains to us that our identities, our ways of existing in the world, are co-created by our relationships with the other and therefore, by his argument, interpersonal relationships *enable freedom* rather than restrict it. He refers to these relationships as "erotic bonds," more specifically the connection one makes with another once they have experienced the realization of one's nature as a sexual being. It is to perceive another's ambiguity, "which means the ambiguity by which that other both is what he 'is' and is also the possibilities by which he exceeds himself... which means the ambiguity by which he and I share and do not share an identity; which means, in sum, the ambiguity in the performative unity of things, others, and myself" (Russon 2009, 84). The *unity* of us to the rest of the world is built on sharing and recognizing the ambiguity of existing with others. We have subjective experiences of our engagements with others and likewise, they also have subjective experiences of their engagements with us. To realize these "subjectivities" do not, in fact, create a shared, objective truth of the relationship is a bridge to freedom. "He and I share [ambiguity] and do not share an identity," Russon states. What we share are our existences as bodies in the world—what we do *not* share are our interpretations of these bodily experiences as they transform themselves from interactions to identities.

Eros as discussed by Russon is experienced in the "fundamental bodily recognition of the presence of another person as a person" (Russon 2009, 73). Erotic life is described by Russon as a "call" to which we must respond. Erotic attraction, further, is "the stirring of the other in me, in my body" (Russon 2009, 73-4). We are sexed beings determined by our interactions and experiences, and erotic experiences are that which engage our sexual being into sexual awareness and responsibility. Relating to an *other* on an erotic basis co-establishes both individuals as

erotic beings. As a body-subject, I experience another individual as a sexual being, which confirms my existence *for that person* as also a sexual being.

Negotiating with the *other* is a way of substituting what the body lacks in terms of an existing, intentional being anchored within their own field of reality. The *other*, like the limb of the insect which adjusts to the world as a “whole body” and not partial, enables a re-entering of self to world in an immediate moment whereby the self can feel and exist fully, rather than partially. Yet one cannot simply engage in a perfected relationship of immediate recognition of their ambiguity with someone, for just like the unpredictability of the never-objective world these relationships create “human meaning, human values,” both of which are not solid terms of interpersonal structure (Russon 2009, 86). Meaning and value are ever-changing, and realizing “the dignity and worth revealed in the epiphany of the other’s personhood” opens the path to just possibility of interactions, not concrete results (Russon 2009, 86). Once we recognize a person’s significance we become grounded in shared subjectivity, and yet this recognition comes with unpredictable conditions against which the body (and thus one’s conscious sense of being) must adjust.

This systematic structure of interpersonal relationships is what Russon explains as relationships that are co-constitutive. Revisiting de Beauvoir’s description of what it is to be a woman in a society that habitualizes women into “infantile situations” created by males, we recognize that the relationship of self-to-other is ultimately one of binary opposition. Treated as infantile, the woman is grown to exist within infantile space, thus turning the males into that which is non-infantile. In an example from my own life I find that I participate in roles designated to me by the specific conditions of my situation. Similar to being a tenant with my apartment landlords, or a daughter around my father, I assume the behavior of a server when

circulating from table to table with a pen and notepad in hand, and the behavior of a student when sitting at a desk watching and listening to a lecture on campus. The behavior solicited by these situations is very much like answering a call, or responding to the object that solicits my attention. In a combination of responding to expectations and responsibilities, my variety of work determines my experienced role. If my work is taking orders I am serving, if my work is taking notes I am a student; likewise, I am an object for the consciousness of the work, and the work becomes taking orders because I am there to serve the orders which need to be taken—the work becomes taking notes because I am a student respecting the nature of classroom participation.

Beyond the work, the ways in which I negotiate with the other at hand in these specific settings also contributes to their field of reality. As a restaurant patron they determine my behavior as a server. As a lecturing teacher they determine my behavior as a student. We call to one another and form attachments to one another in order to ground ourselves amongst an experienced realm of ambiguity. The same, Russon argues, is experienced in erotic attachment. When we engage with a person in an erotic relationship, we learn to perceive the other's ambiguity and thus invite a world of "human meaning [and] values" (Russon 2009, 86). By respecting that person as another sexual being whilst engaging in an erotic bond we reveal "The dignity and worth... of the other's personhood," and likewise this revelation reveals "my own personhood" (Russon 2009, 86). To regard another as an individual of worth and importance that is like my own is to introduce a field of respect between one another.

Susan M. Bredlau, in "Simone de Beauvoir's Apprenticeship of Freedom," expresses the relationship between the body-subject and its surrounding objects as a liberating measure en route towards a fully realized experience of freedom. De Beauvoir expresses in her work that the

key to a person understanding their freedom is through an other, by being “taught by others to be free” (Bredlau 42). Bredlau states, “A subject realizes her freedom most fully when she has projects that actually transform the present world and do not merely conform to it. To be truly free, a subject must be able, through skillful handling of the world, to make a situation that is indifferent to (or even impedes) her into a situation that supports her” (Bredlau 43). This process of helping a subject become free is recognized as an “apprenticeship of freedom.” In other words, Zeiler’s bodily openness also leaves one capable of giving to the other a supplemental aspect of existence which would aid in their experienced freedom. I understand bodily openness as the passageway through which this apprenticeship of freedom might manifest itself, bodily openness being, of course, a distance relative of Russon’s *erotic bond*.

Thus, if we as sexual beings engage in bonds of ethical responsibility with other sexual beings, and if my field of reality is experienced in unity with *your* field of reality, a level of trust must enter the equation to allow us to participate in such a co-constitutive relationship. This sort of trust for which I am arguing is not necessarily a Hobbesian Modern Social Contract Theory, though it certainly feels influence from it. It is also not necessarily a “sexual contract.” Rather, it is an indistinguishable facet of being an erotic being among other erotic beings in society. The ambiguous nature of existing as a sexed body and being regarded as such means to be regarded as having sexual possibility, having sexual potential and capabilities. We have a responsibility to allow a person’s intentionality. This next section will explore in more specificity the site of vulnerability created and engaged by beings who exist for and with each other, and whose fields of reality interact at sites in which accounts of their subjective experience are accounted for and heard by the *other*.

## VULNERABILITY

The link between habituated, gendered behavior and intersubjectivity reveals, for me, a deep-rooted link between what is required and expected of an individual and what is subsequently provided. When we establish erotic bonds we must also recognize that manipulation of erotic bonds is also a possibility. By “manipulation” I mean a situation in which awareness of a person’s ambiguity is taken advantage of by the *other*, or a situation in which an erotic being might experience a one-sided attachment. Vulnerability exists in the unity between anchoring points of each individual’s fields of reality; in this site of vulnerability, the ambiguity of beings is ridden with uncertainty, anticipation, and expectation.

There is admittedly a significant lack of work accomplished in the past and currently in process that addresses a phenomenology of sexual violence. I argue that sexual violence is an intentional break of ethical social bonds that surround us as erotic beings. It is an act of manipulating the unfelt sexual presence a person experiences as “inconspicuous behavior,” as Russon labels habituated behavior. As sexual violence is one of the most under-reported international crimes it is difficult to enter a discussion that is statistics-oriented, so it is pertinent to note that my goal in this chapter and the following chapter is not to target sexual violence as *crime*, per se, but as a breach of the ethics supplied by erotic attachment between individuals. There is no targetable point of immanence for the act of sexual violence. Yet, observed in their minute subtleties, interrupted moments of intentionality offer a tracking point by which we can measure and recognize *how* a phenomenological understanding of vulnerability contributes to our understanding of the implications of sexual violence.

As a server I am not expecting to be in a sexual physical modality, yet a person who interrupts my intentionality as a server by expecting an erotic bond will receive that expectation to be unreciprocated, and thus our fields of reality co-exist but do not coincide. Despite this fact, however, through socialized habituation or physical violence, Zeiler argues, “a certain kind of socialization has formed female embodiment so that the woman *comes to identify with a passivity* that is imposed on her by others” (Zeiler 79). Zeiler’s comment comes as a remark on de Beauvoir’s recognition of the other constituting the self’s behavior, and reveals the threat of my intentionality beyond imposed upon *by others*.

Kimberly Hutchings claims that, although de Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity* does not provide an ultimate answer to the regulation of violence, she does, however, argue “that insofar as ambiguity is denied, then so is ethics” (Hutchings 125). Further, Hutchings states, “Once you have certainty then you move from the ground of ethics to the ground of calculation. Ethics, in contrast, is grounded in uncertainty, both at the level of who moral agents are and what moral agents know about themselves and about the outcome of their actions” (Hutchings 125-6). Denying ambiguity is to deny the individual’s ability to operate both as subject and object, as a perceiving individual in a realm of unpredictable sensations.

To deny ambiguity is to declare a “certainty,” to begin crafting imperatives regarding a person’s behavior and accessibility. It is to *impose* upon someone a strict, set way of being—to habituate norms and reject a person’s subjectivity. What this ultimately means is “inhibited intentionality,” a term that will be heavily used in the following chapter via work with Iris Marion Young. In the following chapter I will examine how the manipulation of erotic bonds and ultimate rejection of a person’s ambiguity is ultimately a dangerous and potentially violent rejection of their personhood. The site of vulnerability will be more heavily examined to

recognize the ethical imperatives which arise when inhibited intentionality manifests itself in an ability to enact a fully-embodied consciousness.



CHAPTER THREE  
GENDERED MOTILITY:  
THE INHIBITED INTENTIONALITY OF BEING

In order to pursue or find phenomenological freedom given the unavoidable inhibited intentionality of vulnerability, I argue that it is necessary to transcend conceptions of gendered motility. It is necessary to transcend concepts of “feminine throwing” or “masculine throwing,” “feminine moving” or “masculine moving,” and arrive at a lexicon with which to discuss phenomenological experience that does not ignore gender, but rather escapes *gendered movement*. A woman throws, a woman moves, but a woman ought not to be considered to throw effeminately, to move effeminately. While it is clear that traditional phenomenology has inherent limitations regarding its acknowledgement of separate female experience, the extent to which phenomenological work might be used in the reverse has recently been suggested as a feminist alternative to phenomenology. As a discipline, might phenomenology be utilized as a site of re-directing feminist thought back towards the body and bodily experience? I side with the voices of philosophers such as Linda Martín Alcoff and Dianne Chisholm who, in their ontological accounts of the female body-in-the-world, situate women in such a way that a woman’s movements are her own, and not that of a larger scope of categorized “feminine movement.” This position orients the phenomenological tradition as something which can be lived *through*, rather something which is applied *upon* behavior. It is not enough to simply locate the site of vulnerability as being the point at which separate individuals’ spheres of reality collide, but to observe how phenomenology responds to this vulnerability.

Where phenomenology first recognizes gender as a disorienting critique of bodily situatedness and Merleau-Ponty's "I can" originates with Iris Marion Young's response to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological framework of the body, a response which shifted the ways in which accounts of an experience in the world made new acknowledgements of, and accommodations for, race and gender. Her 1980 essay "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality" ought to be, in this chapter, considered for its merits in beginning the shift of uniting Phenomenological work with feminist theory. This relationship was seemingly political in nature yet I believe, at its roots, pursuing a "gendered" phenomenology means pursuing an ethically fair and genuine world understanding, or in other words, to ethically respect the body in all its subjective nuances. What Young will argue is that the phenomenological framework as presented by Merleau-Ponty is limited in its ability to produce an accurate depiction of what it is to exist as a body situated in the world for women, humans of color, or any number of disenfranchised individuals. The limitations are dangerous for Merleau-Ponty's work assumes and presupposes much about the body's ability to act. To understand that the behavior of the "feminine" body is separate from the behavior of the "masculine" body is to identify a cultural world that denies any objective freedom for *all* individuals, for we are all bound to the confines of a gendered linguistic social structure.

Young believes that examining bodily comportment, being the phenomenological method of understanding consciousness, hits a wall almost immediately when we realize not all bodies are like the others, and some individuals experience a qualified bodily experience affected by social conditions and the physical habituation of social constructs. It is important to realize that, in other words, phenomenology as a discipline is not necessarily the problem but rather its applications. Alcoff, in "Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Theory on Experience," notes that Young

does not take issue with “phenomenology’s metaphysics... [Rather] on [Young’s] view Merleau-Ponty’s shortcomings result mainly from the fact that his analysis of embodiment did not specify sexual difference, and thus male embodiment was allowed to stand in for the whole” (Alcoff 265). Separating male from female embodiment reveals multiple things: firstly, that we are divided between biologically male and biologically female bodies, and to enact a male body does not produce the same experience as enacting a female body; secondly, that to presume the *same* bodily-orienting experience upon all bodies is a privileged presumption from beneath a male-bodied experiential perspective.

If we understand the body as a separate mechanism that exists within a social or tangible framework of anchoring points, we also understand that the body exists in an ambiguous relationship with those points that can produce hindering effects on the body’s capacities. In this chapter, I analyze and expand upon Iris Marion Young’s presentation of *feminine* bodily comportment via her work with Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir in an attempt to understand the ways in which a social framework of gendered expectations physically inhibits the female body’s enactment. Young’s argument that a female person “enacts” what it is to be a female body mandates that person to place herself in the position of being “less than”; that is, being less capable of the same bodily volition and freedom of activity as a male body.

Young’s work, though, has its own limitations, as Alcoff and Chisholm reveal. When pursuing ethical and physical freedom via a phenomenological framework of reality, and when addressing liberating measures women have pursued since publication of her essay, it is imperative to realize that Young’s gendering of motility is reductive to recent accounts of experienced bodily volition by women. I look to Alcoff and Anna Petronella Foulter as additional voices examining feminist theorist accounts of Merleau-Ponty and ultimately utilize

Chisholm's re-interpretation of Young's work to recognized gendered phenomenology as not entirely limited in what it can offer for responding to the diversity of vulnerability experienced by the diversity of genders, but rather it also functions as a site of potentially liberating possibilities. First, I supply an analysis of Young's "Throwing Like a Girl" and explore the framework of her argument for a feminine "I can't" alternative to the phenomenological "I can"; I then respond to this analysis at the latter half of the chapter by exploring the potentiality of re-locating selfhood and embodied empowerment *in light of* this clearly defined framework of vulnerability.

### THROWING LIKE A GIRL

As discussed in the previous chapter, Simone de Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* establishes the connection between ambiguity and intersubjectivity, as the body's unique ambiguity determines its interactions with *others* and the world, and inasmuch as my body solicits specific and unique responses from *others*, my body's unique makeup would solicit a unique response to that makeup. With de Beauvoir's work we understand and receive a gendered alternative to the work of Merleau-Ponty, and her challenges to his presentation of intersubjectivity reveal an ethical imperative to recognizing ambiguity as experienced by alternative subjects, i.e. women. Iris Marion Young follows on the work of de Beauvoir, largely from *The Second Sex*, for the groundwork de Beauvoir establishes regarding femininity and gendered consciousness.

"Throwing Like a Girl" begins with a commentary on Edward Straus' 1966 work "The Upright Posture," a text in which Straus identifies a distinct difference between masculine and feminine bodies. His distinction is brief, though, and unsatisfactory for Young for his only slight

acknowledgement of the implications behind distinguishing bodies by their biological categories. Biological categories are not the full picture, Young argues. Young interprets “femininity” as established by de Beauvoir in her text *The Second Sex*, referencing it as a construct, attempting to avoid any essentialist notions of the “feminine.” Her work with de Beauvoir primarily helps ground her conception of motility that is affected by constructions of femininity. That is, Young wants to identify (and/or generate) “for the existential phenomenologist a concern to specify such a [gendered] differentiation of the modalities of the lived body” (Young 28). In other words, she concedes, “Straus is by no means alone in his failure to describe the modalities, meaning, and implications of the difference between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ body comportment and movement” (Young 28). What Young refers to is a long-standing tradition held by scholars when discussing bodily comportment to either only briefly mention the differences in action and ability between the sexes, or not at all. The differences are not just strictly between sex, though, for by comportment and movement of the *masculine* and of the *feminine*, Young speaks of a gendered, *not* a biological, recognition of the ranging diversity of bodily enactment.

Young is careful in keeping separate what it is to be a female body and what it is to enact a “feminine style.” In the former, we have matters of biology and factual physical differences. In the latter, we have socially constructed determinants of what it means to be “masculine” and “feminine.” For Young, biology and society work against one another in that the body’s potentiality for a woman is limited in its comportment because of the social determinants or expectations of behavior. She states that “each sex *uses* the body” which separates sex from bodies, and additionally implies a non-essentialist argument of being female and enacting femininity within a whole *body* (Young 33). The woman within the body makes the body female.

The situation of a woman is to be in a biologically determined female body, and because of this, the Female is “handicapped” as a result of the sexist society that would place specific expectations and limitations upon that situated Female body (Young 42). She argues, “[Femininity] is... a set of structures and conditions that delimit the typical *situation* of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves” (Young 30). Femininity is an idea, not a natural essence. It is an idea which is provided *for* the body’s existence and enactment that, for Young, inhibits the body’s capabilities in the world. Structurally speaking, bodies are met with the frameworks of gender and gender type: femininity versus masculinity, and which biological bodies fall into which categories is determined by society. The specific social structures to which Young refers are those that hold, or rather contain, female-sexed bodies within the expectations of *femininity*. To carefully identify the specificities of Young’s presentation of the limitations of feminine movement, I think it is important to first examine essentialist versus constructivist views of *the feminine*, and to make clear the described distinction between *femininity*, *female-bodied*, and *female*. Why and how individuals identify as woman is, I believe, an area of exploration largely missed in Young’s argument.

The reality of being female-bodied is to have expectations of femininity inflicted upon you. The reality of being female-bodied is to, ultimately, as de Beauvoir would say, “become a woman.” This *becoming* is a result of social normal, cultural and social affectations of implemented behavior, and because the range of her physical motility has both been denied and dictated for her, Young states, “Woman is thereby both culturally and socially denied the subjectivity, autonomy, and creativity that are definitive of being human and that in patriarchal society are accorded the man. At the same time, however, because she is human existence, the

female person necessarily is a subjectivity and transcendence, and she knows herself to be” (Young 31).

The restrictive structures that inhibit feminine motility are, as stated by Young: “*ambiguous transcendence, an inhibited intentionality, and a discontinuous unity with its surroundings*” (Young 35). By *ambiguous transcendence* Young refers to the Phenomenological term of ambiguity, being that by which the lived body is the source of consciousness (not just consciousness as a separate intangible entity) but is unpredictable in its immediate corporeality. While the body as Merleau-Ponty and John Russon have depicted it exists ambiguously and makes contact with the world via its ambiguity, for Young the ambiguity of the female body is the permanent way it exists in the world. If, being ambiguous, the body is in a constant state of unpredictable flux (and thus so is the consciousness), the permanency of the female body’s ambiguous transcendence is constantly unpredictable, and never achieves authentic *whole*-ness. Thus, for Young, the woman lives with her body as a “burden”; that is, she lives beholden to its restricted capacities as a being-in-the-world, never fully capable of accessing its true motility for that *inhibited intentionality* (Young 36).

The female body is constantly *substituting* itself for all that it lacks within the structures built for it. What it lacks specifically in terms of motility, or inhibited intentionality, is a freedom of physical volition. While it is full and complete, the female body is not necessarily a half-body or an incomplete-body, but rather according to Young, a body-less capable. Realizing this is an important facet of negotiating subjectivity with an *other*, particularly a female-bodied *other*. Feminist theorists laud Young for bridging accounts of experience with claims of discrimination and misrepresentation, as Linda Martín Alcoff states, “Feminist theory needs a better account of the relationship between theory and experience” (Alcoff 254). Further, Alcoff argues for a theory

that is “understood as itself embodied rather than simply formative of, without being formed by, bodily experience... [Experience] is and must be the basis of explanation. There is no conceivable alternative basis or ultimate justification for knowledge other than experience of my body in the world” (Alcoff 254-62). In other words, there is no alternative to explaining the female experience as situated in the world without relying on experiential accounts *by* individuals enacting the female body. By Alcoff’s reasoning, Young’s approach as well as her contemporaries offers a specific re-accounting of phenomenological experience for which the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty does not make allowances.

Similarly observing the deficiencies of a philosophy with does not make allowances for sexual difference, Anna Petronella Foutier in her article “Language and the Gendered Body: Butler’s Early Reading of Merleau-Ponty” observes Judith Butler’s critique of Merleau-Ponty and reveals many areas in which his work lacks this awareness of the female body experiencing a different bodily capability than a male’s. Yet for Butler, it is in Merleau-Ponty’s entire conception of the lived, existential subject that fails, for “it reveals the assumption that the normal subject is a male, disembodied subject” (Foutier 769). In other words, Butler believes Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology *assumes* a body that easily exists as is, that easily exists in its totality and substitutive measures to experience the world as a whole, structural body-consciousness. Foutier explains, “Butler claims that [Merleau-Ponty’s theory] hides certain normative suppositions about sexuality,” and because in Butler’s work gender *and* sex are constituted by language and discourse, we must achieve the account of experience to *create*, not just *supplement*, theory as Alcoff argues for (Foutier 767). In this case, though, Butler contends with phenomenology as a notion for feminist theory, in itself, while Alcoff sees potential for



benefitting feminist liberation within the phenomenological tradition of accounting for bodily experience.

The following section echoes the work of Foultier's identification of the "male, disembodied subject" that has been brought to life by philosophical traditions throughout history by reorienting the purposes of phenomenological theory towards a feminist purpose. In other words, given Young's criticisms against Merleau-Ponty, the structure of phenomenology and the structure of lived realities offers a framework through which I, and others, might express the experience of being vulnerable.

#### REGAINING MOTILITY IN LIGHT OF VULNERABILITY

The lived effects of vulnerability are not all entirely theoretical, but rather are experienced in themselves. With this in mind it is important to recognize that vulnerability is not just a state of being but a point of intrusion upon a person's consciousness that invokes, in itself, inhibitory restraints to one's ability to transcend that vulnerability. It is simultaneously foundational to one's being and re-created by experience, both a framework of lived reality as well as the interior conditions of that reality which mold and adjust to one's ongoing existence.

As a woman enacting a female body, I cannot walk down the street with the same freedom as a male enacting a male's body. This statement reflects not just a reflective judgment of my objective observed experience but an assertion of validity based upon physical experience in which I, and most other women, become susceptible to the impacts of the site of vulnerability which is shared with an *other* being manipulated by the threat of violence. I experience a "discontinuous unity" with the world such that my anchoring points are not accessible to the

same degree or retention as a male's. My father's street is not only a separate lived reality just because he has experienced it as "father," rather than as "daughter," but also that to walk down Reed Street is *not*, for him, an exercise in risking attack or assault. For me, the experience of walking Reed is a remembrance of a past attempted sexual assault; an enactment of habituated movements required of me as a female-who-has-been-attacked, i.e. walking with hesitation, with expectation, and with fear; and simultaneously the *inability* to walk within my father's experienced reality of Reed. All of these attributes comprise my recognition of this place, and as such, I am affected by a denial of "subjectivity, autonomy, and creativity" within that space, for walking Reed I walk as a woman carrying the burden of my femininity which is to identify the street as a potential threat of violence. I am a female-body-in-the-world walking, but identified by *others* as a "woman walking," and under Young's expertise, realizing my vulnerability and thus realizing my "inhibited intentionality" requires that I am also unavoidably walking effeminately, walking within feminine motility.

Feminist theory targets much of experienced sexual violence, and experienced potentiality of sexual violence, as evidence of the misogyny overwhelming our patriarchal Western society and thus affecting the experience of the lived body. Contemporary feminist theory would regard a woman walking down the street as inherently a vulnerable action, as inherently an action which solicits from the woman herself an awareness of her vulnerability to seek protection and defense, which in itself presupposes a culture of violence-against-women. What my lived experience of walking down Reed suggests, though, is that in the totality of memory and perception by which I regard Reed, I am immersed in the fact that it does not offer me the same spatial freedom for which it offers my father. These implications suggest a strong, not oft-mentioned link between social conditions, experience of sexual violence, and physical

phenomenology. This example of my walk down Reed Street must be qualified, however, by notions of memory and empowerment. I am now able to walk down Reed Street, and other public streets, without the involuntary, physical reactions marked by my awareness of bodily vulnerability. With time, I have re-habituated my body into a formal state of re-situatedness, such that I am able to anchor my body regarding the same points and same homes and same turns of Reed Street in a different way that provokes a sensation of empowerment.

Essentially, a flaw arises in Young's conception of what it means to enact a female-body—not necessarily a flaw of her three-fold analysis of restrictive structures inhibiting women's motility, but rather a flaw in how closely she relates "being a woman" with "feminine motility." Because Young does not give an account for the ways in which a woman might be able to reject her inhibited intentionality, "Throwing Like a Girl" does not necessarily offer a solution for the reversal of an experienced site of vulnerability. Dianne Chisholm in the early 2000's, among others, contends with Young's late 20<sup>th</sup> century essay and argues, "Unlike Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, [Young] conceptualizes girls' and women's experience of embodiment within a restrictive history of gender normativity that no longer typifies their contemporary situation and that fails to account for the phenomenology of their 'ascendance' in new realms of freedom and existence" (Chisholm 10). Essentially, when Young writes about women's bodily experience she writes as if the actions of women are enactments of an intangible yet present outline of *femininity*. Others like Chisholm, such as Judith Butler and Peg O'Connor, recognize flaws in Young's understanding of gendered embodiment, as gender itself is a physical enactment as much as the body. Rather than being something which women inherently embody by moving or acting, "femininity" or "feminine motility" ought to be regarded rather as something which female-bodied beings *can* enact.

The following sub-sections are categorized by the work surrounding gendered phenomenology by Chisholm and, later, Alcoff and Peg O'Connor. The former section of Chisholm's work is integrated to identify the flaws in Young's argument that might be reworked or re-evaluated alternatively as revealing of a radical utilization of phenomenology for the sake, and not inhibition, of a woman's movements. The latter section is engaged primarily to establish examine how, given that presentation of radical utilization, we ought to ethically respond to a society in which gendered difference is present, even necessary, yet acts as more responsibly equitable after being affirmed of its existence.

*Dianne Chisholm's Critique of Young*

In her article "Climbing Like a Girl: An Exemplary Adventure in Feminist Phenomenology," Chisholm integrates Young's work with much of Beauvoir's radical thought regarding the "ascension" of women, or more particularly their attempts and successes regarding an entry into rising social status and bodily liberation. Bodily liberation is where Chisholm takes issue with Young primarily, reversing Young's alternative "I cannot" with an "I can" that is not only fully-embodied, but free of gender, and liberating for women *because* it is the enactment of a non-gendered motility. For Chisholm, the sport of climbing particularly as performed by famous freestyle climber Lynn Hill and presented in Hill's 2002 autobiography *Climbing Free*, reveals the possibilities of the contemporary woman as she regards her female body to find empowerment in their physical existence. Chisholm argues, "Hill's vertical world becomes approachable and explorable through her climber's body, whose movements she describes as practiced and spontaneous, thus recalling Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body as

comprised of two-layers [the habit-body and body-at-this-moment]” (Chisholm 15-16). The recognized phenomenological attributes of climbing as a sport are not just to represent athleticism as empowering to women, but rather athletic feats of the female body as empowering in themselves, for these feats escape “feminine versus masculine movement.”

Through climbing, Chisholm argues, one can realize that physical activities (which do not presuppose specific biological genitalia) are not gendered activities, and rather I my bodily vulnerability as a woman stems from two separate entities: bodily vulnerability of all sexual bodies in the world *and* a perpetrator of sexual violence viewing a female body as a site upon which violence *can* be inflicted. Chisholm writes of climber Lynn Hill, “Climbing is not a feminine (or masculine) activity, nor does it engage modalities of feminine embodiment... Whether [Hill] climbs with men or other women, Hill exemplifies Merleau-Ponty’s understanding that to be a body in this world is to be a sexed body, and thus to relate to other bodies differently according, in part, to one’s different sex” (Chisholm 20). One cannot pursue a physical modality in which one is *less* a woman; rather, physical modality relates to different sexes and not gender constructs, and as such, we ought to consider activities as women walking, or men walking, rather than “feminine walking” or “masculine walking.” Movement is bodily situatedness and responsiveness to an object “in space,” and theorists such as Chisholm aim to prove that phenomenology, despite its history of not attending to the female experience, offers potentiality for empowerment when we *relocate* feminine experience to that of explicitly the human body and anchored, situated motility, not that of “feminine” motility. In other words, where Young’s work falters is in her quite essentialist notions of motility; actions like Lynn Hill’s climbing experiences demonstrate to us that the body experiences gender, experiences *as* gender, but bodily motility itself is not explicitly *gendered*.

This is not to say, though, that I could potentially walk down Reed Street *not* as a woman, for my body (despite material changes to its constitution) stays the same in its sexual framework. Chisholm's critique of Young is not intending to resolve what it is to be socially considered a woman or socially considered a man, or to question accepted standards of biology and sexuality. Chisholm merely intends to point out how a female-bodied individual might renew an uninhibited physical capacity by removing a qualifier of gender from actions of motility and spatiality. Through Young's argument, I walk with fear and hesitation on Reed Street while embodying my natural vulnerability I experience the "inhibited intentionality" which Young presents *because* my walking is feminine, my movement is feminine motility. I solicit responses from the *other* that regard my body as feminine and, therefore, susceptible to misogyny-triggered responses. My feminine actions denote a capacity for vulnerability, according to Young's analysis.

*Linda Martin Alcoff and Peg O'Connor*

Complicating a rejection of "gendered" motility, Alcoff suggests that "experience sometimes exceeds language," and further that linking experience to the discourse of gender or violence might affect the perceived experience of an action. In other words, to describe an act as a "feminine act" might largely influence the perceived experience of that act itself. For this argument, Alcoff invokes the example of "marital rape," a formerly contended action that complicated the social value of marriage and ethical standards of consensual sex. Alcoff writes, "We have more than adequate reason to believe that rapes occurred on dates and in marriages before terms such as 'date rape' and 'marital rape' were invented and before these issues became

widely discussed. On the other hand, it is also clear that the changes in discourse have effected changes in at least some of the experience of such traumas” (Alcoff 254). In the latter part of the statement Alcoff contradicts her argument to point out that in many instances, people link language to the experience *of* the trauma.

Alcoff notes that there are many who believe the linguistic term “marital rape” has inspired, in “young impressionable women,” the conviction that they experienced such an action when, in reality, that action did not occur. Alcoff dismisses this claim by stating that because experience can exceed language, “it is at times inarticulate,” and the bodily experience of a woman as the victim of a marital rape is the true site of lived reality, rather than in the discourse that surrounds an account of her experience (Alcoff 254). Peg O’Connor, in her text *Oppression and Responsibility: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Social Practices and Moral Theory*, links evolving discourse as one of many roots of social change and innovation. Her response to the concept of “marital rape,” a formerly “incoherent, if not oxymoronic, notion,” has evolved into a rational, respected experience of vulnerability and violence due to

[women’s movements which] have created languages and vocabularies for women to use in articulating their experiences. A woman can now meaningfully say to herself and others, ‘I was raped by my husband.’ A woman can also break her silence about sexual abuse... By challenging parts of the [social] background in a collective manner, new practices that enable women to give different meanings to their experiences have been created. They have also opened new legal avenues for addressing the harms done to them. (O’Connor 37-38)

While Alcoff’s critics would argue language influences the *experience* of a trauma that is happening, O’Connor posits that language influences the *articulation* and *understanding* of a

trauma that has already occurred. Articulating a physical experience is an entirely separate action from articulating an alternative experience within social conventions. “I was attacked while running” bears a significance to me that is alternative to stating, “A man tried to assault me.” By this I mean that my experience of walking down Reed Street now, with the discursive measures available to me by which I can articulate my experience “meaningfully” and as part of a “collective” group of individuals with similar experiences, my embodiment of my body-consciousness in that particular environment—Reed—becomes transformed and, as such, empowering. For Alcoff, experience ought to be the site from which theory extends, and when we locate the lived, true experiences of sexual violence, and how they impacted the woman’s body itself, we locate not an account of gendered motility, not an account of how the woman experienced a *masculine assault*, but rather a theory branching out from the lived moment, itself.

The way in which Hill can articulate her experience as a climber defies Young’s determined expectations of a female’s experience in the world. Because she is a woman, she exists physically underneath an experience of intentionality—yet it is *not* in spite of being a woman that she re-engages in the world with accuracy, precision, and fully-embodied motility. The action frees itself of her gender and is reoriented as an action in itself, and she is empowered not because she was able to subvert the masculine motility of climbing “as a woman,” but because she denied her climbing from being “feminine” or “masculine.” This new form of created language, this new “created vocabulary” as O’Connor presents, implies that the experience is *not* embodied by the term, but the term allows for an empowering articulation of the experience. If Alcoff’s argument holds that theory ought to be embodied, that experience ought to be presented as the grounds for explanation, then experience is the basis of linguistic explanation and explanation is the basis of theory.



What Alcoff offers O'Connor's theory are ways with which to speak about experience that is determined only by one's phenomenological embodiment of a body susceptible to the vulnerability of an attack, the vulnerability of the threat of violence. Though Young locates the issue of there being a lack of sexual difference recognized by Merleau-Ponty, and her phenomenological re-approach to what it is to be denied the subjective and constant "I can" of his philosophy offers a new way to think of and respect women's experiences in the world, her conception of gendered motility is problematic. Through Chisholm we see available a way in which one might re-engage in the world while exercising full motility *by* speaking about their experience under terms that locate experience, not current theory, as the basis of new theory.

## CONCLUSION

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological tradition, while revealing how perception structures for us our realities, is limited in its capacity to recognize a vulnerable body experiencing the world; this thesis functioned as a response to that tradition while additionally providing an account of intersubjectivity and authenticity of that vulnerable individual. The experienced reality of a human being is informed by their perception of their experiences, meaning that reality for any given individual is the reality constructed by the continuous interpretation of what they recognize while existing. This project grew from an attempt to explore subjectivity as a significant framework of one's presence in the world, and to thus examine that subjectivity as necessarily important when considering an other individual. The work prepared regarding the explicating theory and providing analysis intended to provide an alternative framework for approaching a phenomenological conception of an individual in the world who is subject to the inhibition of vulnerability.

In the preceding chapters I explicated a conceptualization of phenomenology framed by Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, a strategically body-oriented ontological account which would suggest the body-in-the-world and body-with-others as the foundation of human consciousness. It is Merleau-Ponty who identifies the body-consciousness as that which is grounded in a continually responsive framework of beingness that, evidenced by cases of substitution and anchoring, depicts the body as the site through which an identity is vividly created via animation and motility. By enacting the body, he argues that we enact our lives, and our embodiment is experienced as consciousness. It is our body which is our "point of view upon the world," and thus is the origin of the body-consciousness (Merleau-Ponty 70). The body-

consciousness, Merleau-Ponty argues, acts as both an outgoing and a forthcoming capacity for constructing a reality. Our bodies within the world, from which we perceive and towards which perceptions manifest themselves, are positioned by anchoring, by substitution, by various processes which establish our bodily space. The “I can” of expressed motility which establishes bodily space is the language by which Merleau-Ponty’s work grounds itself, denoting ability *and* intention.

This explication of Merleau-Ponty formed the introduction to my argument for a reconsideration of the nuances of bodily space, nuanced by interactions with an *other* individual. This analysis was supplemented by the works of Simone de Beauvoir and John Russon to approach Merleau-Ponty’s presentation of intersubjectivity with an understanding of bodily ambiguity as it pertains to experiencing an interpersonal erotic life. Ambiguity as discussed in these pages was approached as the state in which we exist both *with* and *for* others in an unpredictably constant sphere of reality. In this sense, de Beauvoir acutely locates what I identify as a site of vulnerability, or the point at which our (in Russon’s language) “fields of reality” intersect. For Russon, one’s field of reality is created by the nature of the body to “look *at* something, [to] balance *within* a larger world, [to] reach *out*, [to] grasp an *other*” (Russon 2009, 31). The accomplishments of the body to create such a field of reality ought not be taken for granted, however, as de Beauvoir’s notion of ambiguity (considered to be “conditions”) reveals that fields of reality balance together, intersect, and interact.

It is from this site of vulnerability that my argument of the limits of Merleau-Ponty’s work gains traction as I established, in the intersection of separated fields of reality, the emergence of potential violence. Vulnerability as experienced by the body is the experience of being a potential site of violence or assault from an *other*. Ultimately, my final chapter worked

with the ideas of Iris Marion Young that posed gendered motility as inherently in opposition to Merleau-Potny's phenomenological framework, presenting an alternative "I cannot" to the "I can" of his subject's motility. Her work was argued in such a way that the notion of "feminine motility" was revealed as inhibitory, but also problematic, and it was through the works of Linda Martín Alcoff and Dianne Chisholm that I reworked Young's shortfalls in ways that would represent phenomenology as *not* necessarily unusable for feminist theorists and theory. In much broader terms at the project's conclusion, I located O'Connor's argument as a way to augment the discussion of the female-gendered experience *through* phenomenology. By understanding the framework of vulnerability one can understand their own situatedness in the greater spectrum of interpersonal relationships affected by gender, race, location, etc., one understands how their ambiguity interacts with another's, and thus how social interconnectivity on the basis of bodily motility re-situates consciousness within a perspective of including sexual difference.

Phenomenology *reveals* the site of vulnerability, and reveals spatial embodiment that is crucial towards realizing that the language of feminist theory *supplements* experience in a way which is empowering and enabling for a utilization of fully embodied subjective experience. Phenomenology, in other words, affirms the real experiences of the body-in-the-world, but *must* function as a way that allows for *all* experiences that are affected by being both "object"-for-others as well as "subject"-for-self. Our identities are not established entirely in the functions of the body, the clearest point of contention held by de Beauvoir and Young against Merleau-Ponty, and receive the greatly varying impacts of gender, race, location, financial status, sexuality, etc. One's field of reality does not occur without the framework of social conditions, and my goal in this project was to establish an alternative to the phenomenological tradition which would

acknowledge in its theory differences, such as gender, that affect creating arguments based upon the experiences of one solid, objectively realized “subject.”

This project culminates for me in a turn towards the current state of gender and sexuality politics as they exist in contemporary society. In my final chapter I asked, utilizing Iris Marion Young’s presentation of a phenomenology which would allow for the relevance of gendered difference in accounting for peoples’ experiences, for a reconsideration of social ethics that root themselves in the very real, proven differences of gendered phenomenological experience. Given our arrival at an ontological interpretation of the world which accommodates for sexual difference, we ought to apply this understanding towards a politically progressive account of sexuality. Affirming the validity of peoples’ varying experiences of the world *because* of their gender and/or sexuality is not necessarily the point I am arguing: rather, to reveal that an understanding of intersubjectivity would mandate an inability for us to “affirm” anyone’s experiences, for they are already *real* in their accounted experiences. I turn to modern gender/sexuality politics to ground this project in a topical issue that is requiring the public’s attention not only to the legislative arguments but towards a larger respect for embodied, differentiated experiences.

The work of gender theorist and philosopher Judith Butler was a natural step following this turn towards the understanding of differentiated experience, as Butler’s own responses to Merleau-Ponty are deeply rooted in her understanding of gender as constructed and gender roles as normalized, not innate. Though Butler was acknowledged in the previous third chapter of this work for her recognition of the standard male subject in the phenomenological tradition, her political work with communicating gender and the LGBTQ community marks a substantial realm of possibility following my restructuring of “gendered motility.” Because of her rejection

of essentialist gender, Merleau-Ponty's ideas contain "normative, and therefore exclusionary, assumptions" about sexuality (Foultier 769). Anna Petronella Foultier, in her paper on Butler and Merleau-Ponty, advocates the mighty task of feminist phenomenology re-addressing Merleau-Ponty's *essentialist subject* underneath the knowledge of a heterosexual "matrix," to use Butler's terminology, pervading our culture's discourse about gender. Merleau-Ponty, Foultier states, is concerned with an "objectivistic 'matrix,'" or the structural layout of accepted social perception that would not account for phenomenological constructions of individual perception. However, his lack of attention towards the *importance* of a gendered body within Butler's heterosexual matrix, rather the structure set forth by society which would normalize a typical, male, heterosexual frame of mind as the standard, is missing what Butler deems the most tenuous piece of constructed perception: the *outside effect* cultural notions of gender have upon one's being.

In her text *Giving an Account of Oneself* Butler argues, "If I try to make myself recognizable and understandable, then I might begin with a narrative account of my life. But this narrative will be disoriented by what is not mine, or not mine alone" (Butler 37). She sets forward such a notion under the awareness that using the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, one does not accomplish a narrative accurate to an individual's perceived experience, and rather what is "not mine alone" affects and takes hold of one's continuous recognized existence. When we consider Butler's alternate narratives, and when we consider Peg O'Connor's connection of vulnerable experience with narrative language, we arrive at potential methods of ethically being with and *for* others with recognition and awareness of the uniqueness of a person's subjectivity, affected by not just their perception but by the perception of others upon them, and the initial individual's ability to communicate that subjectivity.

To examine these theoretical notions on a broader scale, the LGBTQ movement of the 2010's is one that is, I argue, deeply rooted in the fight to achieve proper respect for the very real, very differentiated lived experiences of people who do not embody the standard, objective subject. The LGBTQ movement grounds itself in other politically topical areas of revelation, as well, including (but not limited to) sexual assault dynamics and statistics, gender roles both linguistic and enacted, and heteronormative values which create most of our patriarchal frameworks in contemporary society. When bodily experience is understood as not innately but still constantly affected by external social conditions, we might offer a starting point for initiating dialogue that brings mutual respect to experiences differentiated by gender. While this project was not necessarily political in tone, I impress upon its readers the importance of considering phenomenologically-explored sexual difference as a *necessary* turning point in the impact of philosophy upon social relations, both now and for the future.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alcoff, Linda Martín. "Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Theory on Experience." *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*. Eds. Evans, Fred and Leonard Lawlor. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000. 251-273. Print.

Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham UP, 2005. Print.

Chisholm, Dianne. "Climbing Like A Girl: An Exemplary Adventure In Feminist Phenomenology." *Hypatia: A Journal Of Feminist Philosophy* 23.1 (2008): 9-40. MLA International Bibliography. Web. 16 Sept. 2016.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. New York: Kensington Publishing Corp, 1976. Print.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2012. Print.

O'Connor, Peg. *Oppression and Responsibility: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Social Practices and Moral Theory*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002. Print.

Petronella Foulter, Anna. "Language And The Gendered Body: Butler's Early Reading Of Merleau-Ponty." *Hypatia: A Journal Of Feminist Philosophy* 28.4 (2013): 767-783. Web.



Russon, John. *Bearing Witness to Epiphany: Persons, Things, and the Nature of Erotic Life*.

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009. Print.

Russon, John. *Human Experience: Philosophy, Neurosis, and the Elements of Everyday Life*.

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003. Print.

Young, Iris Marion. "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment,

Motility, and Spatiality." *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*.

Eds. Jeffner, Allen and Iris Marion Young. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

51-70. Print.

Zeiler, Kristin. "A Phenomenology Of Excorporation, Bodily Alienation, And Resistance:

Rethinking Sexed And Racialized Embodiment." *Hypatia: A Journal Of Feminist*

*Philosophy* 28.1 (2013): 69-84. Philosopher's Index. Web. 1 Mar. 2015.