

University of Denver

Digital Commons @ DU

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate Studies


---

1-1-2013

## Sense-Making Bodies: Feminist Materiality and Phenomenology in Constructive Body Theologies

Heike Peckruhn  
*University of Denver*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Continental Philosophy Commons](#), [Feminist Philosophy Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Peckruhn, Heike, "Sense-Making Bodies: Feminist Materiality and Phenomenology in Constructive Body Theologies" (2013). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 994.  
<https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/994>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu), [dig-commons@du.edu](mailto:dig-commons@du.edu).

SENSE-MAKING BODIES: FEMINIST MATERIALITY AND PHENOMENOLOGY  
IN CONSTRUCTIVE BODY THEOLOGIES

---

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology

Joint PhD Program

---

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

---

by

Heike Peckruhn

June 2013

Advisor: Dr. Deborah Beth Creamer

©Copyright by Heike Peckruhn 2013

All Rights Reserved

Author: Heike Peckruhn

Title: Sense-Making Bodies: Feminist Materiality and Phenomenology in Constructive Body Theologies

Advisor: Dr. Deborah Beth Creamer

Degree Date: June 2013

## **ABSTRACT**

Constructive body theology provides an ethical commitment to and a set of analytical principles for understanding bodily experience. If we insist upon the theological value of embodied experience, how can we give an adequate account of it? Are feminist appeals to the senses useful in developing theological truth claims based in embodied experiences? Feminist theologies which explicitly seek to overcome body/mind dualisms often reinscribe them when they neglect to attend to perception as a critical element of bodily experience. Phenomenological analyses of perception (such as suggested by Merleau-Ponty) strengthen and refine our conception of embodiment. Grounding constructive theology in experience requires understanding experience as bodily perceptual orientation, as perceptual bodily and cultural acts involved in socially and historically situated contextual meaning-making processes. This shift expands phenomenological concepts such as intentionality and habit, and allows for a comparative investigation of historical and cultural differences in embodied experiences through examples found in sensory anthropology. Body theology, framed as principles, strengthens theological projects (such as those by Carter Heyward and Marcella Althaus-Reid, as well as new constructive possibilities) through opening dialogical avenues of exploration into embodied being in the world. Body theology principles help us conceive of and address how our bodily experiencing—our feeling, tasting, hearing, imaging,

remembering and other sensory knowledge —comes to matter in our lives, especially where oppressive forces viscerally affect embodied life.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation project has been supported by many persons. My advisor, Dr. Deborah Creamer, generously shared with me her time, wisdom, enthusiasm about this project. Without her scholarly prodding and providing spaces of collegiality, this project could not have been conceived and completed. Gratitude goes to Dr. Edward Antonio, Dr. Jacob Kinnard, and Dr. Alison Schofield, who challenged me to embody and articulate theory and theology complexly, clearly and coherently. Instances of importance and relevance in this project are directly connected to the influence and guidance of my advisory committee. Thank you. My gratitude goes out to “my” writing group, other friends and colleagues for their generous support, collegial encouragement, good humor, and patient walking-with: Dr. Tink Tinker, Dr. Julie Todd, Dr. Katherine Turpin, Elizabeth Coody, Dave Scott, Eu Kit Lim, Emily Kahm, Dr. Yvonne Zimmerman, Ben Sanders III, Dr. Brad Klein, Katie Fisher, Alice Runis, Mary Olson, Mary Ragan, Susan Humble, Kristi Dale, Dr. Heike Geist. Special thanks to Kathleen Wohlgemuth and Dr. Aaron Conley, keen eyes for detail, coherence, and clarity strengthened this project. I give thanks to my family: My mother Unchalee and father Gernot have helped me to use my wings. Their steadfast support of me, love for me, and pride in me are precious gifts. My sister Tanja loves and supports me across distances, and I am grateful for her example of living with persistence, faith, and joy. My ancestors, especially Oma Edith and Kun Yay, inspire and guide me, and teach me about the meanings of home. Finally, I am deeply grateful to my loving and supportive spouse, Brooke Fawley. Without her steady encouragement and patience, her vital emotional, intellectual, mental support, and unwavering love I would not have been able to undergo a project of this magnitude.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Chapter One: Introduction Of Body Theology .....	1
Bodily Experience.....	4
Representation of Difference in Experience .....	9
Constructive Body Theology .....	12
“Constructive” Theology .....	16
“Body Theology” –a Brief Detour on Definitions So Far .....	17
Framing a “Constructive Body Theology” .....	24
Project Outline .....	29
Chapter Two: Situating Feminist Theologies Phenomenologically .....	32
Situating Bodily Experience and Perception in Feminist Theology .....	33
Conceiving Perception .....	47
Concepts of Perception: Relevance in and to Theological Projects .....	49
Situating the Theological Sense Regarding Perception .....	84
Moving Beyond the Empiricism-Intellectualism Spectrum .....	89
Chapter Three: Bodily Experience And Perceptual Orientation.....	96
Bodily Perceptual Orientation in the World as Condition of Being .....	102
Bodily Perceptual Orientations: Theoretical Assertions.....	103
Perceptual Intentionality: Perceptual Experience of Gender .....	109
Habits and Perceptual Orientations: Perceptual Experiences of Race....	137
Language and Perception of Normalcy.....	157
Conclusion .....	186
Chapter Four: Comparing Bodily Perceptual Orientations.....	193
Bodily Perceptual Orientations: Historical and Cultural Differences.....	199
Differently Gendered Bodily Intentionality .....	203
Perceiving Others’ Bodies Differently.....	223
Perceiving Normalcy Differently.....	236
Conclusion .....	260
Chapter Five: Body Theology.....	263
Principles of Body Theology .....	267
Body Theology Approaches .....	270
Touching the Strength of Carter Heyward.....	272
Aligning with Indecency and Marcella Althaus-Reid .....	284
Orientation of Family Bodies.....	297
Making Home in New Spaces.....	298
Body Theologies at Home .....	311

Conclusion .....	321
Coda: Sensing Futurities .....	324
References.....	332



## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION OF BODY THEOLOGY**

I was preparing a presentation on the importance of embodiment to theory and theology at a national academic conference in 2010 when I received a phone call from my father: “Oma passed away last night.” Oma, my paternal grandmother, had been part of the household I grew up in and had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease 13 years prior. “Don’t come to the funeral,” my parents insisted. “We’re too busy taking care of things here. Besides, she’d been dying for a long time. You’ve got other things to do. Go to your conference.”

But as family matters often do, bereavement and processing the death of a person infused those “other things” (like presenting about embodiment) with emotions and questions. I asked myself, “How could it be that my thoughts and activities are still centered on a body now dead, the final passing of a person whom I began mourning almost a decade ago?” Alzheimer’s disease had brought on physical, mental, and emotional changes in the loving and doting grandmother who had a significant part in raising me. Changes in personality and physical and mental capabilities required adjustments in our relationship. I had to let go of the person I had come to know. Grandmom spent the last years of her life in a nursing home, requiring more intensive care than my father, who had been her primary caretaker, could provide.

Reflecting on those last years of her at home and in nursing care, I thought about the peculiarity of our household she has been part of—my parents, my sister and I musing

out loud about her mental state, her being “like a vegetable”—and yet so much of our lives, especially the daily lives and routines of my parents, revolved around this body. What agency did this body hold? What power did it assert in the physical space of our home and our experiences together in it, even as we stopped searching for emotional and mental cues to help us relate? Why were the daily activities of my parents managed by this body with declining cognitive capacities, even when (to us) her eyes lost signs of comprehending her environment, and my father, the last person she was able to recognize, became a stranger to her?

\*\*\*

This dissertation is about bodies, bodily experiences, sense-perception, difference, and theology. It is a reflection grounded in feminist commitments, a reflection on how theologians interested in understanding and analyzing bodily experiences need to begin by framing them as integral to the process of our meaning-making, to our socio-cultural expressions, as integral to how we relate to the world and how we find and invest value. This project joins a long line of feminist theological ventures, asserting the importance of experience in theorizing, the importance of difference to experience, and the varieties of embodiments demanding attention when thinking about difference. However, this is not a project seeking to elaborate on the merits of specific experiences as resource by narrating the particularity of the experience and accounting for the ways in which it is useful to theology. Instead, I seek to highlight the significance of complexly conceiving of bodily experience intertwined with processes of perception, so that experience is not simply one among many possible starting points, but *the* realm of meaning making. Ultimately, theologies which seek to begin with a critical analysis of the human condition need to be

able to account for the ways in which bodily experience is the ground for the various dimensions of our lives.

Cartesian/Kantian epistemologies locate the primacy of validation of knowledge in objective rationality. Feminist theories and theologies, too, have suffered compartmentalization as a result of rationalist epistemologies by failing to complexly conceive of the body-mind-world connection they seek to frame in order to overcome body/mind dualisms. The contribution of this dissertation is framed by taking another look at the utilizing of experience itself. I will demonstrate that theologies which understand themselves as accessing, retrieving, and mining bodily experience as resource too often end up failing themselves. They do this by perpetuating certain Cartesian presuppositions they aim to overcome, specifically in regards to bodily experience and perception.

In this project, I explore bodily experience as a theological resource. I will take a closer look at the embodied dimensions of our existence in the world, rather than approaching bodily experience through the discursive, through analyses of social constructions (though not neglecting this dimension). I will utilize “body theology,” which I will frame as analytical principles grounded in and emerging out of understanding our bodily perceptual orientations in the world. Rather than acting as theologizing subjects, exploring material reality and turning to access our bodily experience of it, we need to begin with conceiving of bodily experience as the fundamental condition of our subjectivity. Thus body theology needs to approach bodily experience as the realm through which to understand socio-cultural ideologies traversing and impeding on our bodies, whilst also being the realm which constructs and conveys

socio-cultural ideologies through perceptual values and practices evident in our bodily experience.

As I engage in this work, I appreciate the discursive analysis of experience but wonder about the underlying presuppositions embedded in methods which *access* and *utilize* embodied aspects of experience. My goal is to present an approach, “body theology,” as a critical framework for our understanding of human experiences and embodied differences. I will make a case that we need to take bodily sensory perception seriously in order to understand bodily experiences for the sake of critical theological analysis, not just in feminist theologies and discourse, but generally in the “Cartesian-based” field of theology as well.

### **Bodily Experience**

“Experience is a reality that needs explaining,” Mary McClintock Fulkerson charges as she demands that feminist theologians do the work of connecting systems of discourse and social relations to their claims of experienced reality.<sup>1</sup> Though this claim was made twenty years ago, I will make the case that indeed experience is still a reality that demands explaining, even *after* these critical and complex connections to discourse are made.

The complicated enmeshment of experience and discourse, of embodiment and language, has gained attention with the application of poststructuralist methods and theories of social constructivism. Especially after Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, neither feminist theory nor feminist theology has been the same: The implications of language

---

<sup>1</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), viii.

and discourse on embodied experiences are now available to critical investigation.<sup>2</sup>

“Experience” has become a resource to be defined and handled carefully.<sup>3</sup> It now needs to be thought of in relation to power structures and linguistic systems, lest we run the risk of oversimplifying and excluding differences to the point of inducing harm for the sake of harnessing experiences of chosen identity groups, for example, “women.”

In light of Judith Butler’s claim that language and materiality are fully embedded in each other, but nevertheless not reducible to each other,<sup>4</sup> I question methodologies that seek to *access* and *utilize* embodied experience. When appealing to experience as a resource, feminist theologians often rely upon narratives of experience, which makes the above-mentioned need for discourse analysis necessary. But if our bodily experience, the material reality of bodily life, is irreducible to a *thing we have*, what are we missing by focusing on discourse, and, what are we presupposing when resourcing bodily experience?<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> The elaboration and description of “experience” is one of the aims of this project, I will forego a specific definition here and refer the reader to the following chapters, particularly chapter three.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits Of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 69.

<sup>5</sup> In terms of political analysis of experience, the prevailing mode of accounting for and responding to social events has been what Davide Panagia termed “narratocracy,” or “the rule of the narrative.” Panagia argues that offering narrative lines is coupling of the visual with the textual, rendering events readable by incising a story line into the field of vision. This commits vision to readerly sight (while at the same time partitioning the body into areas of sensory competency. Panagia investigates the regimes of perception and their political power. He questions political strategies such as those of Judith Butler, who seek to offer aggressive counterreadings (i.e., changing the story lines), and offers parallel (not replacement) strategies, namely, enacting reconfigurations of the sensible. Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). This project seeks to inquire into the sensible, as to more complexly grasp how it might configure our social life (and inspire imaginations into possible reconfigurations).

If we as theologians appeal to embodied experience, we must do the work of attending to the sensory perceptual aspects of embodiment, the bodily capacities and orientation to the world, in order to investigate the complex ways in which our experience is facilitated and shaped in and through our bodily existence in the world. For example, the questions nagging in the back of my mind as I developed this project centered on Oma's experience: Without much short-term memory and failing long-term memory, how does she experience her life? Does it matter if I am there with her? Does she experience the love and care, the frustration and bitterness extended towards her? Does she still know \_\_\_\_? And how would we know about what she experiences, considering the symptoms of Alzheimer's (affecting brain receptors and neural connections, loss of neurons)? I had watched my grandmother unresponsive to the smell of burning milk and other sensory stimuli which should have evoked a response. Does she experience \_\_\_\_? How do we begin to understand bodily experience or the criteria for it? If my grandmother does not "have" experiences such as memory, desire, pain, fear, etc., anymore, or at the least, does not have the capacity to express them or respond to perceptual stimuli through verbal or physical responses, what does that imply about her bodily existence? Theologically, speaking from a feminist perspective, has she lost her subjectivity, her capacities for meaning-making, for orienting herself in the world? What makes this body an experiencing person? Whose experience is now (more or less) valuable in the sourcing of theology?

My academic interest in theology had put me on a path ready to explore some of these questions. Because of its insistence on experience (particularly women's experience) as a resource, feminist theology became an important methodological

touchstone. Theologians who affirm “women’s experience” as a theological resource hold different conceptualizations of “experience” and employ them in a variety of ways.<sup>6</sup> Yet more often than not, that humans “experience” is presupposed, but the *how* of experiencing is left unexamined, which posits it in an a-contextual way. In other words, feminist theologians may insist on differences in experience, yet the analytical structures to reflect on “experience” are considered to be foundational and generalizing-able, and stable enough to be universally applicable.

Bodily experience is not a dimension of experience separate from, say, socialized or historical experience, but rather the one grounding all “other” experiences.<sup>7</sup> Yet bodily experience is also a contested space, a space deeply paradoxical, sociopolitical, and intensely personal, as disability scholar Christopher Newell alerts us, because it acknowledges the person experiencing, rather than remaining grounded in the objects

---

<sup>6</sup> “Experience,” as we have already discovered thus far (and will discuss throughout this dissertation), continues to be a term accompanied by various presuppositions as well as common sense assertions. This dissertation will explore experience as bodily perceptual orientation. Other scholars, depending on discipline, have defined (or utilized without definition) “experience” in various other ways. Pamela Young provides a distinction of five categories of experience conceived of in feminist theological reflections: *bodily* experience, *socialized* experience (experience of being made into a ‘woman’ by society with its construction of femininity), *feminist* experience (response to and radical questioning of socialized experience), *historical* experience (recovery of women’s history), and *individual* experience. Serene Jones, “Women’s Experience between a Rock and a Hard Place: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Theologies in North America,” *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms* (1997): 34. “Experience” as a term and category has undergone a plethora of philosophical conceptualizations. In general, when I refer to “experience,” I aim to refer to the modes of sensing, knowing, understanding, moving in, engaging with, being familiar with, learning, thinking, imagining, etc., the world. This incorporates “experience” as practice or skill (as in having experience in typing), but is also much more general in terms of what makes up my grasp and engagement in a situation, “experience” as that which I will explore in chapters three and four as “bodily perceptual orientation in the world.”

<sup>7</sup> As cited in Elizabeth Stuart, “Experience and Tradition: Just Good Friends,” in *Sources and Resources of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Elisabeth Hartlieb and Charlotte Methuen (Mainz, Germany: Matthias-Gruenewald Verlag, 1997), 51. While I do not believe that these categories are necessarily exclusive, they are useful in highlighting what kind of experience an author engages (even if she does not point this out explicitly herself), and this naming of differences is useful to demonstrate the openness and fluidity of the term.

experienced and the validated ways of gaining knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Bodily experience is a space that is socially shaped: to analyze the space of bodily experience we can focus on socio-cultural accounts of oppression of people with certain kinds of bodies and specifically the prejudice and injustices bestowed upon them. Yet this personal space is also deeply physical: the realities of flux and deterioration are embodied and undeniable in each of our own existences. This paradoxical nature of bodily experience can create a space for reflections that come from experiences that are deeply personal, unique, and embodied; reflections on the projects of culture and theology that are subject-centered (not “subjective” in an individualized sense).

The important question regarding bodily experience is not whether but *how* it will be valued. Is it just one kind of experience, one that brings out particularities of an individual context? If so, then the challenge identified for theology remains that of making room for narratives about bodily experiences, especially those marginalized, and to create space for narratives that speak about undervalued, suppressed experiences, to allow for a voice commonly denied to speak against that which has come to be seen as acceptable. Yet this trajectory still maintains bodily experience as a marginal, subjective, and particular object of inquiry. It maintains that its relevance is always in question and in need of justification in the presence of universalized and generalized critical theorizing and philosophical analyzing. With and throughout this project, I will show how *all* experience is essentially bodily experience, and how theology as a critical inquiry into

---

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Newell, "On the Importance of Suffering: The Paradoxes of Disability," in *The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L'arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences.*, ed. Hans S. Reinders (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 174-175.



our being in the world needs to consider experience as a resource by attending to bodily experience and the way it situates us in the world.

### **Representation of Difference in Experience**

To answer the question of how we might value bodily experiences, we must be able to account for differences in bodily experiences and their representation. Rather than simply acknowledging that difference in experience exists, we also need to account for how they come to be, and how these differences might “travel” in representations.<sup>9</sup>

My mother, a native of Thailand, still struggles to express herself in German even though she has lived in Germany for over 35 years. Returning home after a post-high school year abroad, I found my mother cooking in an outdoor kitchen, a repurposed garage. Even after some probing, all Mom would tell me then was, “That’s just how I like it. It’s easier that way.” To an observer, the actual food preparation, cooking, and cleaning procedures did not seem “easier.” And there was much worry, especially on her daughters’ sides, about how we should “explain this” to others who perceive us—about the story or image we would try to convey to those friends and neighbors visiting and seeing and partaking in (or refusing) our newly formed cooking and eating habits. But what was the untold story behind this moving of daily home activities to the outside of the house?

Over the 14 years of outdoor cooking that followed, Mom would sometimes begin to share with me about my grandmother banning her to prepare certain foods at home, particularly foods that would offend my grandmother’s sense of smell. I began understanding my mother’s actions as resistance and preservation of self and identity.

---

<sup>9</sup> Wonhee Anne Joh discusses the issue of representation in theology after poststructural, postmodern, and postcolonial turns, specifically the questions regarding adequate representation of difference. Wonhee Anne Joh, "Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology," (2006): 5-70.

Part of my mother's story, which I have come to learn in bits and pieces over the years, is her suffering under the control and abuse of her mother-in-law (the loving and doting grandmother of my childhood), experiences of which I would not learn until I reached adulthood. Even today, I think I only have heard few and select experiences, and I often hear my mother struggle for words and then say "If you'd understand Thai, I could tell you." If I shared my mother's language, I would have a different (though not necessarily complete) understanding of her practices and rituals at home, which do not always make sense to me, and which do not always have an easily-constructed narrative to explain them. Yet there are some things I begin to get a glimpse of, ways in which differences in experience I tend to overlook make themselves known, differences struggling to find their expression through language. A similar trace is found in Mom's insistence on not re-inhabiting certain rooms in the home until renovation and remodeling erased not only visual markers of my late grandmother, but until certain smells associated with Grandmom had vanished.

In my work, I want to follow these glimpses and traces of difference and find a way for them to take up space in critical scholarship. Without (creating) a space for the lack of voice, for the inability to communicate to fill common space, we will always fall into speaking about, rather than with, those persons without the ability to access language proper. Newell writes in regards to suffering, "Part of the cultural context of suffering is the ubiquitous tendency to worry about its adequate representation rather than actually allowing it to be present."<sup>10</sup> This is a sentiment shared by postcolonial scholars thinking about representation, misrepresentation, voice and agency. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's

---

<sup>10</sup> Newell, 174-175.

often-cited essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* discusses the dynamics of power and race as epistemic violence inflicted on subaltern consciousness and voice.<sup>11</sup> Postcolonial scholarship then reminds me of the academic and cultural tendencies to worry about adequate representation of cultural difference and the inclinations to represent *for* the other rather than creating conditions that support the (embodied) presence and recognition of difference.

Returning to my mother, I am left wondering what my mother's communication about her experiences is about. In a sense, we both seem left without access to language when it comes to communicating about our experiences to each other. The narratives she gives me in a language not native and comfortable to her, and the narratives I tend to create for her, are they really adequate? Or are they possibly grossly inadequate to even begin thinking about her experience? Thinking about my mother guides my reflections in two related directions: the already-mentioned presence of cultural difference and epistemic violence inflicted on different consciousness and voice; and the sought-after manifestation of difference outside of narratives, the difference present in sensory perceptual acts and experiences. What are the glimpses into my mother's experiences that I can gain by paying attention to her perceptual acts, rather than solely relying on narratives? How can I begin to understand my relation to her world of experience, despite

---

<sup>11</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). Spivak argues that the subaltern can speak, but cannot be heard unless the voice is changed. Any attempt to make audible the voice of subalterns is the subjection of the latter to epistemic violence: Granting the subaltern a collective voice by the intellectual expressing solidarity homogenizes the irretrievable heterogeneity of subaltern subjects, and in the same vein establishes a dependence on Western intellectuals or postcolonial subjects situated in the West to speak *for* the subaltern rather than creating conditions of audibility. Furthermore, in the conceptualization of subaltern historiography, the male remains dominant as subject and thus the female subaltern is doubly effaced. Postcolonial studies, in their attempts to recover subaltern voices and consciousness, are complicit in the re-inscription of colonial and neo-colonial political domination and exploitation.

the gap between our social and cultural structuring of selves and identity? How do I begin to think about the realms of perception in which difference manifests, and how does it relate to experience?

Reflecting on both my mother and my grandmother, I begin to think that bodily experiences are grounds of practices, values, meaning making, and theologies. And in both cases, different as they may be, bodily experience demands attention not as one realm, but as *the* realm from which to understand how our existence in the world makes sense. Bodily experience is the site from which to begin critical theological analyses, and we need to come to this site by inquiring into sensory perception.

### **Constructive Body Theology**

As a theologian working to be attentive to difference via feminist and postcolonial theories, I notice that much has been and is being said in regards to the particularities of bodies, bodily experience, and how bodily differences (race, class, gender, ability, sex, pain, etc.) affect particularities in meaning making. Feminist and postcolonial theologians attentive to particularities in embodiment begin with this acknowledgment: Bodies make a difference as they situate us in the world; our embodiment makes a difference in how we perceive and are perceived by our environment, and thus how we actively make meaning, how we do theology in this world. Beginning with this shared theoretical conviction, I bring several concerns and questions (initiated by my personal interests partially sketched out above) to this project:

- If difference in bodily experience and embodied difference provide the starting point for body theology, what then, is bodily experience, and how does difference come into play? Maintaining that bodily experience is just

“something we have” not only maintains the power of (re)definition and (re)narration in the eye of the beholder, but also often leads to universalizing articulations of a generalized “normal” and to pathologizing taxonomies of differences and deviance.

- What might be at stake when references to sense perception and perceptual experiences are made without providing a more thorough investigation of perceptual processes (and thereby implicitly or explicitly referring to commonsense notions of “sensing the world”)?
- How do we move from body metaphor theology to body theology? It seems that most theologies gathered under the label of “body theologies” are better named “body metaphor theologies”.<sup>12</sup> What would it look like if we would move from exploring metaphors provided in bodily images toward a theology which begins from bodily experience and bodies as the locus and medium of our thinking? What is the difference in these approaches and what difference does it make in the constructing of theologies?

I pursue this exploration of bodily experience as an interdisciplinary project, but want to situate this project as *constructive body theology*. A few opening comments are in order to clarify this label.

To locate an investigation into bodily experience explicitly in/as theology might seem like a self-defeating project to some feminist sensibilities. Those committed to the human sciences may wonder whether a discipline like theology, seemingly committed to

---

<sup>12</sup> See chapter two for evidence of this claim.

metaphysical matters, has any regards for the rules and methodologies guiding science (for example building theory on scientifically gained evidence). Theologians reading this project may wonder about the use of drawing in scholars who seem to ignore questions regarding underpinnings values in their theories. Whichever academic discipline we are trained in, we often come to believe that it is our field which explains the world best. Yet it is only because of the limited scope of scientific methods that we come to produce any knowledge at all. Learning about the limitations of the kind of knowledge that our own field produces can help us to appreciate difference and thus be open to dialogue and interdisciplinary (yet still limited) knowledge production. An academic community needs to learn to forego claims of unity and wholeness in its disciplinary taxonomies which tend to impose particular perspectives on the realm of human experience and distort the varieties and differences present around us.<sup>13</sup>

I am convinced that important contributions can be made in anchoring analysis of bodily experience explicitly within the theological, though in an interdisciplinary conversation with other disciplines constructively taking up embodiment: sociology, anthropology, and phenomenology particularly are the disciplines selected here to speak in a dialogical fashion of the constructive potential offered by theology in the deconstructive age of cultural analysis.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Hans S. Reinders, "Human Vulnerability: A Conversation at L'arche," in *The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L'arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences*, ed. Hans S. Reinders (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Most feminist theologians I have read and learned from thus far, owe what is distinctly "feminist" in their works to the questions and methodologies of feminist theorists, and my own theological thinking displays similar directionality of influence. The relationship between feminist theory and feminist theology is often that of the former influencing the latter, rather than the reverse, and even rather than a mutual dialogue between the two. However, or especially now, I seek to employ a dialogical method, rather than a one-directional conversation.

I present this project as a theological one with two premises in mind. First, as a scholar located in Western culture wherein Christianity has forged so many wider cultural perspectives and habits, I cannot properly understand and work out of my own context without at least referencing Christian theology. I agree with Mieke Bal that one of Western culture's interlocking structures is (Christian) theological in nature, and as such it informs the cultural imaginary, and that relevant theology today must be a cultural discipline.<sup>15</sup> Thus, I understand the study of religion and my theological project as necessarily engaging in cultural analysis while understanding at the same time that cultural analysis needs to take into account theological imaginations and frameworks at play in socio-cultural expressions. Further, any investigation into concepts with bodily implications/dimensions today that is located in the Western academy (as this project is) is done within an imaginary that is born and still steeped in religious and Western Christian theological legacies, not the least of these being Cartesian and Kantian infused philosophical frameworks.<sup>16</sup>

The second premise of my understanding and defending my project as theological is also based in the conviction that any investigation into the body today must be interdisciplinary. Religion and theology are but one in a cluster of permeable arenas of

---

<sup>15</sup> Mieke Bal, "Postmodern Theology as Cultural Analysis," in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 4-5.

<sup>16</sup> I will name some of these Cartesian and Kantian legacies more specifically in the next two chapters. At this point, I want to assert that while some might disagree with my naming the works of Descartes and Kant as either Christian or theological—even both—since their philosophical work is a project of exercising rational reasoning over against religious/metaphysical speculation, it is precisely their situatedness in Western Christian culture that structures their philosophies. To invoke a deconstructive analysis, it is the engagement of reason and rationality over against Christian religion and theology that positions their philosophical voice within a Western Christian theo-cultural discourse (e.g., their engaging in philosophical debates regarding the method of inquiry into metaphysical issues, such as the existence of God).

social life. Knowledge in life is not experienced as compartmentalized, and any discipline today must acknowledge interdisciplinarity if it wants to be relevant in a dynamic present. Much of the feminist theory that has influenced feminist theology has drawn explicitly on what are considered non-religious disciplines (medical sciences, anthropology, philosophy, physics), specifically in order to overcome religious concepts of the body considered oppressive to women. Theology then can neither be a separate discipline, nor be treated as the ignored presence in a cultural theory dialogue, in which other disciplines develop the theory and theology receives/criticizes the pieces it can use to stay relevant as a specialized field.

#### “Constructive” Theology

As a Christian theologian, I add the descriptor “constructive” to the kind of work I see myself engaging in. My brief explanation is first a differentiation. I understand constructive theology to engage in the task of taking up questions and concepts of meaning, world, and humanity for the contemporary context, while attending to the shaping influences of histories of ideas and theological traditions, as well as the particularities of the present location. While sharing certain intersections and overlapping in theories and methods, constructive theology thus is different from, for example, historical, systematic, or biblical theology. Second, I offer a proposition: I understand constructive theology *today* to be most apt to the task sketched above if it acknowledges and makes use of certain poststructural ideas and methods. This includes attending to the structures of language and the productions of culture, presenting a complex context of



influences, investments, contesting/conforming discourses, and power dynamics which precede modes of experience, interpretations and thus theological constructions.<sup>17</sup>

Third, and perhaps for some readers most controversially, I propose that constructive theology today must not be, by literal definition, “god-talk.”<sup>18</sup> Theology must not be equaled with dogma but rather understood as a “method by which to analyze human experience... [T]heology in particular allow[s] for interrogation of the cultural underpinning found within all human endeavors.”<sup>19</sup> Theology is an analytical scheme then, and a constructive theology which investigates bodily experience must be interdisciplinary (because it seeks to engage the vast resource of “human experience” explored in vast volumes of inquire in various disciplines) if it wants to attend to the ways in which questions and concepts of meaning, world, and humanity emerge from, come together in and traverse our human existence and experience as bodies.

#### “Body Theology”—a Brief Detour on Definitions So Far

“Body Theology” is most popularly known as the title of James B. Nelson’s 1992 publication.<sup>20</sup> Nelson places incarnation at the center of the theological imagination.

---

<sup>17</sup> I follow here what different theologians have described and exemplified in Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, eds., *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> I take my cues from Anthony B. Pinn, who argues that a non-theistic theology does not need to be an atheistic theology. Rather, it is taking seriously theology as a method to analyze human experience, but rather than arguing for the existence of God and its ramifications, non-theistic theology understands God as a symbol, albeit a symbol that has outlived its usefulness. Anthony B. Pinn, *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3-5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4. Pinn grounds his theological inquiries in the experiences of African-American communities in the United States to develop his African-American nontheistic humanist theology, rethinking various dimensions of embodied life. He, too, turns to the resource of embodiment, though choosing photography and architecture.

<sup>20</sup> James B. Nelson, *Body Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1992). Nelson first used the term “body theology” in an earlier work in reference to embodiment and sexual theology. “Sexual theology is body theology. We experience our concreteness as body-selves occupying

Claiming sexuality as the grounding reality—the basic dimension of personhood—he seeks to develop a positive account of all aspects of embodiment as source of revelation. Rather than developing norms for the use of the body by means of theological reflection, or describing the body in theological terms, he proposes to do theology as “critical reflection on *bodily experience* as a fundamental realm of the experience of God.”<sup>21</sup> This turn to bodily experience was significant, yet his resourcing of bodily experience for theology largely framed bodily experiences as metaphors for theological exploration.

“Body Theology” surfaced again in 1998 as the distinct name of a field of study with the publication of *Introducing Body Theology* by Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, in which body theology is categorized as theology which allows “the body and its experiences to be a site of revelation.”<sup>22</sup> One might argue that any Christian theology, with its doctrinal claims of divine incarnation in a human body, inherently must be body theology, thus making a separate naming redundant and delineation as a field superfluous. Yet, as Isherwood and Stuart point out, while divine incarnation and redemption wrought through the body of Christ could have laid the foundation of body-

---

space in a concrete world.” James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 20. One more book bears this title, published earlier by Arthur Vogel, though it is Nelson’s work which gained most attention and is most referenced in a query on “body theology.” Arthur A. Vogel, *Body Theology: God's Presence in Man's World* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1973). Interestingly to me is that both Vogel and Nelson ground their understanding of the body in concepts by Merleau-Ponty, a philosopher of the phenomenological movement to whom I will return later in this project.

<sup>21</sup> Nelson, *Body Theology*, 43. Emphasis mine.

<sup>22</sup> Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 40.

positive theologies and practices, the history of theology as it is embedded in various religious, political and philosophical discourses proves otherwise.<sup>23</sup>

Isherwood and Stuart introduce body theology as a field of study which is norm-defying in its being positively body-centered, albeit still an emerging way of doing theology.<sup>24</sup> With their volume situated in a series called “Introductions in Feminist Theology,” it is not surprising that the framework within which the authors present, evaluate and critique body theologies is that of taking the female body (in its particularity) as normative,<sup>25</sup> and emphasizing bodily experience as central in order to “create theology through the body and not about the body.”<sup>26</sup>

As introduction, this volume presents a range of theologies which “do” body theology, for example, feminist, womanist, and disability theologies, lesbian, gay, and queer theologies, and ecofeminist theologies each receive mention in this volume, and the future direction of body theology is projected to develop the concerns of gender, sexuality and ecojustice further. The authors point to the phenomenological and suggest future attention to the sensual dimension of bodily experience, as well as the need for new constructions in theological anthropology as aim and constructive contribution of body theology.

Importantly, the methodological approach put forward in this introductory volume suggests to place “what we feel and experience in our everyday lives at the heart of how

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 15-17.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 22.

we begin to understand God;” it suggests that experience is contextual and situated, and fundamental assumptions underpinning experiences must be named; that “interpretation is as embodied as the experience itself;” and that “we are related to the things we experience.”<sup>27</sup> I resonate with these suggestions, yet much of the introductory exploration points towards theologies which nevertheless frame “the body” as a site of investigation (asking how a specific body comes to be in a specific context), a site of revelation (what does a specific body “mean” in a specific context), as locus of speech (what is said through a specific body), questions which may maintain “the body” as an object of and through which we learn. This kind of approach upholds a dualism of body/mind in implicit ways by treating “the body” as *something to do with* theologically. And though “body theology” is framed as “theology through the body and not about the body,”<sup>28</sup> the theological examples and theologians featured more often than not present bodily experience (or narratives thereof, as for example in biblical stories) as symbol or metaphor to construct liberative theological visions.<sup>29</sup>

When “Body Theology” again appears in a title ten years later, it is in the series “Controversies in Contextual Theology,” in which editors Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood seek the continuation of dealing with the “harsher realities of the body and the way in which it manifests and reacts in the world and most importantly to the

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>29</sup> James Nelson’s aforementioned book is referred to in *Introduction to Body Theology*, but he is not listed again as a significant key contributor. Most often he is referred to, as I have, as the author coining the name.

world.”<sup>30</sup> Here, too, it is women’s and/or sexual bodies that provide the ground for critical inquiries, from matricide and the Marquis de Sade, to mutilation of bodies, trans- and intersex bodies, to women’s bodies and dieting/fitness crazes in Western contemporary culture. The editors call this a highlighting of “some of the important current themes in the discussion of a body theology pertinent for the twenty-first century,” hoping for new development of dialogue on “some of the hard issues of women’s bodies, the theological, political and social implications of which we are just starting to unravel.”<sup>31</sup>

That both books, given the feminist theological commitments of the editors, are prefaced with grounding inquiries into the body, specifically in female bodies, is not necessarily surprising or troubling.<sup>32</sup> What I want to note in comparing these two volumes, though, are certain significant disappearances or omissions. Mentioned in *Introducing*, ecofeminist concerns disappear in *Controversies*. *Introducing* gives some attention to disability studies and disability theology (fields which significantly challenge and enrich inquiries into embodiment taking up ability and normalcy), presenting a few pages on Nancy Eiesland’s *The Disabled God* within a chapter discussing the construction of bodies which need redemption or might signify the divine. *Controversies* does not include disability among the themes mentioned, disability appears only in a brief reference in a chapter on the intersections of Christian diet programs with capitalist, racist

---

<sup>30</sup> Marcella M. Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, eds., *Controversies in Body Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>32</sup> After all, I locate myself as a feminist theologian and concur with feminist assertions that what has come to be normative has been shaped on concepts/conceptualizations grounded in the male body.

and misogynist ideologies.<sup>33</sup> And *Introducing* highlights reflection on embodied (sensual) experiences, specifically laughter, as very promising in being able to avoid the pitfalls of biological essentialism in body theology. Such embodied experiences “of the flesh” are taken up in *Controversies* by a chapter inquiring into cosmetic surgery and cultural representation of women and a chapter on cutting (self-mutilation) of women as embodied deconstruction of pain and Christian communities.<sup>34</sup> But the explicit references to disability theology and phenomenological approaches in *Introducing* have vanished in *Controversies*.

The disappearances of certain embodiment differences between the publications is disconcerting to me, because these works are most commonly cited in queries on the term “body theology” and thus set the parameters of how body theology as a term and field is framed. Body theology then appears as an outgrowth, subgroup, niche work, or synonym of feminist and sexual liberation theologies: the framework is given by feminist/sexual theology (though grounded in a variety of feminist theories), and the main concerns of “body theology” today (still) focus on the effects of social constructions of (gendered

---

<sup>33</sup> Lisa Isherwood, "Will You Slim for Him or Bake Cakes for the Queen of Heaven?," in *Controversies in Body Theology*, ed. Marcella M. Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, *Controversies in Contextual Theology* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2008). To understand why certain diet programs could be supported by Christian religious framing, Isherwood explains biblical and historic connections of sin with physical disability over against holiness equated with perfection, health and beauty. “Women with disabilities have carried an extra burden since they are viewed as doubly transgressive.” (191) This makes disability only one of the additional markers of a woman’s body, the experience of disability being subsumed under the experience of being a woman, and thus, in this chapter, the experience of surveillance and oppression from religiously framed consumerism and aesthetic-ism is experienced as woman first, as disabled person second.

<sup>34</sup> Inga Bryden, "'Cut'n'slash': Remodelling the 'Freakish' Female Form," in *Controversies in Body Theology*, ed. Marcella M. Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, *Controversies in Contextual Theology* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2008). Elizabeth Baxter, "Cutting Edge: Witnessing Rites of Passage in a Therapeutic Community," in *Controversies in Body Theology*, ed. Marcella M. Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, *Controversies in Contextual Theology* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2008).

female, lesbian, queer, or transgender) bodies.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, “body theology” as presented in these works might be more aptly named “body metaphor theology,” as bodily experiences are resourced most often in a symbolic or metaphorical way.<sup>36</sup>

While the critical analysis done in the works discussed so far is certainly important, especially as it concerns real live bodies and suffering experienced, analytical dialogues must be pressed further. Body theology must not be understood as a niche interest/project or analogy for feminist theological work. Doing so submits to strategies

---

<sup>35</sup> In *Doing Contextual Theology*, Angie Pears reinforces this connection, though she groups body theologies in line with sexual theologies and queer theologies under the larger rubric of liberation theologies. In surveying body theologies (and referring mainly to the authors I mentioned above (Nelson, Isherwood, Stuart, and Althaus-Reid), she names as identifying characteristics the body as fundamental resource for theology, a rejection of spiritual/material hierarchical dualisms, and a positive reading of the body. But she also reinforces the impression of body theologies as those inquiring into human sexuality and sexual bodies as *the* point of reference for embodiment – a delineation I find neither useful nor desirable. For example, disability theologies are referenced in one passing sentence under body theologies and receive no further mention in the book. See Angie Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 117-123.

Genealogically speaking, three distinct frameworks have contributed to feminist and sexual theology: a) process thought (seeing the world and the divine as essentially relational and continually evolving), b) liberation theology (theological and ethical formulations based on the lives of the oppressed and justice formulated based on their experiences), c) feminist theory (investigating gender inequality and critiquing social relations based on embodied experience). Jeremy Punt identifies these frameworks as the patterns contributing to the conceptualization of body theology. However, I agree with Linda Hogan that these frameworks are part of the genealogy of feminist theology, with body theology later becoming defined by the three works mentioned here. See Jeremy Punt, "Paul, Body Theology, and Morality: Parameters for a Discussion," *Neotestamentica* 39, no. 2 (2005). And Linda Hogan, *From Women's Experience to Feminist Theology* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

<sup>36</sup> By no means do I intend to dismiss what theologies which seek to provide liberative metaphors, as I am convinced that it does matter how we speak about the sacred/divine we experience or wish to see in the world. The critique of Sallie McFague, for example, challenges traditional theological language as exclusive. Because she understands language to qualify human reality, and metaphors as irreducibly structuring our knowing, she seeks to affect the religious imagination through models and metaphors which will bring about positive relations in the world. Thus she conceptualizes the human body as dependent, liable to contingencies, and vulnerable, and then employs it as a metaphor to posit the world as body of God in order to encourage a focus which prohibits the spiritualization of pain or the focus on existential anxieties, but rather affirms all life as imbued with intrinsic value. Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 72-74. Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 18,168,171-73. For a critique on how her body metaphor still depends on a concept based on whole, well-functioning “normal” bodies, see Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 66-69.

of containment employed to delimit the critical challenges and contributions presented by theologies attending to embodiment to the larger field of theology and the humanities. Emphasizing contextuality and embodied particularity may point out the pretense of disembodiment in universalizing intellectual projects. Yet it also undercuts the critique brought from particularized and contextualized marginal positions by placing the burden of proof for wider relevance on those theologies described as contextual, situated, or emerging from so-called particular (read: non-White, non-heteronormative, non-Eurocentric) locations.<sup>37</sup> To label body theology as a niche theology is to compartmentalize and dismiss the insights offered through body theology analysis for and by the larger normative/operative intellectual structures that legitimate knowledge and theological projects.

#### Framing a “Constructive Body Theology”

This project seeks to make a contribution by proposing a robust and complex notion of “body theology” and demonstrate what kinds of analyses this re-envisioned approach can do. For the sake of naming some of the underlying commitments and presuppositions I bring to “body theology” (the definition, principles, and trajectory of which I will work out in the following chapters) I follow Deborah Beth Creamer’s succinct description of what she names “embodiment theologies:” those beginning with the assertion that theological reflection is always done as embodied selves, yet that bodies

---

<sup>37</sup> My critique here is indebted to Dr. Willie Jennings and his references to strategies of containment employed on liberation theologies. Willie James Jennings, roundtable conversation with students at Iliff School of Theology, Denver, CO. January 5, 2013.



have not been taken seriously in the doing of theology.<sup>38</sup> Having grown out of liberation concerns related to gender and sexuality, and highlighting the political and the experiential, body theologies take as starting point a conscious focus on embodied experience, using it as a critical source for reflection on and construction of theology. These theologies acknowledge the role of particularities of embodiment and make credible arguments about the role of bodily particulars such as gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. in establishing a difference in one's position and experience of the world.<sup>39</sup>

“Body theology,” as I will work it out in this project, begins with these acknowledgments and commitments. I consider bodily experiences as significant, even fundamental, starting points for and concerns of theological reflection and construction. More than simply affirming bodily experience, body theology as inquiry with particular critical principles begins with attention to complex differences and inherent ambiguities of particular embodied experiences, and demands that these bodily sites of experience are recognized as significant, if not crucial, to our understanding of the human condition of all.<sup>40</sup> Depending on context, a body theology then might find a home in feminist theology, womanist theology, mujerista theology, disability theology, queer theology, contextual theology, or postcolonial theology, but it is more broadly cast to be adequately

---

<sup>38</sup> Though while bodies have not been taken seriously, “[t]heologies have always been embodied because all theologies have been explored and lived by people with bodies.” Creamer, 57.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

<sup>40</sup> This is important, since it is neither an unequivocal celebration of the particular body (which might produce romanticizations similar to those found in some early feminist theologies celebrating the feminine), nor is it a marginal discussion which needs to prove the value of its contextualized analysis to the dominating mainstreaming discourse.

contained by any of these labels. I want to establish body theology as analytical principles in conversation with different theologies which hold concerns and commitments in regards to engaging and exploring varied embodiments and their effect on our orientation in and interpretation of the world.<sup>41</sup>

In conversation with and indebted to the theologians who have shaped my own theological interests, skills, commitments, analyses, and desires, I offer “body theology” as a framework of principles that seeks to claim the concern for specific and particular bodies as relevant to all. The “body” in “body theology” then is not an adjective, but rather a verb (as much as that is grammatically possible) indicating an em-body-ing of theology, a concern with lived, embodied experiences as source and grounding for the doing of theology, common to various theologians otherwise differently grouped. It is then not a theology *of* the body, which starts with theology and seeks to inform and direct bodily issues;<sup>42</sup> rather, it is a theological stance beginning with bodily experience and seeking to speak back to or engaging in a dialogue with theologies, social theories, cultural analysis, etc. It is those embodied/body theologies I want to engage with, and ultimately, suggest critical principles for.

As mentioned above, I will argue that body theology does not need to be “god-talk,” but rather, body theology is a critical inquiry into and within human experiences, beginning with and taking seriously bodily experiences. If we consider history of religions scholar Charles Long’s definition of religion as orientation in/to the world, as “how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one’s place in the world,” and

---

<sup>41</sup> Creamer, 58.

<sup>42</sup> As for example John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans., Michael Waldstein (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2006).

assert that orientation is more than just structures of thought but “experience, expression, motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles, and rhythms,”<sup>43</sup> then our bodily experiences are orientation in the world.<sup>44</sup> Our means of situating ourselves in the world is in our being embodied selves: in and through our bodies we come to perceive the world and are perceived by it; our bodily experiences give rise to thought. This implies that our orientation to the world takes place in a vulnerable space, susceptible because of its deep, flexible physicality and because of its exposure to social forces.

Body theology begins by seeking a more complex understanding of how and why human existence manifests as bodily inhabitation of time and space. Any theological enterprise, theistic or not, explicitly attending to embodiment or not, is always, as Gordon Kaufman noted, a constructive project following experience, because all theologizing and analyzing is based on and follows experience and articulates that experience and its meaning through a particular lens.<sup>45</sup> Thus “body theology” in this project is the doing of theology within a body framework. As such, it begins by seeking to appreciate bodily experience and sketching an understanding of it in regards to our embodied existence. Body theology as analysis of human experience places bodily experience and expressions of the embodied subject in time and space at the center of meaning-making, and frames bodily experience by attending to sensory perception, the interplay of bodily experience

---

<sup>43</sup> Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 1995), 7.

<sup>44</sup> The arguments for this claim will be provided in the following chapters, particularly chapter three.

<sup>45</sup> Gordon D Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975). Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1981), 21-24.

and the complex productions of culture, and inherent power dynamics within which both are found.

I consider this move as critical to grounding any theological enterprise in bodily experience. While remaining committed to feminist theory and analysis, I reposition the theoretical lens with which we approach bodily experience at an intersection with other disciplines. If particularities of embodiment make a difference, as feminists claim, then I need to know not *what* the body is, but *how we are bodies*. As I mentioned earlier, my reflections on personal experiences provided me with a hunch that there is something to sensory perception that might help to explore bodily experience. Turning to phenomenological concepts, particularly those of Merleau-Ponty, exploring bodily experience as perception will allow me to follow the cues of the living (and dying) bodies of my grandmother and my mother. The senses and perceptual experience are the juncture at which my various questions and pursuits might be usefully explored. As exploration into perception and bodily experience, the potential scope and breadth of this project is vast, and so inevitably, this project is selective and eclectic, drawing on philosophical, historical, anthropological, and ethnographic perspectives to frame a theological reflection.

The attention to sensory perception is not merely one of many possible approaches that I could choose from. I will show how attention to sensory dimensions of embodiment is a fundamental component of bodily experience and thus can lend complexity and strength to other approaches, such as religio-cultural analysis or theo-ethnographic studies. I strive to offer an integrated view of the role of perception in

bodily experience; and bodily perceptual experience both as a relationship to a world and as in itself a kind of structuring of world and defining of meaning.

While the very act of critical analysis on bodily perceptual experience demands certain abstractions and presuppositions (such as presuming that distinct perceptual capacities can be identified and discussed analytically), I hope to show that (and how) the dimensions of bodily perceptual experience are intimately connected to our emotional, intellectual, and other personal experiences; in fact, that bodily perceptual experiences *are always implicated in, embedded in, and subtending of* our existence, there is no experiencing that is not bodily perceptual. Moreover, any given context and culture provides perceptual matrices through which bodily experiences are made intelligible, and in turn, individual and culturally informed bodily experiences shape our sensory perceptions. By developing a better understanding of what bodily sensory perception is, my project seeks to encourage new theological investigations into bodily experiences and processes beyond potential essentializations of bodily perceptual functions.

### **Project Outline**

I turn to feminist theology because of the explicit commitment to embodiment and the difference bodily experience makes found in this field. Therefore, my review in chapter two demonstrates theoretical perspectives on perception explicitly or implicitly drawn on in feminist theologies. I offer representative indications of phenomenological conceptions found in feminist theologies, which feed into understanding bodily experience. I discuss how these conceptions factor into theologies which have sought to construct theological claims by returning to bodily experience in one way or another. I discuss the challenges inherent in embedded concept of perception, and how they may

undermine the theological project they are supposed to support, most significantly by resorting/succumbing to Cartesian dualisms sought to be overcome.

In chapter three, I make a case that our existence in the world is always fundamentally and significantly a bodily perceptual orientation. In other words, we are always feeling, tasting, touching, hearing, thinking, imagining beings; and these perceptual acts are how we exist in the world and how the world makes sense to us. It also orients us towards the world in specific ways. At stake in not carefully conceptualizing our sensory perception is that, while we might point out differences in embodiment or bodily experiences, conceptual shortcuts regarding perception might lead us to “flatten” bodily experiences into examples of our situation, rather than understanding them as integral to our situation in the world. I make my case by exploring phenomenological concepts such as bodily intentionality, and habit, and do so through the pivot points of gender, race, and normalcy.

In the chapter which follows I apply a comparative lens to the concept of bodily perceptual orientation. I present historical and cultural comparisons in order to deepen our understanding of our existence in the world as fundamentally bodily sensing. The differences and incarnate possibilities regarding bodily perceptual orientation, regarding the being, feeling, thinking, touching, speaking, etc., in the world, are not only potentialities to imagine, but already did/do exist. Encountering these differences can bring our own orientations in the world more complexly and viscerally to our attention.

In chapter five, I then present how we can now conceive of body theology as principles which ground our analysis and investigations in bodily experience and frame our approach to experience via bodily perceptual orientation. I return to theological

projects which attend to body/bodily experience, particularly the works of Carter Heyward and Marcella Althaus-Reid, to demonstrate the difference a re-envisioned body theology as analytical principles can make. Returning to my personal questions raised in this introduction, I frame answers by approaching my own familial bodily experiences through “body theology.” I conclude this project by looking out into further fields of study or issues of interest which might benefit from body theology queries.

## **CHAPTER TWO: SITUATING FEMINIST THEOLOGIES PHENOMENOLOGICALLY**

Both feminist theory and theology have shaped and influenced the concerns I bring to this project. To demonstrate the importance of carefully attending to sensory perception in order to complexly understand bodily experience, I will present the spectrum within which perception is conventionally framed in feminist theologies, implicitly or explicitly. This will help us better understand the stakes involved regarding under-articulating or ignoring to frame a concept of perception and its place in bodily experience, and support my search for a complex and integrated view of the role of perception in bodily experience.

Feminist theologies, because of the explicit commitment to embodiment and the difference bodily experience makes, have provided me with guidance as I embarked on my own journey of critical thinking and engagement with my experiences, and have ignited a spark of academic, theological passion in me. I might come across as critical, maybe even unappreciative of the perspectives provided to me in the theologies surveyed below. Yet I hope it nevertheless becomes clear that I could not engage the questions in this project without the supporting shoulders of my brilliant and daring feminist theological foremothers.

I will begin below by situating my interest and concern regarding bodily experience and perception within a larger conversation of feminist theory and theology.



After a broad sketch of the feminist dimension informing my theological work with highlighting approaches to bodily experience and perception, I will switch angles and provide an outline of the spectrum within which perception has been conceived in traditional phenomenologies. Feminist theologies, implicitly or explicitly, employ phenomenological concepts along this spectrum in efforts to bolster theological claims. I will show how this resorting to perception in an effort to overcome body/mind dualism and re-validate bodily sense experience as epistemological resource may nevertheless implicate and undermine the theological aim precisely because of the way perception is conceived of.

To conclude this chapter, I will provide a conception of bodily experience and perception which avoids the problems highlighted; a conception which I will explore in depth in the following chapter to propose as the theoretical frame for exploration of bodily experience as theological resource.

### **Situating Bodily Experience and Perception in Feminist Theology**

After Descartes' epistemological base of *cogito ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am"), the body and those associated with it (i.e., women, racial others) have largely been dismissed from Western intellectual traditions.<sup>1</sup> The body/mind split of the Enlightenment was not a new development, but the emphasis shifted from the body as a mundane (though suspect) factor to being considered an obstacle to rational thought.<sup>2</sup> The

---

<sup>1</sup> Descartes' statement here refers to the philosophical assertion that, as human beings who are primarily thinking beings (who are rational and detached from the sensual world), we can only be certain of objects (the worlds outside of our minds) if they conform to the representations we hold of them in our minds. We can even be sure of our own existence only as and within "I think, I am."

<sup>2</sup> The philosophical roots of judging the physical senses as distorting perception of objective truth or even incapable of perceiving such, and of only the discerning mind being capable of accessing true

post-Cartesian body was a fixed biological object, some “thing” to be transcended to free the person into full subjectivity by pursuit of rational activity.<sup>3</sup> Because women were considered too steeped in their bodies, their rationality and intellectual ability were questionable because of their supposed sensuous nature. Early feminist theory challenged this and focused on the body/mind, female/male binary split in order to elevate the feminine from its position of the other, the less than fully human.<sup>4</sup>

The feminist theory emerging in the 1960s out of and in tandem with the feminist movement of that time set the intellectual course for a developing Euro-American feminist theology.<sup>5</sup> Feminist theories and theologies took up new philosophical and

---

essences are found in Plato and Socrates. But it is Cartesian philosophy which first provides a systematic philosophical account, building on Hellenistic traditions. Descartes articulates the mind/body dualism in *De Homine*, conceiving of body and mind as separate entities, the former affecting the latter through sensations, but the mind affecting the actions of the inferior body.

<sup>3</sup> Descartes' concern was to establish reason as the foundation for a universal science. He sought to establish systematic doubt as the method to establish a firm foundation for comprehensive scientific philosophy and knowledge. This foundation was the intuitively perceived existence of the finite self. This self subjected the realm of physical facts, events, and experiences to scrutiny and investigation. Sense experience can be deceiving, and thus any experience needs to be subjected to doubt. While Descartes left a lasting legacy, this is not to say that Cartesian trajectories have been left without critique. For a sample of early and later rejections of Cartesian dualism, see Stuart F. Spicker, ed. *The Philosophy of the Body: Rejections of Cartesian Dualism* (Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> These strategies are not confined to early feminist theories and theologies, but their trajectories continue today, as for example found in the feminist philosophy of Luce Irigaray or feminist theologies turning to bodily experiences/faculties traditionally associated with women to value their epistemological and theological meanings. See Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993). Paula M. Cooley, "The Word Became Flesh: Woman's Body, Language, and Value," in *Embodied Love: Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values*, ed. Paula M. Cooley, Sharon A. Farmer, and Mary Ellen Ross (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987). See also the below discussed Carter Isabel Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotics as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Neither feminist theory nor feminist theology begins at that time. One of the ways feminist thought has been traced is by referring to what has been coined “first wave feminism,” a period of women’s activism during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century which saw a focus on suffrage and the production of Stanton and Anthony’s *Women’s Bible*. The emergence of feminist theology as a discipline does not occur until the 1960s, which is why I begin my discussion with this time period. However, one could also argue that when/wherever women have been / are oppressed one could find instances of what is now called feminism, though not gathering under the name of this modern concept.

theological frameworks to promote the affirmation of women's full humanity. They began affirming women's experiences as valid, even indispensable, resources for theorizing and theologizing and saw women's praxis as liberating activity central to political and cultural (and for theologians and some theorists, spiritual) life.<sup>6</sup> The move to explicitly value experience is not necessarily a new methodological move, as the appeal to experience in the study of religion and theology has roots in (masculinist) Enlightenment thinking.<sup>7</sup> The methodological revolution was *women's* experience as the primary resource. Placing women at the center of theoretical and theological reflection reframed epistemology as it had been defined. Valid knowledge and the means of its production were no longer solely limited to that which passed as scientifically objective, namely the uncritically male and masculinist Enlightenment thinking.<sup>8</sup>

Seeking to challenge sexism in religious traditions, early feminist theologians pursued a variety of strategies, and commonly a spectrum between two broadly sketched ends is used to frame the approaches taken (though many might be better described as falling somewhere in between): There are those feminist theologians who sought to detect and remove androcentric symbols and practices, using women's experiences as a starting point for dialoguing with and within their respective religious traditions. They came to be

---

<sup>6</sup> Hogan, 16.

<sup>7</sup> An example is Schleiermacher, who articulated religion as an interior, personal experience. See Grace Jantzen, as referred to in Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 54.

<sup>8</sup> For discussion of the epistemological shifts, see Alessandra Tanesini, *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999), Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, eds., *Feminist Epistemologies* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Or for more explicit connections to theology, see Lucy Tatman, *Knowledge That Matters: A Feminist Theological Paradigm and Epistemology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001).

known as “reformists.”<sup>9</sup> Others, known as post-Christian or radical feminist theologians, determined Christian traditions to be too deeply steeped in androcentrism and sexism, so they sought to theologize outside of Christian texts and traditions, hoisting new symbolism, metaphors, rituals, etc., or re-appropriating ancient, pre-Christian religious symbolism.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless whether one most identifies with the reformist or the radical end of the spectrum, the smallest common agreement among feminist theologians is that bodily difference (and/or discourse thereof) has social consequences; different bodies leads to different (bodily) experiences, and different experiences are valid sources of evidence. Roughly, feminist theological uptake of “body issues” ranges from following a masculinist standard (rejecting the body in pursuit of intellectual equality), to reclaiming and revalorizing the body and cultural associations with it (nature, nurture, cycles) as the very essence of the female, to the most recent poststructuralist concern with instability, cultural inscriptions on bodies, bodily experiences, and embodied potentialities.<sup>11</sup> Feminist theologians today are routinely challenged to not only address the gendered dimensions of life, but be able to attend to intersections of race, class, abilities, nationality, and other dimensions leading to marginalization of bodies. Experience remains a significant factor in theorizing from a variety of standpoints and towards various ends.

---

<sup>9</sup> Key figures among them are Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether.

<sup>10</sup> Carol P. Christ and Mary Daly are often highlighted as models for this approach.

<sup>11</sup> Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price, "Openings on the Body: A Critical Introduction," in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 3.

While most contemporary feminist theologians might agree that the instability and flexibility of the concept of “woman” is desirable and useful for feminist theology, not all might agree that the same is true for the concept of “experience.”<sup>12</sup> With the category “women’s experience” under scrutiny (very much from the beginnings of feminist articulations), how a feminist theologian decides to employ this category depends on the epistemological framework and methodology chosen, a choice which then marks the emerging theological perspective.<sup>13</sup> Appeals to experience are most commonly distinguished between essentialist and constructivist frameworks. On either side of this divide (with feminist theologians now often acknowledging that a strict binary division is neither possible nor theoretically desirable), experience is highlighted as *embodied* experience. Theologians who operate within the essentialist framework anchor their work

---

<sup>12</sup> Remember, for example, the famous Sojourner Truth speech *Ain’t I a Woman* decrying the racism and exclusion of black women from the category “woman” in the mostly white women’s movement of the time. Mary Daly is another popular example of attracting criticism for essentializing “woman” as white; most known is Audre Lorde’s charge against Daly as either excluding black women’s experience or essentializing non-white women as victims.

<sup>13</sup> For example, marking corresponding connections between a certain feminist vision and divine reality, revealed through accessing and expressing a certain “experience,” runs the risk of conceptualizing said “experiences” as unmediated, untainted material to be accessed. Assigning ontological normativity to select “experience” is evident when patriarchal religion and myths are critiqued and followed up with “recoveries” of more authentic matriarchal origins or feminine spiritualities. A recovering construction has the potential to become ideology itself when it becomes more reflective of a cultural critique of a modern crisis that, for example, seeks to reconstruct the female goddess symbol in the image of what is considered to be lacking in the current context. This reads contemporary concerns into a historical situation in order to use this constructed history to legitimize a project and the validity of such a method. Moreover, simply accepting appropriations of accounts of, for example, medieval women’s spirituality often does not account for differences. These accounts often characterize women’s spirituality as bodily-affective, which upholds and reifies traditional stereotypes of the feminine. Yet historically, women’s spirituality emphasizing embodied devotion and mysticism was no oppressed activity but was even supported by contemporary religious authorities. It was the women who advocated for other kinds of spirituality (esp. one’s emphasizing intellectual activities and interpretation outside clergy supervision) who were persecuted as heretics and had their writings destroyed. See Monika Jakobs, “Auf Der Suche Nach Dem Verlorenen Paradies? Zur Hermeneutik Von Ursprüngen In Der Feministischen Theologie,” *Sources and Resources of Feminist Theologies* (1997): 128-132., Anke Passenier, “Der Lustgarten Des Leibes Und Die Freiheit Der Seele: Wege Der Mittelalterlichen Frauenspiritualität,” *Sources and Resources of Feminist Theologies* (1997): 196-197.

in gender fundamentals and differences and seek to craft and/or employ universalizing frames of reference to structure their account of human experience. Theologians on the constructivist side follow postmodern trajectories and investigate the social roots of experiences of gendered personhood.

To sketch the wide field of feminist theologies today, we can acknowledge first feminist theologians who prominently contributed in the emergence and shaping of feminist theology as a discipline, like Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza. The first two began with the observation that women and female bodies have historically been degraded by means of theo-philosophical and scientific discourses of the time. Therefore, updating philosophical and scientific evidence on the body provides the arguments with which to make a case for equality of the sexes.<sup>14</sup>

Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza focuses on methods of interpreting Christian scriptures, and in *But She Said* and other works also presumes women's experience as determinant of the validity of theological traditions.<sup>15</sup> When referring to experience, she explicitly seeks to utilize "feminist experience" or "feminist analysis of women's (socialized) experience" as resource and perspective on reality against which theological

---

<sup>14</sup> I will discuss Daly and Ruether again below as exemplars for different phenomenological stances.

<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet. Critical Issues in Feminist Theology* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1994). Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

interpretations need to be tested.<sup>16</sup> However, when Schüssler-Fiorenza posits “feminist” experience as the source of liberating theologizing,<sup>17</sup> she frames the creation of a feminist critical consciousness as originating “breakthrough” or “disclosure” experiences of suspicion about the supposed naturalness of patriarchy.<sup>18</sup> While she does not explicitly appeal to the utilization of perception, she reveals an implicit leaning on poststructuralist tools (see below) in her drawing on Foucault’s articulation of docile bodies and the disciplining of bodies to illustrate women’s oppression through cultural forces.<sup>19</sup> Experiences of pain, suffering, oppression, violence are mediated through the surface of the body, and while important, gain traction only in and through discourse, through a critical feminist consciousness which enables “correct” perception.<sup>20</sup>

Theologians who plow the field of theological resources of embodied experience with poststructuralist tools (for example Sallie McFague and Marcella Althaus-Reid) may be eclectic in their methodologies and draw on linguistic, cultural, social and political theories, yet all are influenced by and employing themes of subjectivity, language and

---

<sup>16</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, 21,34.

<sup>17</sup> This comes close to the a priori access to truth found in Mary Daly, who would have only ‘women-identified women’ at the center of all ‘true’ interpretations, in Schüssler-Fiorenza, it appears as only persons within the *ekklesia of wo/men* and engaging in the processes she describes, are able to appropriate ‘experience’ correctly, that is, in a liberating fashion.

<sup>18</sup> I chose to discuss Ruether and Schüssler-Fiorenza here at length, because much of what is popularly understood to be “feminist theology” has followed these two scholars or at least used their trajectories and/or taken cues from their methodologies. One reason might be Schüssler Fiorenza’s employment of Marxian language and method as well as her liberationist language appropriated from liberation theology, which is useful in theologies seeking to do a material analysis. Radford Ruther’s methodology might find its popularity and resonance in many (feminist) audiences, western and non-western, as she charts an accessible middle way between the liberal and romantic types of feminist thinking (women are equal and equally capable as men; women are aligned with attributes that need to be validated).

<sup>19</sup> Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context*, 143-145.

<sup>20</sup> It does not really matter what the island is made up of, but what is said about it and how the treasures on it are described in pirate speech.

social construction of identity.<sup>21</sup> These theologians seek to affirm the instabilities as well as the generalities articulated in “experience” by particularizing social location.

Poststructuralist methodologies allow theologians to focus on language, symbolism, and myths and the power inherent in linguistic systems to shape social structures and therefore experience. This kind of focus often supports theological aims of subverting dominant and oppressive symbolic. New understandings and models of the body allow for new metaphors and re-symbolization in theology to express and address embodied experience.

For example, Sallie McFague understands language to qualify human reality, and metaphors as irreducibly structuring our knowing. She therefore seeks to affect the religious imagination through models and metaphors which will bring about positive relations in the world.<sup>22</sup> Her epistemological claim connects the quest for truth and meaning to embodied locations, as she defines experience in its basic sense as the act of living.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> I will discuss Althaus-Reid again below as exemplars for different phenomenological stances.

<sup>22</sup> For example, in *Models of God* and *The Body of God* she uses scientific theories and other texts concerning North American experiences of the ecological crisis as touchstones to investigate cultural models and paradigms that construct experiences and with it Christian identity and practice. McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. For example, she uses the Big Bang theory as a cultural text and ‘common creation story’ which informs contemporary experience, and through it theorizes unity and diversity and applies this to a theology of nature. See McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, 45-46. McFague situates her project in an epistemological discussion between idealism and positivism, in which she is critical of both, though more so of the latter than the former. She is skeptical of unitary tendencies in some idealist immaterial epistemological claims (direct correlation between metaphor and reality), and resists tendencies to deny reality outside of language, but frames human existence as hermeneutical in nature. Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 39.

<sup>23</sup> McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, 47.



Yet McFague acknowledges that one has no access to a *raw* experience of reality, and, utilizing theories on metaphors (particularly Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology), argues that all experiences are expressed in metaphorical constructions. Moreover, she asserts that human access to reality is partial and always mediated through linguistic metaphors. At the same time, metaphors are productive of reality, meaning that metaphors can produce and offer new/different experiences, and her works attempt to find metaphors to express radical relationality between all that lives.<sup>24</sup> While experience begins with bodily sensations, the latter serve in constructive processes of associations, connections and interpretations within signifying systems.<sup>25</sup> While metaphors are central to knowledge and language, McFague acknowledges "sensuous, affectional, and active lives at the most primordial level," providing the base for metaphors and symbolic systems.<sup>26</sup>

Mujerista, womanist and postcolonial theologians (like Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Delores Williams, Kwok Pui-Lan) often share concerns and methodological features with poststructuralist theorists regarding embodied experience.<sup>27</sup> They often seek to make explicit the connections between particular and historicized social locations and

---

<sup>24</sup> McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, 26,51.

<sup>25</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, 32-35. Perception is a "seeing-as," it is not simply reception of sense data, but involves recognition of what is seen. This recognition is part of an interpretation process, and McFague argues that perceiving is always interpreting, it always takes place in our contact and response to reality and our environment. Analogies and metaphor guide us in our interpretative acts and are also created by us to re-interpret and continuously respond and engage our contexts and re-reading historical experience. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, 34-38.

<sup>26</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, 37.

<sup>27</sup> I will discuss Ada María Isasi-Díaz again below as exemplar for a phenomenological stance.

embodied differences to make use of historically marginalized experiences as a central resource in doing theology. Often using socio-cultural and ethnographic accounts or localized “thick descriptions,” they make an effort to point to the abjected, embodied experiences which provide the grounds for emancipatory and liberating theological formulations.<sup>28</sup> This strategy borrows (or at least echoes) the concerns and methodologies of more explicitly poststructuralist theologians, albeit from different locations.

Delores Williams describes triple inscriptions of racialization, masculinization, and sexualization on black women’s bodies (using historical experience to analyze contemporary socialized experience of black women). In *Sisters in the Wilderness*, she draws on novels which describe and ground the experiences of African American women, making experiences of race and class intersect with gender to articulate women’s experience.<sup>29</sup> Williams, in a womanist methodological vein, retrieves embodied experience (e.g. motherhood, surrogacy, ethnicity, wilderness experience) hermeneutically and for the purposes of developing reading strategies of biblical texts and other literary sources supporting full moral agency of black women. Important in this constructive theological work is critical reflection on experience (embodied and narrated), especially as it concerns the body doubly marked by race and sex; this often takes the shape of analyzing stereotypes and cultural images of black women and the

---

<sup>28</sup> “Thick description” is a methodological concept offered by anthropologist Clifford Geertz. He proposes to provide dense descriptions of small, real-time lived experiences (rather than aiming for broad, all-encompassing descriptions devoid of detail). Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>29</sup> Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993).

construction of race.<sup>30</sup> Her conception of perception is less explicit, yet what leaks through is an understanding of perception as sensitivity to lived experience, particularly regarding oppressive structures. While embodied knowledge can be found expressed in bodily movement (singing, dancing, gestures), highlighted is often the making intelligible of embodied experience through critical intellectual attention.

Kwok positions the “Asian woman” as a multiple, fluid identity, grounded in communal (rather than individual) experience and in particular historical contexts and struggles, and signifying a political position rather than an essential definition.<sup>31</sup> Discussions of experience, particularly Asian women’s experience as theological resource, most often center on experiences and feelings of fragmentation, displacement, alienation, and oppression under colonialism and its aftermaths. Kwok points out that to talk about Asian women’s experience generally, “experience” needs to be understood as a social construct. Asian feminist theologians resource this experience often via utilizing narratives (since story telling has been the chief means of transmitting wisdom between generations of women) and social analysis.<sup>32</sup> Similarly to Williams, perception in regards to experience becomes a tool utilized for critical analysis, particularly hermeneutical approaches to narratives of experience.

---

<sup>30</sup> See also for example the ethical work of Emily M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, ed. Norman K. Gottwald and Richard A. Horsley, The Bible and Liberation Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 26. Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 36.

<sup>32</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 2000), 38-41.

These are just few examples of what can be found in today's feminist theological field, in which "embodied experience" as a category is accepted as dynamic and conceptually unstable. The challenge for feminist theory and theology in using "women's experience" is that of acknowledging and accounting for and theorizing with difference.<sup>33</sup> The plurality and the diversity of the lives, choices and values of women are all bound to class, race, culture, physical make-up and other factors. Theologians utilizing "experience" today need to attend to how human experiences are bound up in bodies and the particularities through which we encounter the world.

The body matters, and the most basic feminist consensus is that any theoretical investigation needs to begin with this acknowledgement.<sup>34</sup> It is also important to realize how dangerous the vulnerable body is: The body vulnerable to disease, decay and death terrorizes the human imagination, and modern medicine embodies a war on this body in the form of therapy or ennobling duties of care in the name of love. The dominant social approaches to the vulnerability of the body reveal that within the larger project of modernity, human bodily experiences of finiteness and mortality are abject to a culture which normalizes idealized images of able-bodiedness. Bodies which defy the norm appear as dangerous "other," and in a world which worships reason and intellect, the vulnerable and disturbed mind incites terror.<sup>35</sup>

This concern is highlighted in the feminist theological landscape by feminist disability theologians (like Nancy Eiesland and Sharon Betcher) who frame the body as

---

<sup>33</sup> See Fulkerson, 13-18.

<sup>34</sup> Shildrick and Price, 1-3.

<sup>35</sup> Newell.

the locus for theological reflection, yet explicitly seek to deconstruct persistent notions of “normal” embodiment. Paying deliberate attention to the physical body and its representations, these theologians resource lived experiences of persons with disabilities to utilize this multifaceted body knowledge for doing theology, for grounding symbols, metaphors and models of God.<sup>36</sup> These theologians highlight the ambiguities of nonconventional bodies and their potential as resource for re-conceiving notions of wholeness, mutuality, survival and care. Lived experiences of persons with disabilities are tapped for the alternative knowledge regarding the disabled body and the specific social and existential bodily experiences of it to “think with” it about difference.<sup>37</sup>

If “the body,” as it is presented to me, is always an inconsistent production, then there is never an unmediated access to a pure corporeal state or to pure bodily experiences. Even the so-considered neutral, biological body itself is an effect of language, a product of the representation of scientific “objectivities” which materialize the body within normative charts, in stages to be manipulated or (more or less) intelligible diagnoses. That even the medical body is far from fixed or factual can be observed in how changes in cultural understandings are reflected in scientific language and descriptions of bodies.<sup>38</sup> The methodological issue here is that when we name our

---

<sup>36</sup> Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994).

<sup>37</sup> Sharon V. Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> See for example Lynda Birke, "Bodies and Biology," in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999). She describes changes in conceptualizations of the immune system as a defense system of a closed body system to a flexible response system of a permeable body. See also again Emily Martin, "The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles," in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999).

bodily experiences, we are always involved in a dialogue that is already framed by the discourse(s) we find ourselves in, and we materialize our bodies at the moment we represent it with the references we choose.

While feminist theorists and theologians have become skilled in reading bodies as signifiers of culture and detecting inscriptions on bodily surfaces, there are still remnants of conceiving of the interior body as biologically fixed and either “passive,” inaccessible, or universal.<sup>39</sup> This stance rests on biology being conceptualized as fixed and reductionistic, rather than within parameters of indeterminacy and transformation.<sup>40</sup> This kind of Cartesian binary leaves liberal humanist parameters of health/disease, whole/broken, etc., in place and unproblematized; for example, corporeal distress (pain, physical suffering) is an experience of vulnerability that happens to a subject in a body previously or otherwise “whole”/“healthy.”<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, while bodily surfaces, such as skin, have received much attention in regards to social values are inscribed on the skin, the skin as sense organ is also more complex and undifferentiated than the other sensory faculties. Skin therefore is a sense organ *and* a social-bodily canvas it enables perception as well as the site of where tactility is “seen;” this links tactility and sight closely together. Sander L. Gilman, “Touch, Sexuality and Disease,” in *Medicine and the Five Senses*, ed. W.F. Bynum and Roy Porter (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1993). With this linking, it appears that the visual investigations “into” skin have eclipsed explorations of skin in regards to its complex tactility and related sensory dimensions. Mark Smith notes that tactility was deeply implicated in modernity (e.g., in a kind of skin consciousness regarding race, gender, class, comfort, capitalism; the look, haptics, protocols of touch), and rather than touch losing importance, it was that ideas about it changed. He also cautions against too closely linking touch and sight, and even collapsing the two so that inquiries into the visual aspects of skin/touch stand in for exploring tactility more complexly. Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 95. For a volume of essays discussing touch/tactility, see Constance Classen, ed. *The Book of Touch* (Oxford, NY: Berg, 2005). Also note a compilation of essays into the history of touch, particularly the role of tactility in early modernity and its relation to epistemological organization and definitions of subjectivity. Elizabeth D. Harvey, ed. *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

<sup>40</sup> Birke, 44-48.

<sup>41</sup> For intriguing and exciting theologies that take up this issue, see Creamer. Or Betcher.

Bodily experiences of pain and suffering are then bodily signs to be interpreted, to be used as indicators in an analysis. Control over one's body and being human is kept in close theoretical connection (and threatens the loss of humanity or subjectivity for those who cannot control their bodies).<sup>42</sup> This approach also forecloses potential theoretical and theological thinking *in* and *through* (not just *about*) our "real" bodily experiences. It prevents theologizing from bodily experiences *as* bodies in pain, *as* "bodies out of control," from *within* the very bodies that actively inform our perception and experience of ourselves in the world.

### **Conceiving Perception**

Feminist theologies may name (women's) bodily experiences and thereby make it a conceptual category, holding up specific bodies and/or experiences to "truth," be it via ontological epistemological access to it, or be it as indicator or text offering truth about social and cultural forces. Sometimes experience is used to demonstrate the power of cultural inscriptions on embodiment, sometimes experience is the site of identity. Sometimes embodied reality is investigated for the wear and tear of the effects of sin/oppression, sometimes it is held up to demonstrate the body as a site of contestation over who gets to control whose body.

What I will diagnose as inattention to perception is what leads to conceptual problems when bodily experience is used as an access point for theology. Rather than talking *through* the body or bodily experiences, feminist theologians more often than not

---

<sup>42</sup> Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price, "Vital Signs: Texts, Bodies and Biomedicine," in *Vital Signs: Feminist Reconfigurations of the Bio/Logical Body*, ed. Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 5.

end up talking *about* the body. This may be traced partially to the ways in which theological scholarship in the Anglophone academy has been framed and validated, it is also connected to the ways in which our language limits us in our theological expressions (after all, there is no existing English word that described what we might want to see as body-mind unit). But it is also partially due to the ways in which the body/mind dualism leaks back into our theologies, and I am making the case that it can leak back because we have not paid attention to carefully articulate our conception of bodily experiences and perception.

The theologians surveyed above employ different methods in accessing and conceptualizing the body, experience, and perception. When it comes specifically to sensory perception though, what emerges is a spectrum between two perspectives on perception: an empiricist view on perception, and an intellectualist view. In other words, the descriptions or implied conceptualizations of perceptual experience fall on a spectrum between considering perception a mechanical bodily function (the senses as bodily channels for truth “out there”), or of perception as function of the mind (the senses as providing the data which the mind then perceives, judges, and interprets).

To be able to more fully engage with the phenomenological aspects of a feminist theology, I will now turn to sketch the spectrum within which traditional philosophical works have framed perception, frameworks which make their way into theological projects. I will show how even those phenomenologies (philosophies of perception) which seem to be on opposite ends of the spectrum still share common underlying presumptions and are complicit in continuing the pervasive Cartesian dualism of



body/mind. Theologies which point to sensory perception as a way to overcome body-mind dualisms, but implicitly or explicitly embrace phenomenological concepts upholding them, end up undermining themselves and maintaining this separation of body and mind by not giving careful attention to the understanding of perceptual processes.

The scholars solicited as exemplars for what is at stake in theological projects do not necessarily fall clearly on one end or the other of the phenomenological spectrum, often because their phenomenological concepts are not explicitly articulated or do not receive the sophisticated attention other philosophical issues receive (such as discourse).<sup>43</sup> Below, I offer a phenomenological spectrum with inserted theological connections to highlight the importance of being attentive to our theological conception of bodily experiences and perception.

#### Concepts of Perception: Relevance in and to Theological Projects

Sensory perceptions have often been conceived of as either mechanistic or intellectual functions, positions that are still commonly held today. These theoretical stances should come as no surprise and neither should the confusion surrounding perception. We hold commonsensical notions of perceptual capacities, and tend to “know” what they are—we define vision as “seeing with my eyes,” or olfaction as “smelling with my nose.” Yet we continue to inquire into the complexities of different

---

<sup>43</sup> Further, my solicitation of select theologians is neither exhaustive nor fully representative. Rather, I draw on the works of some key thinkers in feminist theological discourse that have influenced feminist theology as a field as well as my own theological formation. Overall and most generally, common to these theologians is the concern with theological imagery. My selection is not to imply that these theologians are the “worst perpetrators” of the issues I will highlight, nor are they the only ones. Rather, given their influence on my own feminist theological journey, they exemplify the theologies which refer to bodily experience in one manner or another, and they have been conversation partners in my initial quest to explore bodily experience for constructive theological projects.

perceptual capacities in a variety of ways, though not necessarily in an interrelated manner.

Take vision, for example: It is not intuitively evident what vision is and how it functions. Philosophers since antiquity have developed theories on vision and have come up with diverse concepts of processes regarding visual perception.<sup>44</sup> Questions regarding visual perception are engaged in a diversity of fields: there are *empirical* questions inquiring into the physical mechanics (e.g., examinations of lenses, the retina, projections), scholars investigate *psychological* aspects (e.g., questions regarding the inversion and reversion of projected images, brain processes which appear to transcribe data into “right side up single vision”), and we also find *philosophical* questions regarding the nature of perception (nature of knowledge, images, language, etc.). When different approaches are aligned with different disciplines, some inquiring into the bodily mechanics, some inquiring into the workings of the mind, body/mind dualism might be upheld, though this is not to be read as a scholarly determination or conspiracy to perpetuate this Cartesian split. Rather, it points to the depth of the perpetual mystery surrounding perception itself.

The pervasive mystery (or shall we say: conceptual uncertainty) regarding the processes of perception is also traceable in traditional phenomenological theories. Conventionally, the spectrum along which perception has been conceived falls between the empiricist/objectivist and the intellectualist/idealist ends. Very roughly sketched,

---

<sup>44</sup> For an exploration of the many conceptions of vision, see Nicholas J. Wade, *A Natural History of Vision* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998). Wade describes Plato and Euclid, for example, who defined optics mathematically and conceived of vision as reception of geometrical projections. Descartes traced vision to the movement of light through air. Hobbes conceived of color as an apparition through motion working in the brain.

empiricism considers perception a mechanical bodily function, a reception of sense data which carries meaning through sensory bodily channels; intellectualism considers perception a function of the mind that receives perceptual data through sensory channels which the mind then perceives, judges, and interprets. Empiricism and intellectualism hold similar views of the world as object of perception, the world as self-contained “nature.” But the two positions disagree about the role of consciousness in the process of perception.

Below, I will discuss these positions in more depth and embed critiques provided by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenologist who provides the phenomenological perspectives for my exploration of bodily experience in this project.<sup>45</sup> Woven into the exploration of this spectrum of phenomenological positions are the connections to theological projects. I will show how different theologians explicitly or implicitly take up

---

<sup>45</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty is the phenomenologist of choice for this project for two reasons. While other scholars have critically expanded and appropriated his thought further, Merleau-Ponty remains useful as this dissertation seeks to discuss and analyze phenomenological presumptions present in feminist theologies as well as point to ways beyond the drawbacks and problematic consequences inherent in different positions. Merleau-Ponty provides just this kind of discussion with his own contemporary conversation partners, a discussion complex enough to make it valuable for transfer to my own interests. Further, he maintains the focus of discussion regarding embodiment on perception, a focus which I would like to maintain as well. However, Merleau-Ponty’s work is not without criticism. For example, Shannon Sullivan critiques Merleau-Ponty for obscuring differences in his account of intersubjectivity by grounding embodiment in pre-personal functions. She also challenges his embodied subject for its inherent maleness, challenges also made by Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler. See Shannon Sullivan, “Domination and Dialogue in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*.” *Hypatia: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 20, no.4 (1997). Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994. Butler, Judith. “Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception.” In *Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, edited by Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989. Others have challenged Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological assertions for its erasure of difference regarding race. Jeremy Weate, for example, employs Frantz Fanon’s critique of phenomenology to contest Merleau-Ponty’s notion of bodily freedom with Fanon’s genealogy of unfreedom of the black body. See Jeremy Weate, “Fanon, Merleau-Ponty and the Difference of Phenomenology,” in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, (Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2001), 169–183.

positions along this spectrum, and I will point out what is at stake in holding the respective conception of perception.<sup>46</sup>

*Empiricism Described and Critically Analyzed*

In empiricist thought, the world is distinct and separate from the perceiving person, but we can come to know about this world through perceptual processes. Sensation is a bodily capacity, perception an activity of the mind, and the mind obeys the laws observed in nature.

In short, empiricism involves a view of perception as the reception of simple, basic sensory units (e.g., a certain intensity of light as simple retinal stimuli) that are independent of one another in quality and quantity. Bodily perceptual faculties (eyes, nose, ears, etc.) are independent channels and “recorders” for these independently received sensory units (the units recorded via my eyes are not the same as those recorded through tactile channels). To achieve the perceptual outcome of, say, seeing and touching a body, is to combine the received perceptual units and based on previous experiences, having learned that these perceptual units belong together so that we can account for them as distinct perceptual whole, such as “body” or “apple.”<sup>47</sup>

An early empiricist conception of perception is found for example in Aristotle, in which the mind receives the form of the object: Seeing an apple is to receive in the mind via the eye the form of the apple, though not the juicy fruity substance. The mind itself is

---

<sup>46</sup> Again, these theologians will serve as exemplars; therefore I will focus on the phenomenological aspects in their work rather than providing full reviews of their scholarly corpus. My aim is to provide useful illustrations that may raise questions and connections in regards to our own theological work via these established scholars.

<sup>47</sup> David R. Cerborne, "Perception," in *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, ed. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008), 122-123.

a tabula rasa into which experiences of the world enter through the senses. This is a skeptical kind of empiricism: While we might not know the things themselves, we know how they appear to us in our mind, and only what appears to us, our mental pictures of the world, are the objects of knowledge. Thomas Aquinas critically builds on this Aristotelian view, though he finds fault in the concept that the mind knows only its own ideas. Aquinas asserts that what we perceive is not a form or an idea, but we perceive external objects through our ideas, through our mental pictures. The mind perceives through images provided through the senses, images are the means by which we perceive objects in the world experientially.

Philosophers like John Locke carry on this school of empiricism, and argue that the only knowledge achievable is knowledge based on experience, a posteriori. Our ideas about the world are derived from experiences, from sensation and reflection on it. An object has primary qualities (the structure which makes it an apple) and secondary qualities (varieties of color, size, texture, but varieties which still adhere to the primary qualities). What is received in the mind through perceptual processes is an idea or picture of the outside world. Significant to the processes of perception are sense data transfers made possible through bodily capacities, the bodily derived and transmitted sense data then causes ideas in the mind of the perceiver.<sup>48</sup>

David Hume is more skeptical about the perception of the world as ideas in the mind. While we perceive the world through our senses which deliver images to our mind,

---

<sup>48</sup> Locke also differentiated between complex ideas (ideas which can be broken down in component ideas such as the idea of an apple, which can be separated out into ideas of round, red, sweet, juicy, etc.) and simple ideas (ideas which cannot be further broken down, e.g., the idea of “red”). All ideas are caused by the material world, mediated/transmitted by our perceptual faculties. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1975).

but the perceptual senses are conveyers or channels which cannot necessarily be trusted. It is convention which leads us to suppose that our sensory perceptions deliver accurate representation of the external world. Yet because we can also experience hallucinations or dreams, the senses show to be unreliable and deceptive. Only experience can prove and justify what we know about the world, though experience cannot help us (dis)prove the doubt we might have about the very perceptions we have in experience.<sup>49</sup>

Considering the empiricist camp, Merleau-Ponty criticizes its views of perception for separating sensation from perception. Presupposed in empiricist views is “sensation” as building blocks on which perception rests. Sensation is presented as readily available to analysis. This kind of distinction breaks down perceptual processes into cause and effect mechanisms, separating though linking sense data and bodily sensory capacities via sensation. One way for empiricists to conceive of sensations has been to invoke sensation as impression sensed by the subject: Color, for example, is not a property inherent to the object, but an impact made on the eye; my visual faculties are affected in a particular way by the object causing a sensory impression.<sup>50</sup> In other words, the ripe apple I am about to eat is not inherently red; rather, my eyes pick up light waves, and I make a judgment that the sensory units of shape, size, and color come to me from an apple.

Merleau-Ponty notes that conceiving of sensation as distinct from perception differentiates between lived experiences and sensation: Experience is filled with meaning

---

<sup>49</sup> David Hume and L.A. Selby-Bigge, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1975), 149-162.

<sup>50</sup> See above. Locke, for example, has conceived of primary and secondary qualities of objects. Only primary qualities (such as solidity, number, shape) exist in the object itself and are certain; secondary qualities, color being conceived as such (also taste, smell, sound), are not possessed by the object, but are affected in the subject and do not provide measurable truths about an object.

to me, whereas pure sensation—understood as undifferentiated impact such as light waves hitting my retina, sound waves entering my ear—has no meaning in itself. Empiricists consider meaning as found in the impression formed within me, created in my mind through conscious processes of evaluation and judgment. For example, to experience color, I receive sensations on my retina, certain wave lengths of light reaching my eye, and I perceive this sensation in my mind and through convention or evaluation perceive the color red. This view of sensation, Merleau-Ponty points out, has several significant implications to my experiencing in the world: There is a strong delineation between me and the object I perceive; there are objectifying processes undertaken by me; there are implied strong delineations in the causal relationship conceived of between sensation (the reception of data, the experience of a sensorial impact by me) and perception (the forming of meaning).<sup>51</sup>

When theologians appeal to sensory perception as equivalent to knowing (as akin to receiving ideas about the world) they may uphold the inherent mind/body dualism of this empiricist phenomenological perspective. When perception is reception of knowledge and apprehension of reality, feminist theologians may charge women to recover their ontological ability to perceive/receive knowledge through their senses.

Carter Heyward and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, for example, through their positive association of embodied sensory perception with nature and the sacred, imbue sensory capacities of the body with the ability to access unmediated, untainted

---

<sup>51</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans., Colin French (New York: Routledge, 1962), 7-8.

information or truth about a situation.<sup>52</sup> Both theologians seek to overcome body/mind dualisms by conceptualizing body and mind as a unit: Heyward uses the term “bodyself” to articulate a subject or self not separated from the body and defines the “soul” not as an essence or separate spiritual component of the bodyself, but as the “relational spark” connecting all creatures.<sup>53</sup> Moltmann-Wendel articulates body and soul as a unit, a field of energy, the seat of feelings, the sphere of thought and relationship,<sup>54</sup> and asserts the importance of the senses to conceptualizations of the body, as the senses extend the body.<sup>55</sup> Meanings are not natural or biological occurrences, but the ensemble of potentialities which are given value in a particular society.<sup>56</sup> But it is the senses which are charged with the reception of meanings, from socially assigned meanings to divine revelations, and the bodily capacity for sensation affirms the epistemological authority of bodily functions which reveal the world to us and make it intelligible for us.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Heyward. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body: A Theology of Embodiment* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

<sup>53</sup> Heyward, 18,89,93.

<sup>54</sup> Moltmann-Wendel, viii,42,46.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>56</sup> Heyward, 163n3.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-94. Heyward uses the example of encountering difference to show the connection between sensory intelligence and bodily boundaries. To Heyward, bodily boundaries in the encounter with the bodily-different other need to be fluid and permeable, while sensory apprehension in a strange environment registers difference as dangerous and evokes thick, self-containing boundaries. Heyward, 110-113. Moltmann-Wendel affirms experience when she also assigns epistemological value to female bodily functions such as giving birth. Yet Moltmann-Wendel overlooks the socially-constructed link between sex and social preferences when she lists social differences related to gendered bodies (for example, linking gendered differences in preference for sports or other types of play to essential male/female differences). This misses the link between female body experiences and social restrictions on female bodies. Moltmann-Wendel, 86;100.



Purely empiricist conceptions, however, are fraught with theoretical problems: Understanding sensation as such, placing meaning-making processes as social or intellectual processes, renders bodily sensation itself devoid of meaning and separate from the structures of perception. It implies that my bodily taking in the smell of a person's skin, feeling it, seeing the color of it and touching it, is simply the intake of independent sensations, whereas *perceiving a lover* or *perceiving an abuser* is an intellectual or social process (their differentiation unclear) of putting sense data together. Yet these empiricist conceptions can only explain the deduction that indeed all these sensations taken in with my bodily sensory tools add up to *a person in close proximity*. The emergence of meaning needed to judge this person to be a lover or a perpetrator of violence, or possible connected revelations of the divine, remains unaccounted for.

This kind of positing bodily sensations as building blocks in a theory of perception is also problematic in other ways. It constructs sensation as something that allegedly explains perception while at the same time sensation supposedly has nothing to do with perception as activity of the mind.<sup>58</sup> It presents the sense data of the person (visually received image of a specifically shaped body of a certain type, size, and color, I am receiving tactile data and a scent, etc.) as something that effects and leads to my perception of a person; therefore sensation explains how it is that I come to perceive anything. Yet it makes a distinction between sensation and perception as if the two could exist independently of each other, as if I could ever sense something without necessarily perceiving it.

---

<sup>58</sup> Monika M. Langer, *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception: A Guide and Commentary* (London, UK: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1989), 4.

In addition to highlighting the theoretical error of separating sensation from perception in empiricism, Merleau-Ponty also points out that the lived experience of perception is that of always perceiving meaningful wholes: I experience sensations within a figure-background structure. Without the latter, we would have no sensation of *something*.<sup>59</sup> I always perceive a person first, and already within a given context, before I can then abstract and tease apart the different components (color, smell, size, texture) of this perception. The concept of undifferentiated sensation without meaning in itself, however, cannot explain how I would come to perceive something meaningful, like a friend at a party or a stranger on the street.<sup>60</sup>

Theologians conceiving of the senses as bodily receptors of knowledge concerning a person's world fail to account for how perceived meanings then are formed or changed (how new or additional sense data can invoke different meanings in the mind). We actually do experience a person in an immediate perception with associated

---

<sup>59</sup> Merleau-Ponty is strongly influenced by Gestalt psychology on this point. More specifically, he learned about Gestalt psychology from Aaron Gurwitsch, who combined a reading of Husserl's phenomenology with the Berlin Gestalt School (Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler). Gestalt theory rejects mechanistic assumptions and argues that sense experience has a holistic and dynamic character, perceiving intelligible forms and shapes (Gestalt). Experience rests on meaningful, coherent configurations, which often fail to correspond to sensory stimuli in a direct way (i.e., sensations do not show constancy in their relation to stimuli). Merleau-Ponty recognizes the enormous philosophical implications of this Gestalt claim, not just for thinking perception as an aspect of psychological functions, but for thinking perception as essential to our being in the world. Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Brian Leiter, Routledge Philosophers (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 20-21.

<sup>60</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 4-5. For example: Where empiricism conceptualizes perception as passive reception of sensory data (e.g., the data of light, color, shapes are received by the eye, odor is received by the nose), sensory faculties become independent organic receptors. The perception of an object is the result of combining and accounting for the received data ("I see and smell a flower"). Merleau-Ponty charges that this position is untenable: Perceptual experience is that of sensing *things*, and we sense them in *context*, i.e., perception is not awareness of sensory data ("I see light and colors and feel a smooth hard surface") but of sense data in context (I see red as the red of an apple, I feel softness as the softness of a blanket) and of objects ("I see and feel a table"). Empiricism also problematically presupposes but leaves unaccounted for an interpreting consciousness, as we will discuss below.

meaning, and the same person can be perceived with various meanings in different contexts. Theologians appealing to the senses as channels for perception run the risk of maintaining that ultimate “truth” about a perception is connected to egocentric reflective judgments of a cogito, a separate mind in a body, a concept which is exactly what the feminist theologians mentioned seek to refute, yet reinstate.<sup>61</sup>

Not all empiricist philosophers posit this differentiation though. Some of those who recognize the flaw in conceiving of pure impressions or sensations move to situate sensory qualities in the object. Sensations received by the subject, such as color, taste, and smell, are then theorized as inherent properties of the object. Yet Merleau-Ponty rightly diagnoses this approach as equally flawed in replacing one extreme version of object-subject dualism with another: Sensory perception and meaning have simply been reworked from a radically subjective process to a radically objective and determinate property. Objects are posited as existing in a world that is in-itself: Everything has clearly defined boundaries, inherent properties and meanings. The subject’s perceptual experience is now conceptualized as analogous coherence between sense impression and the properties of an object that is isolable, self-contained, and determinate.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> Consider also Mayra Rivera’s comment regarding sensuality and materiality in theology: “The senses do not belong or give access to a ‘natural’ realm and they are constantly changing in relation to things, including the technologies that we invent to approach the world. Nonetheless, when it avoids the illusion of having escaped the realm of discursive influence, an appeal to the senses may call attention to the non-human [...].“Approaching material things as relations, rather than as objects encountered by fully constituted human bodies, suggests a promising way to theorize the materiality of bodies as well as of things. [...] The crucial affirmation of materiality and the body in theology must resist the tendency either to reify or idealize them, instead theorizing materiality in its dynamic, complex relationality and incompleteness.” Mayra Rivera Rivera, "Corporeal Visions and Apparitions: The Narrative Strategies of an Indecent Theologian," in *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots: Essays in Honour of Marcella Althaus-Reid*, ed. Lisa Isherwood and Mark D. Jordan (London, UK: SCM Press, 2010), 92-94.

<sup>62</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 9.

As in the aforementioned approaches, this empiricist view upholds a strong subject-object differentiation, presupposes strong and singular specific object-perception connections, favoring analogous connections. This discounts sensory ambiguity as a deficiency in the subject (e.g., inattention, sensory deficits). Indeterminacy is a perceptive blunder by the subject, not a possibility of the perceived object.<sup>63</sup> Theologians relying on these kinds of conceptions do not account for how more complex meanings can be perceived through the utilization of bodily channels simply transmitting sense data.

Mary Daly, for example, asserts that a feminist consciousness awakens deprived and dormant senses to allow women to perceive the dimensions and effects of patriarchal oppression. The newly sharpened senses allow women to perceive “gynaesthetically” (that is, to perceive and recognize patterns of oppression), and this newly honed perceptive ability also aids in the implementation of liberative action.<sup>64</sup> In Daly, women’s sensory ability is framed ontologically as well as epistemologically: women are biologically different. This has ontological dimensions, and it makes perception ontologically sexed. In an empiricist vein, the senses then become bodily functions operating like channels: they may be congested or cleared, but they are passive receptors of knowledge. Daly conceptually separates sensing from perceiving, thinking, imagining, acting, and speaking; even as she attempts to hold them together, she connects sensation to perception and knowledge in a mechanistic way. The senses function as receptive

---

<sup>63</sup> The point-by-point correspondence between stimulus and elementary perception is the “constancy hypothesis” of empiricists. The objective world is given, and emits stimuli received by the sense organs, this connection is a constant. This however fails to account for discrepancies such as optical illusions (e.g., of size or color). *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>64</sup> Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 341,401-405.

organs whose capacities are biologically-ontologically determined and, once “re-awakened,” aid in the use of other capacities such as perceiving, thinking and speaking.<sup>65</sup>

While Daly’s larger theological project involves highlighting and struggling against persistent mind/body/spirit separations imposed on and maintained through patriarchy and androcentric language, her framing of perception with empiricist conceptions undermines her project significantly. Daly attempts to frame body/mind/soul not as separate entities, but rather as different aspects of the same self. Daly describes women as being deeply connected to the world and as capable of tapping into the interconnection of the world through women’s range of subtle and complex sensory powers, accessing what she calls “deep memory.”<sup>66</sup> When addressing the patriarchal split

---

<sup>65</sup> Considering speech as an action and expansion of the self/mind/body, a linguistic revolution is Daly’s (theological) solution, and she seeks to strategically invent and reappropriate words and grammar to speak and write “woman” in order to create a female mystic symbolism which will allow a re-membering of the creative integrity in women. This shares similarities with the philosophical project of Luce Irigaray. Critics of Daly’s project point to her exclusive dismissal of differences and her universalizing of women’s oppression, the patronizing, racializing undertones when Daly essentializes non-White women as victims. In my reading, it is not the victimization of non-White women where I locate the strongest indictment of racial stereotyping. I find Daly to mirror the patriarchal gaze when she draws the biology-oppression-symbolism connections in her discussion of women’s global oppression: The Indian wife stands in for gender oppression in marriage, the Chinese woman symbolizes oppression of sexuality and erotics, the African woman illustrates bodily sexual violations, while the European and American women become illustrations for the oppression of female wisdom, spirituality and autonomy of mind. Thus, Daly keeps bodily associations and hierarchies common to Enlightenment taxonomies intact. Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 175. Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, 24.

<sup>66</sup> Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy*, 80,91,353. The soul as the animating principle is wholly present in each part of the body as the intellectual principle that is united to the body as the body forms. This also grounds her claim of ontological differences based in biological differences. Insisting on women’s biological ontological difference, Daly valorizes female bodily functions like menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth as biological and symbolic – they are ontologically different experiences which need to be perceived and expressed grounded in feminist consciousness. Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, 83. Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy*, 344-345. This conceptualization also explains Daly’s preference for bodily integrity and her valorizing and normalizing of bodily wholeness and sex/gender conformity. Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, 57,238. Transgenderism and transsexuality might be judged to be bodily mutilations caused by or effecting a mind/body/soul split, which might explain Daly’s expressed contempt for male-to-female transsexuals (claiming that most transsexuals are men, trying to take creative capacity away from women). Also not

and control of mind/body/spirit and the “pollution inflicted through patriarchal myth and language on all levels,”<sup>67</sup> Daly diagnoses the effects of this oppressive split in the pervasive sensory deprivation of women, a deprivation that destroys women’s capacity to feel and perceive and know deeply and therefore act authentically.<sup>68</sup> The world in which women live is not ambiguous; rather, inattention or sensory deficits/deprivation results in flawed perceptions and inauthentic knowledge.

Daly’s appeal to the senses resorts to a strong dualism in which the biological capacity to sense the world is causally connected to the epistemological capacity to perceive truth *about* the world. Daly’s conception of sensory capacities and perceptual abilities makes linear connections between biology, symbolism, power and language, but rather than overcoming dualisms, she reinforces them by positing the senses in a bio-mechanical manner as channels to perceive truth which then gets expressed in language according to this perception in the mind.<sup>69</sup>

Merleau-Ponty assesses that dissecting perception into sensations, qualities, stimuli, response, etc., upholds an objectification of the world with a rigorous subject-

---

faring well are gay men, lesbians who are not sufficiently "woman-identified," and more or less everybody who is not a radical/Lesbian feminist is considered a traitor to the feminist cause, conforming to an androcentric worldview.

<sup>67</sup> Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, 9.

<sup>68</sup> Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy*, 63, 342.

<sup>69</sup> However, any granting of special or particularly keen perceptual capacities to women (as in Daly) maintains dualistic biological essentialism and universalizing of “woman.” It remains unclear how exactly it is that female perceptual capacities are different or better than male perceptual capacities, especially if the uniqueness of female bodies is located in bodily functions such as pregnancy, menstruation, or lactation, bodily organs not immediately connected to, say, the capacities of sight or hearing. Resorting to a connection between perception and consciousness to support a sexed/gendered perceptual difference is equally unsound, because it upholds a consciousness/senses dualism, and makes consciousness the cause *and* the receptor or perceptual insights.

object divide and presupposes an objective world in-itself accessible through mechanical perceptual processes. The various theoretical takes of empiricism conceptualize perception by theorizing how an object affects perceptual experience. “Sensation” is often the empiricist notion of choice to explain perception: It seems commonsensical that objects are sensorially perceived and bodily senses are the physiological tools available to the subject. But no matter where empiricists locate the process of sensation, perception is reduced to a causal process of an object bringing about a sensory impact; felt sensation is conceived as the experience of impact on sensory organs. The perceiving subject has at her disposal a physical system which receives stimuli to which she responds in ways determinable by empirical observation.<sup>70</sup>

But in any possible empiricist stance (sensory impressions formed by the subject upon stimulation, or sensory qualities inherent to the object and analogously received by the subject with her sensory capacities), causal theories of perception still fail to explain exactly *how* an object can cause a perceptual experience. When empiricists attempt to answer the question of how a sum of independent sensations can lead to the perception of an object (e.g., how does a figure stand out from a background), the go-to explanation is to invoke sensation along with mental functions like association and memory.<sup>71</sup> That is,

---

<sup>70</sup> In one possible empiricist conception, sensation is a differentiated building block: it is implicitly independent of perceptual processes and by implication cannot serve in an explanatory function. In another empiricist conception, sensation is understood as an unambiguous correlative process between object qualities and perceptual experience, but the ambiguous nature of perception (with perceived information and meaning depending on context) is unaccounted for and produces mischaracterizations of our actual perceptual experience. Merleau-Ponty points to ambiguities in perceptual experience and the dependencies on context by using examples like Müller-Lyer’s optical illusion (two lines which are equal in length, but appear as various in lengths). Merleau-Ponty, 6.

<sup>71</sup> Another notion invoked to explain perceived object unity, but also discrepancies between perceived object and immediate sensory effect (as in an optical illusion), is *attention*. I will return to this notion in more detail shortly in my discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s take on intellectualism. But in terms of

particular distributions of sensations are thought to invoke similar distributions experienced in the past and with it invoke the references we learned to associate with them. This, however, simply defers the problem of how sensations invoke perception of a unified object standing out against a background: the past event to which the association refers still poses the same question, and our search for the original invocation of meaning is caught up in an infinite regress.<sup>72</sup>

This is a theoretical bind Rosemary Radford Ruether encounters when appealing to perception. Like other feminist theologians, she understands dualisms of any kind to distort reality and, as such, cause and perpetuate structural and individual sin.<sup>73</sup> Ruether paints a complex picture of human embodiment and existence in a matrix of energy-matter. Energy and matter are not separate; energy is organized in patterns and relationships and is the basis for what is experienced as visible things. Human consciousness and intelligence are a most intense and complex form of inwardness of material energy itself.<sup>74</sup> The individual self, which is an individuated ego/organism, ceases in death (the cessation of consciousness as interiority of that life process which

---

empiricist theorizing, attention is invoked to explain why, if all sensations are equally present and available to the perceiver, some qualities are perceived and others are not. Attention equals perceptive focus in this framework. Yet again, as we will see below with memory and association, what exactly triggers attention/inattention is unaccounted for. Empiricism, by explaining perceptive processes as external, mechanical relations only (in an attempt to leave out acts of consciousness), puts the notion of attention into infinite regress: what triggers attention must be triggered by something else, but no original trigger can be given. *Ibid.*, 26-27.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 19-21.

<sup>73</sup> Her method of choice is to employ dialectical thinking and to construct syntheses between posited dualisms and to recover positive aspects of what traditionally has been devalued: mind/body, man/woman, white/black, human/nature, orthodoxy/heresy, transcendent/immanent, etc. See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87. Ruether draws on Teilhard de Chardin's theory of evolution for a philosophical-scientific concept of the body.



holds an organism together), and dissolves back into cosmic matrix of matter/energy which is the basis for new life.<sup>75</sup> This cosmic matrix is what enables “revelatory experience,” the breakthrough experiences beyond ordinary fragmented consciousness which provide the grounds for theologizing.<sup>76</sup> Because oppressions are social and cultural products, they can be overcome through re-socialization, which revelatory experiences make possible.

In Ruether, the subject (the energy-matter-ego-organism) has experiences, and these experiences appear to be organized by the mind (complex form of material energy). Revelatory experiences, brought about by a honed utilization of bodily and intellectual senses, are equated with consciousness of evil (the perception of evil).<sup>77</sup> Ruether uses brain research to argue that women already have a biological and cultural advantage for psychic wholeness due to their advanced integration of rational and relational modes of thought.<sup>78</sup> And because of women’s socialization towards rational and relational modes,

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 257. Ruether’s conceptualization of the body as energy/matter fits with her concept of “experience.” If the energy released from the organism in death returns to the cosmic energy cycle, then the breakthrough revelatory experiences are a tapping into this cosmic matrix.

<sup>76</sup> These feminist (because brought about through consciousness-raising) experiences provide interpretive symbols illuminating the means of the whole of life. Starting with the experiencing individual, they become socially meaningful only when translated into communal consciousness and becoming collectively appropriated by a formative group. Ibid., 13.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 159-164. Ruether calls this “conversion.” To Ruether, this ability to perceive evil and name sin is not an individual conversion, but one that requires (feminist) networks of communication and support. Ruether, 184-185.

<sup>78</sup> Ruether, 113. She specifically investigates research into the relation between the two brain halves. However, Ruether neglects that scientific research into the brain itself might already be culturally ordered, research in which cultural gender divisions are read into “objective” biological observations. For an example of how culture shapes scientific facts, and casts scientific observations in gendered terms, see Martin. See also chapter three.

women have a “perceptive edge” in terms of psychic integration and revelatory experience.

Because she is describing consciousness-raising processes as intellectual processes (though we remember that she understands intellect/mind as a form of complex matter), Ruether is employing an empiricist separation between intellectual perception and biological sensing. Her concept of experience also rests on a presupposition of perception being different from experience, with (accurate, revelatory) perception functioning as the result of a heightened consciousness applied to experience. Once a woman is open to a feminist consciousness, she is able to perceive her individual, bodily experiences from a feminist perspective, and now needs to move from deepened senses of anger and alienation to a sense of a redeemed, liberated self.<sup>79</sup> Perception functions as the unexplored tool or channel of consciousness, and serves the mind to interpret experience.<sup>80</sup> The cosmic matrix (which enables revelatory experiences of truth by collecting the energies of previous lives and their experiences) about the world still defers the problem of how sensory experiences invoke perceived meaning; the origin of truth ends up being projected into a matrix which has no beginning.

---

<sup>79</sup> Ruether, 184-189.

<sup>80</sup> Understanding perception as correlative process of sense experience and qualities of the world can render “truth” and “meaning” in the world static and fixed. This stance implies that perceptual differences now have a hierarchical aspect in regards to truth. In other words, it ties knowledge to the external world, and posits hierarchies of perceptual consciousness in regards to perceivers. For example, if I do not perceive and associate certain embedded structures (say, sexism) as connected to my experience in a certain way, I either fail to sufficiently tune my senses or my feminist consciousness to the overarching “truth” in the world. This stance undermines any attempts of conceptualizing contextual and historical differences or shifts and interrelations of meaning. Effectively, this universalizes certain interpretative methodologies by adding fixed perceptive associations as a biological and theological capacity for theological work.

*Summing up Empiricist Conceptions and Connected Theological Dilemmas*

Empiricist notions of perception are caught up in a paradox. By invoking memory and association, they presuppose that which they seek to explain (the actual process of association), and defer to a consciousness for which they cannot account via empiricist methods. Furthermore, they undermine the positing of sensations as building blocks. If a specific sum of sensory data invokes an association or a memory, it cannot be neutral. It must possess more than just factual qualities and inherently hold a guide for its own interpretation. Resorting to memory and association then only highlights the circular theoretical explanations of empiricism and the shortcomings of sensation as main explanatory principle.<sup>81</sup> The latter is especially evident when expanding the equation of sensation with experience to more complex perceptions, such as spatial and temporary relations: If all experience is dissectible and analyzable in terms of quantities of differentiated sensation, then knowledge cannot be more than an anticipation of impressions.<sup>82</sup> The process of association and recognition of unity (seeing a thing as a thing) remains unexplained and relegated to a consciousness equally unexplained (though crucial in the operation of identification of configurations).<sup>83</sup>

Empiricism, Merleau-Ponty thus asserts, is descriptively wrong in the claim that perception is simply an awareness of sensations: describing experience via sense impressions fails to explain sensation itself. Also, it is incoherent when it attempts to

---

<sup>81</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 22.

<sup>82</sup> This is a position Hume is content to rely on. While the external world is “out there,” perceptions are only evidence from which we can infer existence of exterior objects and knowledge about them, but we cannot perceive things as they “really” are.

<sup>83</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 17.

capture the content of experience in terms of sensation while at the same time putting forward experience as brought about by sensory stimuli.<sup>84</sup> In other words, the empiricist position is not accurate in the claim that perception equals attending to the senses. Nor is it logically consistent to define experience as consisting of *and* caused by sensation. Such a position bestows sensation with the dual, but discordant purpose of describing *and* explaining experience.

Attempting to hold on to sensation as a concept and fix loopholes in their own theorizing, empiricists can no longer maintain purely empiricist methodologies. Theorizing perception via empiricist avenues in the end fails to adequately account for structures of perception, structures which allow us to perceive whole objects and qualities. It also conflates felt sensation and associated meaning, presenting a linear or consistent relation between sensation, perception, and knowledge. Empiricists externalize these structures and imbue them in the elementary sensation perceived by a stimulus via the constancy hypothesis. But because this cannot explain perceptive confusions or varieties in association, it leaves processes or dynamics of perception unaccounted for in the end.<sup>85</sup>

Turning back on their concerns with dualist notions of body/mind, even theologians like Daly, Heyward, Moltmann-Wendel or Ruether, who passionately argue

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 3, 13-17. Empiricist phenomenology in the eyes of Merleau-Ponty reverses the order of explanation by taking the consequence of perceptual significance (e.g., taking a red sign in a landscape signifying a specific meaning to me) for the ground. "In doing so we relieve perception of its essential function, which is to lay the foundation of, or inaugurate knowledge, and we see it through its results." Merleau-Ponty, 17.

<sup>85</sup> Taylor Carman, "Between Empiricism and Intellectualism," in *Merleau Ponty: Key Concepts*, ed. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008), 46.

against a separation of body/mind rendering female bodies passive and biological-mechanical, have rendered it passive yet again by appealing to sensory capacities which turn bodily sensation into purely receptive channels and/or by implying perception to be the intellectual grasp of bodily sensorially received data. Being unclear about how bodily experiences are connected to or brought about by sense data and perception curiously separates the body from the mind. It relegates the body to the role of mere vessel for sensations with perceptual capacities which can be honed and utilized by a consciousness.

Epistemologically, rendering sensory perception a biological capacity (however spiritually or intellectually honed) in empiricist conceptions (even those which may allow for socio-cultural influences) makes it difficult to account for any knowledge gained through perceptual ability, especially different knowledge acquired from a different standpoint (be it the female body, the racialized body, or the poor body). In other words, it makes it difficult to explain how embodied experience can be the sensing of for example, oppression, without resorting back to conceiving of knowledge as associating and anticipating certain patterns of experience and identifying them as “oppression.” Either this association must have a specific origin which was clearly identified as oppression and is easily transferable to other experiences (thus universalizing and simplifying either oppression or experience), or this association is made by a consciousness (but how is still not explained).

When appeals to the senses are made in feminist theologies, they may be connected to liberative epistemological strategies of tuning into the “real world,” or of

tapping into traces of a “world untainted by sexism/oppression” (as in Ruether). Yet this upholds divides of natural vs. cultural, and often associates this “natural” world with an ideal world free of oppressive structures. This nature/culture divide, deliberately placed or not, frames sensory perception as a biological, but somehow “culturally sensitized,” tool which is supposed to be able to bridge the dualism it was conceived within in the first place. For example, the perceiving woman has at her disposal either a physical system which she simply needs to hone or “fine-tune” in order to receive knowledge about the world (e.g., in Daly or Moltmann-Wendel), or the perceiving woman has innate bodily and mental capacities to perceive her environment which she needs to reawaken in order to make perceptive and interpretive associations (as in Ruether).<sup>86</sup>

It does not matter if the empiricist conceptions of perception found in theologies are expressed explicitly or implicitly, or if they show more or less theoretical sophistication. Any resourcing of bodily experience which utilizes a plea to the senses as

---

<sup>86</sup> Serene Jones cautions against establishing universal principles or themes under which “women’s experience” become subsumed, such as posing ‘relationality’ as intrinsic to female human existence. As Jones comments, relationality can serve as the structure to appropriate or fit in that which is marginal, and she also wonders if valorizing traditional stereotype of women being more relational can really be liberating. Also problematic is the thinking of relationality as essentialized female experience, based on care and nurture in the essentially female (biological) capacity to reproduce and mother children. Valorization of bodily experiences described as uniquely female, such as menstruation, seems useful in countering social constructions of menstruation as symbol for female excess, lack of control and messiness. Jones, “Women’s Experience between a Rock and a Hard Place: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Theologies in North America,” 39. Also Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, ed. Kathryn Tanner and Paul Lakeland, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 47. I echo this concern. Relationality, if used in an undifferentiated way, can easily neglect to take a postcolonial analysis into account, in which relationality is complicated by relations to colonial power and within imperialist structures: Relationality is not necessarily inherently innocent, thus a women’s experience of relationships can be marked by oppression as well as complicity, be it in deference to cultural customs or survival struggles. This potentially falls back on regarding the reproductive body as something essentially female, regardless of intention or ability of individual women to exercise that capacity. Theologies that valorize women as life-givers valorize biological capacities and connect affirmation of women to their considered biological (reproduction) and social (relationality) capacities. This kind of deduction raises questions about the humanity of those women who cannot or want not bear children, or who fail to show nurturing and caring traits.

“better” access to “truth” or “meaning” maintains caught in dualisms of many kinds and on many levels and ends up perpetuating them in significant ways (though it may be unintended). In empiricist conceptions sensory capacities remain fixed in a biologically determined body, and this obviously undermines any attempts to move beyond body/mind dualisms.

### *Intellectualism Critically Analyzed*

Intellectualism (also called idealism or cognitivism, depending on discipline and context) is the most pervasive theoretical thread in the phenomenological movement. Traceable (though not exclusively originating) in the diverse manifestations of Cartesian and Kantian rationalisms, intellectualism conceives of our essential relation to the world—of the content of our attitudes about the world—as thought.

Descartes conceived of the mind as that which apprehends ideas, rationally formed. Body and mind are two distinct entities; bodies are made of physical properties, the mind takes up properties of thinking, seeing, feeling, sensing, etc. Edmund Husserl, the considered founder of the phenomenological movement, alludes to Descartes as the “patriarch of phenomenology,” describing his own phenomenological approach as a new Cartesianism.<sup>87</sup> Cartesian conceptions have habituated us to think of the body as an object, and of perception as an action of the subject. From this perspective, bodily experiences and perception as mental activity are at best causally connected, and this

---

<sup>87</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans., Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 3-5.

makes it difficult to conceive how physiological, spatially-grounded facts can be commensurable to psychic facts not located in time and space.<sup>88</sup>

Immanuel Kant, more known for his epistemology, nevertheless leaves a legacy on phenomenological thinking. He distinguishes between the way objects are “in themselves” (called “noumena,” which one cannot directly experience), and the way objects are interpreted in one’s perception and understanding (“phenomena”).<sup>89</sup> Kant drew a contrast between receptivity and spontaneity, a distinction which comes close to basic intellectualist aspects of perception, the sensory and motor dimensions.<sup>90</sup> For analytical purposes, I could make a distinction between two aspects of perception that underlie the traditional objective-subjective, physical-mental divide: a) the relative passivity of sense experience, and b) the relative activity of bodily skills.

A Cartesian cogito of some kind is common to both empiricist and intellectualist approaches: a mind that synthesizes and “manages” sensory information. Yet intellectualist theories conceive of perception fundamentally as cognitive and subjective activity. The “I” actively transcends itself and grasps the world. The world exists as such, though only for the conscious mind which “knows” it. As a form of idealism, intellectualism is a response to the considered flaws of empiricism, especially the positing of the consciousness as just another thing in the world subject to natural laws

---

<sup>88</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 77. Or posing this as a question: How can there be a connection between something that exists somewhere in space (is spatial-physiological), and something that exists nowhere (is psychic), and what would this connection be?

<sup>89</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans., Marcus Weigelt (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2008), 251-260.

<sup>90</sup> Dennis Schulting, *Kant's Deduction and Apperception: Explaining the Categories* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 139.



(such as causation). Intellectualism conceives of consciousness as wholly different from the world. Taken to its logical conclusion, intellectualism then has to argue in support of a consciousness constituting the world, a consciousness that *is* the “I” transcending into the world. There is a world in itself “out there” existing independently of the conscious “I,” but we cannot know about this world “as it is,” only as it is constituted in my consciousness.

Intellectualism, though it seeks to overcome the mechanical sensory model of empiricism, renders perceptual experience just as static and shares much with the empirical views it seeks to overcome, for example, the conceptions that raw data is passively received through sensory faculties and knowledge conforms to independently existing objects. Intellectualism understands perception as the exercise of thought and judgment involved in experience, executed by an evaluating subject.

Phenomenologically, this describes sense experience as distinct from, but analogous to, thinking. Consequentially, rendering experiencing akin to thinking absorbs sense experience into thought and cognitive structures without accounting for the ways in which thinking and bodily perceptual experiences differ.<sup>91</sup>

More specifically, intellectualists attempt to address the concept of attention, used by empiricists to theorize how it becomes possible that in the reception of sensory data an object stands out against a background for the perceiver.<sup>92</sup> Where empiricists fall short because of their theoretical inability to resort to consciousness (though they imply it),

---

<sup>91</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 28.

<sup>92</sup> See footnote 58 in this chapter on Gestalt psychology and figure/background perception.

intellectualists propose that it is the constituting activities of consciousness which create the structures of perception.<sup>93</sup> Whether or not this structure is perceptible to the subject has no consequence in intellectualist theories. Consciousness, by its very existence and activity, produces structures which aid the subject in perception.<sup>94</sup> Intellectualists do not need “attention” in order to explain perception, but use it to help illuminate perceptual structures.

However, Merleau-Ponty points out, if consciousness in its activity produces structure, it must have these very same structures itself. In other words, if consciousness provides the structures of perception, then in the moment of perception we already possess perceptual structures. This makes certain actual perceptual experiences theoretically untenable: I could not possibly be perceptually deceived (as in optical or other sensory illusions), and contingency and learning remain unaccounted for theoretically. Conceiving of a consciousness possessing and producing structures of perception implies that perception is always complete, determinate and definite. Yet our lived experience shows that we continue to explore and learn about that which we perceive.

Intellectualist perspectives are unable to meaningfully employ concepts such as attention. Indeed, “to attend” is to progressively formulate that which initially occurs as indeterminate and ambiguous to us. Therefore, the experience of attention shows that at the beginning of perception, there is neither sensory chaos nor unambiguously

---

<sup>93</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 27-28. For example, my consciousness, by virtue of being active, produces structures of time and space; therefore, I perceive my world temporarily and spatially.

<sup>94</sup> Without this structure-inducing consciousness, there is either perceptual chaos, or a Kantian noumenon (the thing in itself). Ibid., 29.

perceivable qualities; at the end of perception, there is no complete transparency and coherence.<sup>95</sup> Attention itself is creative, and this creativity is motivated exactly by this initial indeterminate horizon of perception.<sup>96</sup> Intellectualism thus needs a different concept to link sensory data impinging on the subject to the perceived sense image of unified objects.

The problems inherent in intellectualist conceptions may make their way into theological projects which emphasize consciousness-raising. For example, Ada María Isasi-Díaz's theological project is that of detecting, describing, and valuing Hispanic women's moral agency and subjectivity.<sup>97</sup> Among those themes, she uses, for example, the experiences of particular community struggles and that of *mestizaje* (signifying the racial and cultural mixed-ness of U.S. Hispanics), mined for processes of meaning-making.<sup>98</sup> Her method is strong on being sensitive to culturally specific historical,

---

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>96</sup> Merleau-Ponty discusses psychological studies with patients who cannot locate a specific point on their body, yet who are not completely ignorant of it either. Their vague locating of a body part overturns empiricist and intellectualist concepts of attention. The same is evident when considering infants learning to distinguish color. Child development studies show that children first conceive of color/colorless, then warm/cold hues; they then begin to distinguish colors. Merleau-Ponty claims that it is not that they saw colors all along but failed to pay attention; rather, the structure of their perception changed. Ibid., 30-31. Langer, 12.

<sup>97</sup> Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996). Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha = in the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*, 10th anniversary ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004). Hispanic women's experiences as theological source are called *lo cotidiano* in Isasi-Díaz: The struggles and processes of Hispanic women's lives, the "stuff" of Hispanic women's reality makes up shared (not common) experiences.

<sup>98</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, 66. When Isasi-Díaz elicits processes of meaning-making she focuses on acts of interpreting and understanding one's actions and statements. Isasi-Díaz's balancing act between thick descriptions and normative generalities is mirrored in other feminist theologies from non-Western locations, as found in the essays compiled by King, Fabella and Oduyoye, and Brock, Jung, Kwok and Seung. See Ursula King, *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994). Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyeye, eds., *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

socialized, and feminist experiences, and she constructs insightful theological formulations.<sup>99</sup>

Perception is significant to Isasi-Díaz where consciousness and conscientization are concerned. Sensory perception to Isasi-Díaz is the most basic level of sensitivity in consciousness, a level shared with animal life.<sup>100</sup> But understanding (she refers to Bernard Lonergan's use of Hegel's term *Aufhebung* or sublation<sup>101</sup>) is used to describe complementation and interpretation of what is sensed. Unique to humans is the incorporation of sense perception with other, higher, levels of judging and choosing.

Because conscientization as critical reflection on action leading to awareness is connected to higher levels of consciousness Isasi-Díaz describes, sensory perception in her work is the raw material, but nevertheless needs to be absorbed into a consciousness which "pays attention" in order to be put to use for processes of liberation. Knowledge about the world still conforms to a world that exists independently and offers meaning to the person sensing and reflecting on her sensory bodily experiences in her environment. Conscientization is the exercise of thought and judgment; the evaluative perception

---

Rita Nakashima Brock and others, "Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology," (2007).

<sup>99</sup> For theological projects with similar aims of constructing theology from particular locations, see for example Joh's engagement of the Korean concept *jeong* in Wonhee Anne Joh, "Violence and Asian American Experience: From Abjection to Jeong," *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology* (2007). See also Joh's christological construction based on *jeong* in Joh, "Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology."

<sup>100</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, 154. Díaz draws here on the concept of moral consciousness by Bernard Lonergan.

<sup>101</sup> Bernard Lonergan was a Catholic priest and theologian. Part of his philosophical work includes explorations of empirical methods to investigate exterior sensation as well as internal processes of consciousness.

employed by a person who holds perceptual structures in her mind which aid in her perception of her world.

Theologians leaning in intellectualist directions in terms of phenomenological conceptions are bound to the ways in which they (implicitly or explicitly) propose a judging and evaluating mind processing perceptual data gained in bodily experiences. Judgment in intellectualist conceptions assumes the coordinating function within consciousness, whilst also taking on the explanatory burden for phenomena such as optical illusions (or even the discrepancies between what is projected on a retina and the perceived object).<sup>102</sup> Within this theoretical assembly, perception is rendered an intellectual construction. Sensory data is received, but to perceive is to interpret, elaborate, or use that data to conclude and determine. The experience of perception is now the intellectual activity of judging: Every time we see, hear, taste, smell, or touch, we actually judge that we see *this*, hear *that*, smell *this*, or touch *that*.

Merleau-Ponty argues that this intellectualist version is not how we experience perception in real life. Purely physically, we do “see” (receive an imprint of an image on our retina) upside down, but we do not experience upside-down images which we then judge or interpret right-side up. And we do experience differences between sensing and judging, as evident in attempts to make sense of sensory illusions or to explain hallucinations.<sup>103</sup>

---

<sup>102</sup> “Judgment is often introduced as *what sensation lacks to make perception possible*.” (Emphasis in original) Merleau-Ponty, 32-33. Merleau-Ponty sketches intellectualism’s take with Descartes’ example of seeing hats and coats below our window, but, using judgment, we declare that we see men.

<sup>103</sup> Regarding hallucination, Merleau-Ponty explains that intellectualism makes sharp distinctions between true and false perceptions. But it is incoherent to say that, if I experience a hallucination, I simply *think* I am seeing something which I do not really see, because by definition, I *do* see it. Because if saying

Contrary to intellectualism's conception, perception is not thought. The latter is based on and presupposes perception. Merleau-Ponty insists here on an irreducible phenomenal difference between perception and thought and observes that we perceive before we think, and we learn how to think about what we see, rather than attaching preexisting thought to a sensed world encountered by the act of thinking.<sup>104</sup> At the same time, thinking itself is structurally much more like perceiving than rationalistic concepts account for: both are intentional,<sup>105</sup> both share some underlying structural features (e.g., perspectival orientation), because both are anchored in the body.<sup>106</sup> Merleau-Ponty asserts that judgment is secondary, not integral, to perception. The intellectualist trajectories of phenomenology (beginning with Cartesian rationalism and moving through Kantian a priori categories of judgment enabling perception) posit an autonomous and disembodied consciousness. In the Cartesian model, the mind holds "ideas" (or "representations" in Kant) and therefore is able to imagine and perceive. These ideas are objects of consciousness: the subject is aware of ideas and has attitudes about ideas. This fails to acknowledge that all subjects (including their mind and its functions) are inherently embodied and situated.

---

that I see something = I think that I see something, then the intellectualist stance implies that I think I see what I don't think I see. If I argue that I simply execute bad judgment (perhaps by holding false premises), the problem of explaining the process of my hallucinating is merely deferred. The process of distinguishing between adequate and inadequate impressions still requires explaining. And such an explanation would require conceiving of an elementary sensible holding immanent signification, a concept already ruled out by intellectualism's theoretical stance. Ibid., 39-44. Langer, 14.

<sup>104</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans., Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 11., Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 12.

<sup>105</sup> "Intentionality" as a technical term in phenomenology is *not* understood as a synonym for "on purpose." Rather, as the feature of our mental life, it describes our perceptions, thoughts, emotions, beliefs, etc., as being "of" or "about" something. I will explore this concept in depth in the next chapter.

<sup>106</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 33.

Even theologians who explicitly and adamantly seek to do theology from embodied perspectives and grounded in bodily experiences may be tripped up by intellectualist notions making their way into their projects. Marcella Althaus-Reid, for example, seeks to ground her theological engagements in the lived, embodied experiences of women in Latin America, who face multiple layers of oppression.<sup>107</sup> Althaus-Reid investigates lived realities of bodily experiences, comparing them with religious narratives and symbols, looking for possibilities of identification and liberation in sexual metaphors employed for the theological imaginary.<sup>108</sup> Constructively, she then proposes a perverting and “indecenting” of theology by constructing positions from sexual marginal epistemologies: telling sexual stories and doing theology of sexual stories, bringing them into dialogue with economics and politics and the oppression occurring through them.

Because Althaus-Reid connects perception to recognition of meaning *and* reception of sense data, perception can be conscious or not, but conscious perception is linked to particular standpoints and social location, revealing particular (hidden) truths.<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> Using socio-cultural analysis and ethnographic tales, Althaus-Reid argues that economic, political, sexual, and religious structures all work together to form systems and orders of decency which determine the lived reality of women. Althaus-Reid names this kind of liberation theology “Indecent Theology” and argues that this is the case because it exposes and deconstructs the relationship between the sexual and the theological, a relationship defining the order of decency which underpins other oppressive orders. Decency/indecency operate to define what stands as “normal” in terms of the economical, sexual, racial, and theological, and this decent and normal masks the multiple oppressions and interrelated structures of oppression at work. Marcella M. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 2,17,22-26.

<sup>108</sup> For example, she finds subversions in theologically engaging the poor raced transvestite who seeks to survive marginalization and oppression by prostituting in a nightclub. She resists essentializing of ‘the poor’ as well as their desires, and complicates religion, citizenship and notions of justice through her theological readings of sexual practices and embodiments. See *Ibid.*, 32-33,85-86,112-114,136-137.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 38,55.

While she does not articulate it specifically, at times she implies perception to be bodily function which can be put to use in accessing experience and providing information useful to processes of interpretation and meaning-making. Other times, she implies perception to be something that is also socially influenced, particularly when it comes to recognition and reception. What is perceived/recognized is already shaped by the social and cultural imaginary, for example, certain physical appearances of a person are already shaped as perception of a criminal.<sup>110</sup> In her theological project, Althaus-Reid invokes employing a phenomenological method which understands perception as the capacity for objective observation and for “truthful” description of sensory information of a lived experience/phenomenon.<sup>111</sup>

When Althaus-Reid specifically seeks to tap into (sexually and economically) marginalized bodies and experiences as theological resources, her phenomenological stance binds her to utilizing bodily experiences as metaphor (albeit lived).<sup>112</sup> She indicates that perception is more than physical sensing, more than accessing objective data to receive knowledge. Perception and affect are linked to each other and to one’s social location; neither is free from social and cultural inscriptions. Althaus-Reid links perception and recognition, the latter being shaped by the cultural imaginary, though she also sometimes likens perception to a bodily mechanism which accesses experience and

---

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>112</sup> Althaus-Reid both has been lauded for her radical, subversive, and liberatory theological images and metaphors derived from bodily experience. But she also has been challenged for their limitations, particularly for the failure to spell out what a “Queer God” or a “Bi/Christ” *really* means, in other words, what the actual substantial difference in using these bodily groundings *is*. Thomas Bohache, *Christology from the Margins*(London, UK: SCM Press, 2008), 223.



aids in meaning-making. We can also detect how this inadvertent employment of intellectualist conceptions upholds the body-mind dualism and its cause and effect mechanisms. The mind receives data of the external world, and in a separate internal zone the world is represented. An isolated body causally affects the mind, though the purely mechanical relations of a physical universe are upheld: an external physical world shapes the organization of the interior mental world, and this relation can be reduced to physical laws of causation.<sup>113</sup>

*Summing up intellectualist conceptions and connected theological dilemmas*

Theologians drawing on intellectualist notions allow for the person to play a role in the process of perception and in formulating meaning as it appears for her. But this subject stands outside the world of experience and imposes meaning on the world. Even when theologians insist that to be embodied in the world implies a situatedness in time and space, implying a particular perspective which is only possible when one is *in* the world, the embodied subject is still caught in transcendental frames, as mind disconnected from body and world when perception remains an intellectual function.<sup>114</sup>

When sensory perception is mostly thought of in terms of awareness but remains a lower

---

<sup>113</sup> Dorothea Olkowski, "Introduction," in *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World*, ed. Dorothea Olkowski and James Morley (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 1-2.

<sup>114</sup> Merleau-Ponty maintains that the intellectualist position holds that the world has no role in determining meaning, which resolves to idealism and implies a detached subject. ("For to acknowledge a naturalism and the envelopment of consciousness in the universe of *blosse Sachen* as an occurrence, is precisely to posit the theoretical world to which they belong as primary, which is an extreme form of idealism?" Merleau-Ponty quoted in Christopher Watkin, *Phenomenology or Deconstruction? The Question of Ontology in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur and Jean-Luc Nancy* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 37.). A constituting subjectivity implies and demands that the world is affirmed/assumed to be bare of meaning. Against this extreme idealism, MP proposes that the self and the world are inextricable in the constitution of sense, an un-analyzable Gestalt in which meaning emerges in the interaction of self and world, while remaining reducible to neither. Watkin, 19.

or subordinate function of consciousness (as in Isasi-Díaz), bodily experiences become subordinated to or absorbed in cognitive structures.

Where perception is understood as bodily mechanism *and* socially influenced process (as in Althaus-Reid), we have observed that the theologies constructed by resourcing bodily experience mine the latter for metaphorical and symbolic purposes. Aiming to reshape the cultural imaginary, perception is a link and interrelated with embodiment and social location and shaped by social inscription/cultural imaginary. Yet inadvertently, a nature/culture dualism is upheld if the focus of theologies becomes the reshaping of theological and cultural imagery: If perception is a biological mechanism which is also socially influenced, it remains unarticulated how sensory perception is also a factor in the shaping of the social and the cultural, and it becomes a “natural” ability over against “cultural” powers. Consequentially, these theologies are about bodies and of bodily metaphors, rather than theologies grounded in bodily *experience*.

Perception as intellectual capacity bearing on bodily sensory information conceives of things and structures in the world as constituted by my perception, and thus dependent on and even confined to my constitutive consciousness. Although I am real and I exist, any oppression perceived, and structural violence sensed, would disappear without me and my grasp on it. Experience is a resource for theology, but never more than raw material on which to critically reflect. Experiences from a specific embodiment and particular location can give rise to theology via conscientization (intellectual processes) *only*. To paraphrase Gayatri Spivak, the subaltern may experience, but cannot

do theology.<sup>115</sup> This maintains certain hierarchies, not just of body and mind, but also of intellectual processes.

Any theological focus on identity and subjectivity (often considered multiple, fragmented, or intersectional in feminist and postcolonial thought) still upholds an explanatory gap regarding perception. Articulating cultural forces on subject formation and bodily experience and thereby forming cause-effect mechanisms still maintains nature/culture, body/mind dualisms, and places processes of perception alternately in either category. In other words, simply using either category or both to explain experience (or identity, subjectivity) does little to overcome any dualism itself.<sup>116</sup> Curiously, the subject itself, or subjectivity, falls into an “explanatory gap” in some versions of this kind of approach, for example, when the brain is rendered an organ which carries out thinking, remembering, imagining, acting, etc., in a system based on physical mechanics. The mind is either reduced to the brain or becomes an unaccounted for third party in this cause-effect model, a mind which nevertheless somehow has experiences as a subject.<sup>117</sup>

---

<sup>115</sup> See chapter 1, footnote 11. Spivak famously wrote that the subaltern can speak, but cannot be heard without significant changes to consciousness ultimately demanding the subaltern not be subaltern. I believe the same is true for theologies. Though I do believe that critical reflection is important and is a significant step in liberative projects, I also believe it is not the most important in terms of understanding what it means to experience and perceive the world.

<sup>116</sup> For example: Explaining subject formation alternately as social forces inscribing meaning on bodily markers and thereby shaping experience (e.g., heteronormativity inscribing sexual practices and thereby experiences which in turn produce heterosexual subjects and “others”), and also describing subject formation as resistant bodily practices taking up and reshaping existing cultural imagery (e.g., queer practices taking up recognizable positions while at the same time resisting and reshaping stereotypes). This strikes a balance between two perspectives which are not necessarily opposed to each other. However, the mind/body dualism is muddled, rather than overcome, in this method.

<sup>117</sup> Scott L. Marratto, *The Intercorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on Subjectivity*, ed. David Pettigrew and Francois Raffoul, *Contemporary French Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2012), 13.

When the perceived world is rendered as separate from myself, things and others exist and relate to each other independently of me. As detached perceiver, I can sense the world from nowhere and everywhere and am simultaneously connected to the world only as another alienated object, and my perception of the world is irrelevant to its existence. The world and its goings-on are real, but I as perceiver am not necessary, do not have to be a person involved in it. Even when interrelation of me-other and me-world is thought of as constitutive of my identity, as long as conceptions of perception remain caught in a subject-object divide, then “deep down” my subjectivity remains prior to interrelations with other subjects and objects (the independent “I” comes before any relation/perception of the world). Unwittingly, perception in empiricist *and* intellectualist conception can (re)shape the subject of feminist theologians into the dis-embodied universalized male, either by suggesting access to (universal) truth through sensory channels or by employing phenomenological notions which disconnect the perception of the world from one’s bodily location.

#### Situating the Theological Sense Regarding Perception

Lacking at present in feminist theology are methodological tools to address how exactly the body is not just the passive material molded by language and social inscriptions. How *do* we experience in our bodies, how *does* the body move into the imagination, into concepts, into perceptions of the world? In other words, what exactly can theorists and theologians alike learn about the “inner life” of the body and embodied experience, and what influences are at work in how we come to feel it, perceive in it, talk about it, and look at the world from and through it? And how can a theologian

conceptualize (from) a particular bodily experience (be it disabled, raced, gendered), without universalizing an able ideal, a white norm, or a naturalized gendered concept, and also avoiding exclusive, segregated theological conversations? And as a caution to myself, working within the Western academy, how do I (can I) cautiously entertain this project not as to simply present dominant discourses with yet another tool to appropriate or exploit other/othered bodies to “improve” Western discourses?

Surveying the spectrum of phenomenological approaches I have presented the two ends of the spectrum within which perception has been conceived (empiricist and intellectualist). At the ends of this spectrum, one can conceive of perception as a mechanical bodily function (the senses as bodily channels for truth “out there”) or as a function of the mind (the senses as providing the data which the mind then perceives, judges, and interprets). Neither position might seem palpable to a feminist theologian concerned with body/mind dualisms, yet when perception is unattended to, one may fall anywhere in between. My goal in presenting the ends of the spectrum has been to highlight the shortcomings of the phenomenological positions via their extremes, and to allow us note where these conceptions of perception leak into theological projects.

If I want to pursue my questions which initiated this project, and turn to feminist theologians who employ bodily experience and sensory perception in their work, I might be bound to remain within the same spectrum they find themselves in. In other words, I get caught between a methodological rock and a hard place: seek to hone my sensory perception to receive truth about my experiences in/with my family, or install my

perception and interpretation as a superior mind. Let me illustrate more clearly the dilemma I find myself in.

I could attempt to ground my theological reflection on my grandmother's experience for example by employing sensory perception as access to experience. But for lack of communication (verbal or gestural) I am left with "objective" data of what her experience might or could be like, based on detached scientific observation and collected sensorial evidence on persons with Alzheimer's disease. My attempts at accessing and utilizing her experience, what she might perceive sensorially, remain speculative, though they gain a certain clout of authority backed by scientific inquiries into the universal. Or I can move to a hard place and shift my attention to *my* experience, my first-person perceptual account and descriptions of grandmother. This would correct the speculative utilization of what Grandmom's experience might be (should be) like, but shift the focus on experience towards my personal perspective, to meaning and truth as only I experience it. Grandmom's experience and its meaning are either universal and exist independently of my witnessing them, or I am bound to my perspective and can attest to experience and meaning only as I perceive them myself. Neither approach addresses complexly how it might be that bodily sense experience (mine or hers) informs my theological reflections, and, as this statement also reveals, maintains inadvertently a body/mind dualism in which the body experiences and the mind reflects.

In the case of my mother, I can pretend to perceive her meaning-making in the world as if I am not part of her situation and not enmeshed with her in her experiences of suffering and resistance. Theologically, I am then observing her bodily movements

through my perceptual capacities as if my sensory perception is capable of grasping all meanings emerging *for her*. Or I can acknowledge that I am left with my own subjective grasp of her experience; I cannot perceive of *her* experience, but only draw on *my* experience of her, my perception and description of her experiences. Yet, honing and employing my sensory abilities to perceive of my mom's experience like an outsider is imprudent not only (though significantly) because *I* am involved. Positing my perceptual capacities as adequate for theological reflection and interpretation on her experiences like an insider is imprudent because *she* is involved. And I still have not accounted for the ways in which bodily experiences and perception are implicated with each other so that I am not a mind evaluating my bodily perceptions.

Within this spectrum of empiricist-intellectualist approaches to perception, the nature and processes of perception are insufficiently explained. Perception cannot be adequately conceived as either a causal link in a mechanic, bodily process or as an event or state in the mind or brain. When theologians employ embodiment to voice dissatisfaction with pervasive mind/body dualism, perception cannot remain conceptualized within a dualistic frame. What has emerged so far in this chapter is that some phenomenological conceptions posit bodily experiences as offering up "truth" accessed through perceptual processes. Theologies naming (women's) bodily experiences, and thereby making it a conceptual category, then may imply that these bodily experiences may be accessed via ontological epistemological sensory capacities, or they may serve as indicators or text offering truth about social and cultural forces evaluated and interpreted through intellectual capacities.

In the phenomenological spectrum presented, sensori-perceptual processes are established as common universal. Theologies falling within this spectrum—either by hailing sensory perception as the go-to avenue for women (or all persons) to access truth/knowledge, by likening perception uncritically to apprehension (albeit from different standpoints), or equating it to recognition of reality—fall prey to the problems inherent in this spectrum. This does little to deconstruct binaries of experience (e.g., male/female) or metaphysical dualisms (material/transcendent), but again constructs idealized bodies and bodily functions, and particularly neglects implications of those bodies doubly inscribed with difference (racialized women, women with menstrual complications, intersexed persons, transgendered persons, impaired bodies, dying bodies, etc.).<sup>118</sup>

Turning back on their own concerns, even theologians who explicitly seek to overcome body/mind dualisms render the biological body mechanical and passive: Either by appealing to the senses and therefore making the body no more than a vessel for reception, by appealing to bodily function while at the same time applying normatizing ontological ascriptions, or by focusing on the intellectual perceptual capacities to evaluate social forces impinging on bodily experiences. These approaches, however, tend to establish evidence of different bodies and bodily experience as evidence for the fact of

---

<sup>118</sup> See Jones, "Women's Experience between a Rock and a Hard Place: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Theologies in North America," 39. Also Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, 47. See also Paula Cooley's discussion of constructions of motherhood and 'bad' women, in Paula M. Cooley, "Bad Women: The Limits of Theory and Theology," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). On the problem of gendered implications in reproductive health and childrearing for moral agency and full personhood of women, see Helen Marshall, "Our Bodies, Our Selves: Why We Should Add Old Fashioned Empirical Phenomenology to the New Theories of the Body," in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999).



difference (I see different bodies, therefore our bodies are different). This kind of shortcut might prevent us from undergoing a more complex exploration of *how* difference is perceived and established and how bodily experience and perception may play part in it. An appeal to the senses does not grant access to unmediated truth or untainted experiences, revelations of meaning or the divine; bodies, and their sensory capacity themselves, are always differently constituted. To “be in touch with one’s feelings” is always simultaneously less and more than just that, as we will discuss in depth in the following chapter.

### **Moving Beyond the Empiricism-Intellectualism Spectrum**

We have seen in the above describing and evaluating of the different positions that empiricism posits a perceptual process which in effect renders the subject ignorant (because consciousness is denied a role in the process, though invoked for other functions). In contrast, intellectualism conceives of a subject completely cognizant of what is perceived. But despite some of our actual sense experiences being ambiguous or vague, both positions theorize perception as determinate and corresponding to a (self-evident) objective world: Empiricists understand this world to exist in itself, imposing on the perceiver, and construct an absolute objectivity via this theory of perception. Intellectualists conceive of the world as the immanent end of knowledge, posing a concept of consciousness which sustains the objective world constructed by empiricists.<sup>119</sup>

---

<sup>119</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 29, 35-39.

Merleau-Ponty charges that the inadvertent denial of the embodied nature of perceptual experience is common to both empiricists and intellectualists. The former treats the body as a mechanism; the latter treats the body only as an afterthought or contingency to consciousness.<sup>120</sup> Both positions take for granted that there is an objective world “out there,” a world described by science. Human beings are but one of the objects in this world, and “experience” is the result of inter-object cause-and-effect relations. Merleau-Ponty asserts that this approach is mistaken in its starting point: It is from embodied experience that any scientific theories are derived, i.e., we interact with the world before we develop our theories about it. This pre-reflective dimension cannot be explained away by mechanisms or after-thoughts.<sup>121</sup>

We do not experience (in) the world as a thinker musing about an object of thought. Thus we ought not conceive a perceiving subject solely as consciousness which executes cognitive functions like interpretation of data, or which orders the matter and meaning of objects according to ideal laws inherent to the object.<sup>122</sup> Hence, if perception is not what empiricists or intellectualists propose, what is it? For Merleau-Ponty, this question can only be answered by maintaining the focus on embodiment. Merleau-Ponty turns to the inherent embodiedness of perception to frame the subject as able to access to the world *only* through the body and *only* as already situated in the world. Merleau-Ponty considers the paradox or mystery of perception to be that a) the world is disclosed to as at

---

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 24,39.

<sup>121</sup> I will discuss “pre-reflective dimension” more explicitly in the next chapter.

<sup>122</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 12.

all, that we are aware of things outside of ourselves, and b) that we are living beings encountering the world via bodily perspectives, bodies which we *have* and *are*.<sup>123</sup>

Perception is bodily; it is as bodies that we perceive. We are not subjects positioned over against objects, but bodily agents in and of the world.<sup>124</sup> More concisely, perception is an integral aspect of our bodily existence.

Merleau-Ponty's famed thesis is the primacy of perception, though he does not bestow perception with exclusivity of evidence.<sup>125</sup> Rather, perception in Merleau-Ponty is that which constituted the grounds for all knowledge, and as such its study has to precede all other layers of investigation.<sup>126</sup> Maintaining distinctions between interior and exterior, mental and physical, subjective and objective, is misleading when using them to frame sensory perception. Merleau-Ponty conceives of these perceptual aspects as interrelated and inseparable.<sup>127</sup> His understanding of the various aspects of perception is always both:

---

<sup>123</sup> But I only *have* a body as body. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 8., Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 144.

<sup>124</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 41-44. Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 26.

<sup>125</sup> If the philosophical and scientific purpose of phenomenology is to describe and clarify the meanings of concepts found in our language and culture by getting back to the source, the phenomenon originating the meaning, then perception must be primary, because it is perception which reveals the phenomena which in turn are the source for abstract ideas. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xxi, 241-242.

<sup>126</sup> Merleau-Ponty's originality lies in his attempt to develop a non-Cartesian understanding of perception: he seeks to find a new, innovative unity between the empiricism of traditional sciences and the philosophical intellectualism he considered too narrowly centered in the Cartesian tradition. Herein lies Merleau-Ponty's challenge to his predecessor Husserl and his contemporary Sartre, who both desired to overcome the Cartesian and Kantian object-subject dualisms, yet whose points of departure in phenomenology were still a version of the Cartesian cogito. To Merleau-Ponty, there is no pre-given objective world which is put together by attention or judgment of a subject. Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, 3rd ed., 6 vols., vol. 5 (Boston, MA: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982), 542.

<sup>127</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 130.

always passive and active, situational and practical, conditioned and free.<sup>128</sup> He insists that our own bodily experience shows us this, because we do not experience an “I” in a body that is simply a living organism functioning in a mechanistic manner.<sup>129</sup> Merleau-Ponty refers to pain to support this point: I feel pain not as caused by my body, but as inhabiting my body. In other words, pain is not something that is distinct from my body, a sensation inflicted on me by a pain-wielding body as agent, but I experience the sensation of pain in me, in my body-self.<sup>130</sup> I *have* pain and I *am* *paining*. Pain can be scientifically measured and it is something that I feel and describe subjectively and cannot relate objectively.<sup>131</sup>

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty posits that perception is always in the middle of two traditional categories, it is in fact the *ground*: the dualist categories employed depend on and presuppose perception as the middle ground of experience. That is, I can have subjective sensations and experience sensory qualities, but only because I can sometimes generate them by abstracting away from my original openness to the world and zoom in on isolated features of things and on bits of experience. I then suppose (rightly or wrongly) that my sensations must correspond to those isolated features. This can go the

---

<sup>128</sup> Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 79.

<sup>129</sup> Though we might ridicule the rigidity of Cartesian body/mind split and the overly mechanical understanding of the body he held, the ontological assumptions are still widely held in scientific common sense.

<sup>130</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 90-93.

<sup>131</sup> On the incommunicable personal bodily and emotional aspects of pain, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985). On her argument related to language, see footnote 104 in the following chapter. On pain and other sensations felt emotionally and physically, and an analysis of the political role of emotions at intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, see Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004).

other direction as well, taking my zeroed-in sense experiences and abstracting them away from myself towards a world I posit as independent of perspective.<sup>132</sup>

Merleau-Ponty gives us the human subject existing as embodied perceiver: I am a body perceiving; my bodily experience is always perceptual; my perceptual experience is always bodily. This is the presupposition unattended to in traditional concepts of perception which understand perception as either causal (empiricist) or conceptual (intellectualist). For Merleau-Ponty, to insist on perception as essentially bodily affirms that perception cannot be theorized or understood when abstracted from its concrete corporeal condition and/or when separated into bodily and mental functions. We have a pre-reflective understanding of our own experiences, i.e., we do not think of our experiences as linked to our bodies in a causal or conceptual way, but we understand our experiences to coincide in relation with our bodies: our thinking, feeling, judging, remembering, etc., is always coinciding with our seeing, feeling, touching, smelling, hearing, etc.

For the purposes of my project, thinking of bodily experience as experiences of us as living bodies shows that there are significant untapped ways to think about how more complex experiences (such as oppression or structural violence) are embodied and experienced *in* and *through* ourselves, not just inflicted *on* us. I might be able to draw on studies correlating social location with bodily markers and specific physical/medical conditions, but these studies alone cannot help me access bodily experience in a way that

---

<sup>132</sup> Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 78. Again we can see how the projects of aforementioned theologians might be undermined by their own presuppositions regarding perception if perception is not placed as the ground, as that which gives rise to bodily experience and intellectual processes alike.

helps me understand *how* exactly a bodily condition or social location might orient me in the world via my bodily experiences. To do theology complexly grounded in experience, I need to begin by seeking to understand my existence in the world as constituted by my embodiment and by my perception of and in the world. Thus far, I have sketched that to exist in this world is to be embodied and to perceive a world, there is no me without *my existing as bodily perceptual orientation in a world*.<sup>133</sup>

What does this mean? To exist in this world is always to already be *as* body, and as body I always already am touching, feeling, hearing, smelling, and seeing the world. As perceiving body, I am always already directed towards the world, as I turn my head to see another person, turn my body to listen to a song, focus my bodily attention to the touch and feel of another person: I am always existing by being bodily perceptually oriented in the world.

We are our bodies, and we experience the world as we are in the world through our bodies, as body-subjects. This leaves no room for an ontological separation of the subject “I” and the body of the subject. Furthermore, I and the world are enmeshed with each other, and what pervades this interrelation is perception. Perceiving always implies a situatedness in time and space; it implies a particular perspective which is only possible when I am *in* the world. And it is because I am *in* and *of* the world, that I perceive the world inevitably as structured, meaningful, and whole.

In the following chapter, I will continue to explore the question of how to conceive of experience by supporting the assertion that my existence in the world is

---

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 30.

always fundamentally a bodily perceptual orientation in the world. I will investigate what this assertion entails and provide arguments to support this assertion, but also show how understanding experience as bodily perceptual orientation is useful when seeking to understand specific conditions of human existence. This will provide me not only with a more complex (and I believe more useful to my project) conception of perception, but it will allow me to understand how bodily experience and perception might be interrelated. This in turn will present a robust framework with which to resource bodily experiences for theological purposes.

## **CHAPTER THREE: BODILY EXPERIENCE AND PERCEPTUAL ORIENTATION**

I have asserted above that my being in the world is always fundamentally a bodily experiencing in the world, and this bodily experiencing is a perceptual experiencing. How I come to be and move in the world is always a bodily being and moving, and the ways in which I encounter the world, am shaped by the world, come to learn about the world and myself is always based in and mediated by how I see, touch, feel, intuit, evaluate, remember, etc., in and through my existence as a perceiving body. This basic condition of my existence, which is also my condition for interacting in and with the world, is what I have named bodily perceptual orientation.<sup>1</sup>

I showed in the previous chapter that uncritical theological appeal to sensory perception as a method to discover meaning and develop truth claims may lead to methodological dead ends. Namely, when body/mind dualisms are sought to overcome, but perception is uncritically employed for epistemological purposes, what might be posited is an understanding of having perception at one's disposal, having sensory experiences to which one can turn, which one can access and mine for their content.

---

<sup>1</sup> In this chapter and throughout the rest of this project, I will continue to use combined terms such as “bodily perception” or “bodily perceptual orientation.” Unless otherwise clearly noted, this is not to indicate that there might be other kinds of perception or perceptual orientations. Rather, it is to remind myself and the reader that perception and perceptual orientations are always inherently bodily, and I seek to hold in close linguistic connection that which has often been conceptually separated and maintained through philosophical body/mind dualisms.



Implicitly or explicitly, this appeal to perception may leave perceptual processes and their connection to experience framed within a dualistic body/mind split, undermining the overall aim of theological reflections seeking to affirm bodily experience and overcome the hierarchies and taxonomies developing out of body/mind dualisms. Implied are often certain presuppositions: As conscious subjects we can turn toward experiences, accessed via sensory perception, and access bodily experiences as something inherent to our existence in the world, yet as something we *have*. Thus in this kind of turn towards the senses to access the content of our bodily experience, what actually happens within theological writing (the writing about this sensing of the body and bodily experience) is that more often than not, bodies appear as objects, experiences as content accessed, apprehended, and turned into text and metaphor to be read.

Invoking bodily experience this way for theological projects leaves the theologian in a curious bind: I can attempt to analyze those bodily experiences and functions which seem to be “common” in order to derive ways to analyze meaning-making in the world. For example, I can invoke what are seen as common bodily experiences (death or pain) or common gendered experiences (such as pregnancy or menstruation). But approaching bodily experience with the hopes of tapping into meanings and truth claims inherent in specific bodily experiences might lead me down empiricist methodological avenues which may tempt me to essentialize or universalize bodily functions and/or fixed associated meanings. Or I can attempt to prevent this by taking a first-person approach to embodied experience by, for example, employing personal perspectives and subjective descriptions of experience. Yet this might restrict my analysis of embodied meaning to

the interpretation of the experiencing person and the ways in which perceived meaning is subjectively interpreted and represented. Meaning and truth then might remain a subjective intellectual enterprise.

On either end of the methodological spectrum and anywhere in between, the theologian appealing to the utilization of the senses might find herself between a rock and a hard place, the rock of fixed meanings out there which need to be received through perceptual channels, and the hard place of subjective meaning created through interpretation of perceived information. This can be partially tracked to the lack of attention and clarity in how bodily sensory perception functions in our experiences, and also to significant connections of the manner in which we are bound to the ways in which our language limits our reflections and representations of bodily experience. The English language, for example, does make it difficult to express our existence as unified body and mind. English linguistic structures guide me to say that I *have* feelings or I am feeling *something*, I *have* a body, that I feel pain *in my* foot.<sup>2</sup> But existing in this world (as I will further elaborate on below), I am a body experiencing, and my reflecting on experiences is in itself an experience; I am a body perceiving, and my attempts to understand perception are bound to my perceiving. Because our linguistic limits can too easily constrict our theories and methods and turn on our efforts to overcome Cartesian dualisms, it is crucial to clearly articulate our conception of bodily experience and sensory perception when grounding theology in experience.

---

<sup>2</sup> Some feminist theorists and theologians then construct terms to signal something beyond the body/mind dualism partially enforced through language, such as body-self, body-subject, corporeal self, incarnate subject, just to name a few.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, even when explicitly challenged, body/mind and subject/world dichotomies are still permeating the concepts and theories of perception and how theological projects link perception and bodily experience. If theological language and power dynamics within and between discursive structures were the sole concern of a theological project, then this lack of theoretical attention to sense perception could be defensible. But I am convinced that theologians who want to take seriously the charge to overcome harmful body/mind dualisms must consider and overcome these dualisms found in concepts of perception, lest we undermine our own projects.<sup>3</sup> In other words, challenging body/mind dualisms by, for example, making women subjects and elevating bodies from a pure object status is not enough, if we still continue to conceive of perception in ways that uphold body/mind separations. Therefore, body theology cannot just claim and/or describe a sense experience and assert a role for it in the constitution of theologically valuable experience. Body theology must consider perception to grasp more complexly the nature of body-world-culture relationships and what constitutes a “real” embodied experience at a given moment in a given context in time and space.

---

<sup>3</sup> To elaborate on this point again by drawing in my grandmother and my mother: Focusing on language and power dynamics in linguistic structures shifts attending to Grandmother’s experience towards a discursive framing of her situation and experience. But it remains unclear how a change in discourse about Alzheimer’s disease and aging might actually influence *her* experience, or how it might influence the meaning created for/by her, especially as her cognitive abilities decline. Is she just a body without a mind? Can she perceive and with what? Am I the mind observing her body as object? Similarly, I can understand my mother’s experience to a certain extent by focusing on her self-understanding as shaped by concepts of “foreigner,” “daughter-in-law,” or “immigrant.” But what do *I* know about her experiences and meaning-making beyond what she tells me in broken German? How would I understand how her bodily perceptual experience is involved? Am I the educated perceiver-judge interpreting meaning for her sensory experience and acts?

In this chapter, I will explore how we can understand bodily experience and sensory perception in interrelated ways. I have asserted that perception is a bodily experience inherent and significant to our being in the world: to be in this world is to be in a body, to feel, touch, smell, see in a body; to experience the world and be experienced by the world in a bodily way also positions us towards others and the world in specific ways. Now, after having asserted above *that* bodily perceptual orientation is how I am in the world in the previous chapter, I will explore the *what* of this claim, the question of what understanding perception and experience as our bodily perceptual orientation in the world entails, what it is and what it does, before moving on to further explore the *how* in the following chapter. I will show that it is important to not only give appreciative nods towards an interrelation of body/mind/world, but that it is crucial to begin to think through this interrelation complexly. Complexity does not imply an inability to theoretically frame this interrelation, nor should potential messiness deter us from giving this interrelation careful consideration.

Body theology grounded in experience needs to be able to answer questions regarding what experience *is* and what it tells us about the human conditions we seek to inquire into. Below, I will begin by presenting certain theoretical assertions connected to my understanding of bodily perceptual orientation as condition of being, in order to sketch the theoretical framework I consider crucial in developing a robust body theology. Namely, I will assert that that experience is bodily perceptual orientation, in other words, to experience in the world is to experience through and with our senses, the world we experience is always shaped by our perceptions, and reversely, how and what we

perceive with our senses is also shaped by the world. To perceive then is to engage in bodily and socio-cultural acts. I will then defend my assertions by using gender, race, and normalcy as pivot points for exploration of how bodily perceptual orientation comes about, and what bodily perceptual orientation tells us about conditions of human existence, about the meanings and values experienced and expressed. Rather than giving exhaustive accounts of race, gender, and normalcy, I will let these concepts serve to ground my exploratory movements into how bodily and social dimensions of our perceptual existence come to be implicated in and through our bodily existence in the world.

It should become clear in my exploration that neither dimension of perception can be understood as distinct or separate from the other; rather, each dimension is part of the interrelated dynamic that is our bodily perceptual orientation in the world. Similarly, none of these concepts (gender, race, or normalcy) can be explained solely within the perceptual dimension it is utilized for in this chapter. Nevertheless, gender, race, and normalcy are useful in exploring what bodily perceptual orientation is and how we can understand and explore bodily perceptual orientations through concepts such as bodily intentionality, perceptual movement, perceptual habit, and mutual perceptual becoming at work in bodily perceptual orientations. Each of the three sections will pick up perceptual concepts with varying degrees of attention. Taken together, the three sections connect to each other, expand and explore each other by adding different angles and weaving in further illustrations or investigations.

## **Bodily Perceptual Orientation in the World as Condition of Being**

We need to abandon concepts of the body (and the world, for that matter) as mechanical/biological object found in the above discussed empiricist-intellectualist spectrum, and we also need to let go of any notion of perception as purely intellectual processes of apprehension, judgment and interpretation. Then we can begin to outline how the body figures in our experience of ourselves and the world, and begin describing how our experiences and perception might be our judging and evaluating and thinking about the world. To live is not to live *in* a body, but *as* a body. To exist in this world is not existing in a body which we then use to experience the world, but to experience the world as body. To live as body is how we perceive, feel, think, will, act. What and how I perceive (in) the world is not caused, but constituted by and embedded in the structure and capacities of my specific embodiment. And because my “body is my point of view of the world,”<sup>4</sup> the minimum condition for my existence is my bodily perceptual orientation in the world. What does this mean?

I can experience only insofar that I am a body that rises towards the world, and experiencing as an essential bodily capacity is perceptual. Sense experience is intentional and transcendent (*about* something and reaching *towards* something), extending me as body out into the world, while at the same time embodied and contingent (situated and dependent *on* something). It exceeds the narratives and expressions a subject can give: I can tell a story about cooking with my mother, and this story can be heard, utilized, and

---

<sup>4</sup> In other words, I can never have a perspective in and on the world that is not derived from a perspective I first have from my specific bodily incarnation. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 70. We will explore the implications of this claim in more detail below.

analyzed, even if I never had this experience in the first place. But my experiencing as such, my ability to perceive, cannot be divided into exclusive dimensions; I cannot have experiences in the absence of embodiment, embodied capacities and perceptual abilities. My experiencing of cooking with my mother cannot be actualized without my *living* this experience.

To begin with understanding ourselves as bodily perceptually oriented subjects in this world, we need to begin with re-orienting our questions about bodily, thus perceptual, experiences. Rather than asking “What kind of bodily experiences do I have?”, I need to begin by asking “What are bodily perceptual experiences?” And “What perceptual experiences *are me?*” or, “Who am I in and through perceptually experiencing?”

#### Bodily Perceptual Orientations: Theoretical Assertions

If the minimum condition for the subject to exist in the world is bodily perceptual orientation, then this is not reducible to an “I perceive, therefore I am” (as a mind deducing this fact from accessing perceptions). Rather, the minimal condition of the subject is “I am perceiving.” There is no separation between the conscious “I” and the perceiving body: I am a body perceiving. To exist as a human being in this world, I am a living conscious body; I can never be a consciousness without a body or a body without consciousness. Perception is at work in all dimensions of this bodily existence, as we will explore in more detail below. Perceptual processes are body-conscious-ly, world-ly, and culture-ly. In other words, in all aspects of my existence the interconnected and

interrelated dimensions of body- mind-world, perception is embedded. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

Bodily experience forces us to acknowledge an imposition of meaning which is not the work of a universal constituting consciousness, a meaning which clings to certain contents. My body is that meaningful core which behaves like a general function, and which nevertheless exists, and is susceptible to disease. In it we learn to know that union of essence and existence which we shall find again in perception generally [...].<sup>5</sup>

Meaning is not inherent in either objects or subjects that exist separately, and thus meaning is not transmitted in transactions between sender-perceiver, nor is it interpretation of and within a subject-consciousness. Perceiving is the act of tracing elementary meaning through sensory means, but this meaning is neither solely created through my mental faculties, nor is it simply received through my perceptual capacities.<sup>6</sup> Rather, meaning emerges from the gestalt that is self-world; it is shared between body and world in the same way that it is shared between a figure and its background.<sup>7</sup> My first, most basic experience is always of a whole, with various elements in my experience having a relation to the perceived whole. In other words, I experience a situation as a whole, and the meanings invoked by various elements are in the situation itself. Meaning is not imposed on a situation, but meaning imposes itself on us *in* the situation, or rather, meaning emerges coinciding with the emergence of the experiencing person. And this meaning emerges through perception. I will argue and demonstrate in this chapter that

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>6</sup> “In this primary layer of sense experience which is discovered only provided that we really coincide with the act of perception and break with the critical attitude, I have the living experience of the unity of the subject and the intersensory unity of the thing, and do not conceive them after the fashion of analytical reflection and science.” Ibid., 238-239.

<sup>7</sup> Watkin, 24.



perception is an active bodily process of structuring or organizing a given sensed environment, and in this organization of perceptions myself-as-body and the perceived world/objects are constituted as such.<sup>8</sup>

The meaning(s) and subjects emerging in a given situation are not arbitrary; they are based on human concepts, which are relative to particular cultures. But noting that meaning is connected and shaped by cultural context does not negate the previous assertion that meaning is not imposed by human subjects, but emerges in interrelations of body and world. Cultural contexts shape the body-world interactions and orient us towards certain interpretations, so that certain meanings appear inescapable. Cultural contexts provide the horizon, which is only one of many possible, within which perception takes place.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding experience, Merleau-Ponty asserts that

there is a logic of the world to which my body in its entirety conforms, and through which things of intersensory significance become possible for us... A thing is, therefore, not actually *given* in perception, rather it is internally taken by us, reconstituted and experienced by us in so far as it is bound up with a world, the basic structures of which we carry with us, and of which it is merely one of many possible concrete forms.<sup>10</sup>

An experience, an object, the world, is not given to me in perception, rather, my body conforms to a logic of the world, conforms to subtending settings of our sensory experiences. Merleau-Ponty calls this the pre-reflective realm of experience. We will

---

<sup>8</sup> "The properties of the object and the intentions of the subject . . . are not only intermingled; they also constitute a new whole." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1963).

<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 326. Emphasis in original.

explore below how bodily perceptual movements are possible because I have a pre-reflective understanding of my body, an understanding that I do not need to consciously reflect on in order to operate from it.<sup>11</sup> My movements in and toward a world manifest in bodily perceptual intentionality, and always in reference to a pre-reflective dimension shaped by the cultural, human life-world, a dimension which subtends our bodily perceptions.<sup>12</sup>

This subtending dimension of perception must not be understood as a natural material world existing independently from me, a world in which I simply appear. Rather, this subtending pre-reflective dimension (pre-reflective in the sense in that it subtends my experience without my conscious or reflective efforts to connect to it) is the *condition* by which the world *and* I appear; it is the condition of our coinciding perceptual emergence. Exploring the pre-reflective dimension to perception is attending to the conditions of emergence of the perceived world as well as the conditions of emergence of the subject-body who perceives.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the exploratory questions shift from “*What am I experiencing?*” to “*How did I arrive here to perceptually experience something?*” and

---

<sup>11</sup> This concept will be referred to and explored below as *body schema*.

<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty, appropriating Gestalt psychology, describes this dimension as horizon/background of perception, a concept which I will not be able to explore fully here.

<sup>13</sup> I take my cues here from Sarah Ahmed and her exploration of phenomenological background and arrival. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 38. Ahmed, when exploring phenomenology in her work, critiques the oft used bracketing method of Husserl. “Bracketing” as phenomenological method suggests that we can set aside our own presuppositions when observing a phenomenon, set aside that which is familiar to us so that when we suspend all our usual prejudice, we can perceive the world and the object of our attention unbiased, fresh. Ahmed critiques Husserl’s bracketing method for failing to account for arrival. In other words, we still rely on that which we pretend to bracket. We pretend that we can set aside our own cultural and practical knowledge and look at for example a table as if we had no idea what a table is or what it can or should do. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 32-39.

“How is my arrival in the world a form of emerging as bodily perceptual existence which is also the co-inciding event in which the world of my perception emerges?” Or, put differently again, to understand my existence as bodily perceptual is to understand that my perceptions of a cultural, socioeconomic, sexual, raced, religious world and experiences in it co-incide and depend on my emerging and arriving in the situation as a cultural, economical, social, racial, sexual body. While I might pretend to bracket such qualifiers (e.g., bracketing my gender or race in order to arrive at an “objective” observation of experience), whatever I pretend to bracket is what I arrive with in the first place, and what is in the bracket also shaped that which I am facing, the object of my study. To bracket the background, my arrival in the situation, is to erase the shaping and coming into being of the object which I am now studying, as if it simply floated in time and space. To bracket my own arrival and history is to bracket the history of the material world also, and significantly, it brackets the mutual constitution of me as body and the world and its objects.<sup>14</sup>

Bracketing the arrival of the perceiving body also relegates to the background that which “performs” our perceptions of the world, namely our bodily perceptual abilities. Therefore, my orientation *in* this world is fundamentally a bodily sensory alignment *by* the world. Bodily perception is my existence and transcendence as a subject. But this extension in and comprehension of the world is not enabled *by* my senses; i.e., I do not have senses with which I “do” perception. Rather, bodily extension in and comprehension of the world *depends on* and *is* my sensory perception, and moreover, I am already

---

<sup>14</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 32-39.

perceptually aligned in certain ways. Perceptual alignment is what determines if others are left, right, front, behind, near, or far; but also if others are desirable, approachable, graspable, or even visible and existing at all, in other words, if bodies and objects are in line, aligned with our orientations.

It is not just others and objects in space shaped by and for us through our orientation in it. Conversely, I as perceiving body am also shaped through these orientations in and orientations of space. This is because, as Sara Ahmed argues in *Queer Phenomenology*, bodies as well as objects take shape through being oriented towards each other. Habituated orientations—lines of perception, lines of desire that become compulsory—thus affect and regulate choices and limits of bodily shapes and also bring about sexualization and racialization and other bodily shapings and perceptions. In other words, orientation is not unilinear; it is not one-directional. It is not just our embodied selves who orient our lives and perspectives outward in space. Others and objects in space also orient us. Our environment with others and objects embodying it is the space we move into and co-inhabit; I am also shaped and oriented by my surroundings. Bodies and objects take shape and shape each other through being oriented toward each other.<sup>15</sup>

Below, I will defend these assertions by presenting arguments through investigative movements. Using gender, race, and normalcy as pivot points, I will explore how perception and experience are embedded within each other. I begin with exploring the phenomenological concept of *intentionality*, presenting it as bodily perceptual movement. I will explore this bodily perceptual movement and dynamic of experience

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 54.

through investigating gendered movements. I will then move to discuss bodily perceptual *habits* and their sedimentation through exploring the habit of perceiving raced bodies. In the third and last section, I will explore language and perception, and how we can conceive of the *interrelated dimensions* of body, mind, and world within which language emerges, using normalcy as pivot point of investigation.

### Perceptual Intentionality: Perceptual Experience of Gender

#### *Perception: Bodily Intentionality*

Significant to exploring bodily perceptual orientation in the world as minimum condition for our existence is to conceive of bodily existence and bodily structures as *intentional*. Phenomenology's founder Edmund Husserl famously located intentionality in consciousness: all consciousness is consciousness *of* something.<sup>16</sup> All conscious acts are *of* or *about* something, intending something. Conceptualizing this structuring of our consciousness was Husserl's attempt to solve the Cartesian legacy, by posing the mind-body split as a false dichotomy.<sup>17</sup> But Merleau-Ponty, responding to what he considers Husserl's continuation of Cartesian dualisms, crucially situates the intentionality of

---

<sup>16</sup> It was actually Husserl's mentor, psychologist Franz Brentano, who termed the directedness, the about-ness of consciousness, "intentionality." But it was Husserl who began using this term to challenge Cartesian conceptions of the mind. Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Husserl's phenomenological conception of consciousness as intentional then implies that perception is not solely an interior event; rather, it is essentially transcended and open to the perceived world. In regards to perception, intentionality (the sensing *of* or *about* something) implies that the existence of the perceived object does not depend on the sense experience of the subject. Rather, its existence goes beyond what is perceived; it transcends the consciousness of the self. Moreover, meaning then is neither solely in the consciousness of the perceiver, nor inherent in the object; meaning is always located in the perceptual interaction. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans., J.N. Finley, New ed., 2 vols., vol. 2 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001; reprint, 1921), 77-93.

perception as incarnated, as bodily.<sup>18</sup> Bodily experience as intentional is always already a consciousness of/toward/about something, body and consciousness are irreducibly embedded, and as conscious bodies our intentionality grounds our relationship with the world, namely our mutual constitution in bodily experience.<sup>19</sup>

Theoretically, this presents perception not as access or apprehension but poses perception as that which “indicates a *direction* rather than a primitive function.”<sup>20</sup> This implies that perception presupposes situatedness, that the perceiving subject is specifically located as body in time and space. And it implies orientation: Not only is what I perceive always in reference to my body, my embodied perception is always a *facing* of something.<sup>21</sup> Bodily intentionality, the bodily extension through perception, is a sense of situatedness through “my ownness” and belonging, of relationship and participation, as I will further examine below.<sup>22</sup>

Perceptual bodily reference is intentional and charged with significance:  
something is up or down, to the left or right, appears large or small, appears to precede me; something is graspable; it is something for me; it is something I can reach from here;

---

<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty asserts that Husserl maintains the “I” as foundation for all knowledge and then turns to intersubjectivity to explain the “I.” To Merleau-Ponty, this is simply a modern version of Cartesianism. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, viii-xxi.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense and Place* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 18.

<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 27. Given my Euro-Western cultural context, using the metaphor of “facing something” is easily read analogous to visually facing it as in “seeing something.” This is not an implication I would like to infer. Below, I will discuss a variety of ways other than seeing in which we can perceptually face something.

<sup>22</sup> Rodaway, 8.

it is something I want.<sup>23</sup> Perception therefore orients me towards possible tasks and towards possible ways of achieving my objectives. In perceiving something, I am already positioned towards it: I am already perceptually directed towards it and towards perceiving it a certain way. But what these statements also imply is that what is perceived is already posited as *something*, something other than me which I perceptually grasp with inherent meaning *for me*.<sup>24</sup> My sensory perceptions of objects in the world contain projections, apprehensions—significances of perceived objects that “speak” to my body, to the ways in which I can project my body in relation to objects and movement within the world.<sup>25</sup>

For example, when I join my mother in the kitchen and she directs me to sit down and watch her, I can sit down on a chair without having to make an effort to register and compare perceptual information with the location and movement of my body and chart a plan to achieve my sitting. Rather, I simply move to sit down, because I perceive the kitchen as my environment, and I perceive my mother, the stove, the chairs, already/always in relation to my body: I am facing my environment and perceive the chair to my left as a sitting opportunity for me, and as I am facing my mother in the kitchen, other areas of the house remain out of focus or on the periphery of my perception (I might hear my sister talking on the phone in another room or marginally perceive my

---

<sup>23</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 138. The “I” of this understanding is pre-reflective (a concept we will explore further below), what Merleau-Ponty coins the *tacit cogito*. See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 369-409.

<sup>24</sup> I will discuss and make clear in more detail below that this perceptual grasp does not imply a strict subject-object divide, but rather a mutual implication and interrelation.

<sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 153. Langer, 44.

father through the window as he works in the garden). Further, in my perception, my environment is already emerging with a certain significance: it is a certain chair I desire to sit on, and I know I will be able to sit on a chair and rest my arm on the table because I can project certain bodily movements into my environment.

What tends to be obscured, however, is that this directedness, this perceiving of what is in front of me with significance and meaning, comes about through my bodily intentionality: my bodily existence is a perceptual openness, a perceptual reach into the world. This is what makes my existence inherently transcendent. And because my transcendence into the world is perceptual, it is inherently bodily. Intentionality as bodily perceptual implies that bodily sensory perception is always intentional and meaningful (always reaching outside of my bodily self, and always already grasping significances perceptually), and reversely, intentionality and meaning are sited in bodily sensory perception.<sup>26</sup> In other words, my body is inherently transcendent because sensory perception is bodily, and bodily sensory perception takes part in bestowing meaning. Bodily intentionality is my perceptual extension as an “I can.” In other words, my basic experience in the world is not that of thinking about my experience in the world but of “I can” in my world, of grasping perceptually how I can extend and move in the world.<sup>27</sup> Let me explore this assertion further by investigating bodily movement.

---

<sup>26</sup> Merleau-Ponty argues the point by looking at learning bodily habits, such as driving a car or playing an instrument: I can steer a car through a street or play an instrument without constantly having to analyze sensory data comparing the width of my vehicle with the street, or the position of my fingers in relation to the instrument. Thus, my perception and movements are not that of a body in a geometrical, cartographical space, but of a body relating practically and in movement to/in what Merleau-Ponty calls “practical” space – a space correlating to my bodily perceptual movements. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 141-146.

<sup>27</sup> “Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’.” Ibid., 136.



## *Movement and Body Schema*

Crucial in further understanding intentionality as a bodily dynamic, always embedded in our bodily experience, is to understand bodily perception as movement and movement as bodily perception. As already hinted at in the illustration of my experiencing myself and my mother in the kitchen, it is in moving that I understand my body-self as unified whole. It is in movement that I understand

the body... [a]s an expressive unity which we can learn to know only by actively taking it up, this structure will be passed on to the sensible world. The theory of the body schema is, implicitly, a theory of perception.<sup>28</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's concept of *body schema* may be understood as something like a blueprint that configures my specific way of being as body in a given environment: body schema structures perceptions and sense of self and/in relation to environment; it configures my movements and postures.<sup>29</sup> The body schema is a set of enduring dispositions and capacities responsible for our enduring sense of bodily position and possibility.<sup>30</sup> Put differently, the

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 205-206. While this quote is lifted out of Smith's 1962 translation, I maintain my preference for schema over image (Smith uses image).

<sup>29</sup> Merleau-Ponty's *schéma corporel* is translated as "body image" in the Colin Smith's widely used English translation of *Phenomenology of Perception*, but I prefer the term "body schema." "Body image" can be misleading because of prevalent uses in psychology (the early use, the habitual account of images accompanying various impressions and bodily movements; the adjusted use, the image of a universal body and the awareness of general functions; nowadays the use in psychology to refer to perceptions of one's own body along social and aesthetic dimensions). Merleau-Ponty understands "body schema" to be not an image and more than just an understanding of the location of body parts. The body schema is a nonrepresentational structure of the body: My body is what embeds me in and directs me towards the world; my body schema informs my sense of perception and perceptual agency in a specific environment at a specific time. Ibid., 100-101.

<sup>30</sup> Using "blue print" or "enduring dispositions" might lead to a misconception of the body schema as a fixed entity or a perceptual faculty. As I hope to show in what follows below, the body schema is a fluid, or moving schema of perception. It is dependent on the body-world interrelation, which continuously evolves. For an in depth philosophical exploration of what a moving body schema entails, see David Morris, *The Sense of Space*, ed. Dennis J. Schmidt, Suny Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy

body schema is that in virtue of which a bodily movement is a finely coordinated ensemble of motions intentionally organized in advance towards targets that are to be meaningfully moved.<sup>31</sup>

When reaching for a bowl in the kitchen, I do not make separate, distinct movements with different body parts; rather, I reach for it as a bodily unit with coordinated movements. When reaching for the bowl, I already prepare to grasp it tightly, in a different anticipation from how I might tacitly prepare to grasp the (perceived as wet) kitchen sponge. Perhaps the bowl is covered with a cloth and it looks full and heavy to me, so I prepare to lift it with strength, but in fact it is empty and I now happen to yank it off the table because my bodily movements were geared towards a heavy object. The body schema, my tacit awareness of my bodily self as unit, enables this coordination or perception and bodily movement in and towards my environment.<sup>32</sup>

The body schema is crucial to my self-perception as bodily whole as well as to my perception of my environment and the unity of perceived things: I interpret myself as more than just a conglomerate image of my body parts and my experiences with/of the body. It is in bodily movement that I experience myself moving as bodily unit: I sit down in the kitchen chair in what I experience as a fluid movement from standing to sitting; I move as a bodily unit rather than different body parts making separate motions.

---

(Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 53-80. For a complex investigation into the coming about and workings of the body schema (though she uses the term "body image") as well their ethical dimensions, see Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporality* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> David Morris, "Body," in *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, ed. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008), 116.

<sup>32</sup> Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 231. For example, through the body schema, I know how I can move from a standing position towards a chair, and if a chair's surface will accommodate my desired sitting position. Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 98ff.

Perception and movement here are embedded with each other. Only because of my perceptual capacities can I move into and in the world, and only because of my movement can I perceive myself as bodily unit and project and “do” my movements.

Similarly, this sense of bodily unity supports the unity of embodied perceptual processes: Because any bodily movement is a synthesized assembly of various motions involving various body parts affecting a sense of bodily unit, any bodily movement also affects a synthesis of perceptually received data towards perception of something whole, a unified object. For example, when rolling a piece of dough between my fingers, I do not need to spend conscious effort to synthesize my fingers into a unit (hand), nor do I perceive several lumps of dough (one for each digit making contact), but I am perceiving a single, spherical object. This is not merely either a cognitively or mechanically achieved synthesis. This synthesis is effected by the structure of myself as conscious moving body: like movement effects a bodily sense of unity, so movement effects perceptual unity—unity of perceptual collaboration and contingencies.

“Motility is the primary sphere in which initially the meaning of all significances (*der Sinn aller Signifikationen*) is engendered...”<sup>33</sup> Movement is embedded with bodily perception, and their interrelation is significant to understanding bodily experience: movement brings about meaning; meaning is sited in movement; and because perception is embedded with movement, meaning is embedded with perceptual processes. Movement is at play in *all* sensory perception. Even vision, for example, which in contemporary Western culture is often understood as passive reception, is effected and

---

<sup>33</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 142.

affected through movement.<sup>34</sup> Sensorimotor movement affects and effects visual perception, or more generally, the relation between stimuli and motility constitutes perception. Take color, for example:

Thus, before becoming an objective spectacle, quality is revealed by a type of behaviour which is directed toward it in its essence, and this is why my body has no sooner adopted the attitude of blue than I am vouchsafed a quasi-presence of blue. We must therefore stop wondering how and why red signifies effort or violence, green restfulness and peace; we must rediscover how to live these colours as our body does, that is, as peace or violence in concrete form... red, by its texture as followed and adhered to by our gaze, is already the amplification of our motor being.<sup>35</sup>

There is a *motor* significance to color which must be understood in terms of an embodied dialectic, i.e., bodily movement brings about acts of evaluation which reveal the motor values of color. This dialectic implicates sensation and movement in mutual transformation. In other words, the relation between sensory perception and embodied movement does not cohere to physical laws, but is a situation which is eternally open to its own development. Scott Marratto illustrates and supports Merleau-Ponty's assertion by using research by cognitive scientists O'Regan and Noë, who demonstrate that visual perception of color does not just relate to, but requires eye movements: seeing colors such as red depends on the structure of the changes occurring when movement occurs (movement of the perceiver or the perceived).<sup>36</sup>

Perception and movement then also indicate dialectics between body and world. These dialectics implicate perception and movement in mutual transformation. In other

---

<sup>34</sup> Conceiving of the visual gaze as passive is not a historical or universal notion. See Wade.

<sup>35</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 211.

<sup>36</sup> Marratto, 25-27.

words, the relation between embodied movement and sensory perception does not cohere to physical laws, but is a situation which is eternally open to its own development.<sup>37</sup> To draw on the perception of color again, each of my specific and contextually contingent involvements with a color (e.g. the red of my blood when I cut my finger, the red of the chili peppers on the kitchen table, the red in the German flag at the airport leaving my parents) reconfigures my sensorimotor bodily perceptions in following encounters with that color, i.e., opens up new possibilities or manners of perceiving this color when I am confronted with it again. And each future encounter with that color (the red of chili sauce in an American Thai restaurant, the red of the oil color with which I am painting, the red of the American flag hoisted on the university grounds in Denver) involves a further articulation of the history of my involvement with red. This implies that perceptual relations or “laws” (like the perception of red connected to a certain length of light waves) are also contingent to historical, cultural, and individual contexts.<sup>38</sup> Red is never *just red*, and red never just *is*. Is it always the red of the shirt I am wearing today as I am typing in my office, or the red of the paper flower in the card from my parents that I remember receiving in the mail yesterday.<sup>39</sup>

Perception and movement are embedded in each other: Perception *is an outward movement* of my body-self towards the world. Perception is an activity (not a channeling of information), a motile engagement through which a world appears. Even when I stand

---

<sup>37</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 210.

<sup>38</sup> Marratto, 84. We will explore these contingencies further in the next chapter.

<sup>39</sup> See also, for example, Michel Pastoureau’s history of the color blue in Europe, in which he investigates blue as complex cultural construct, as social phenomenon. Michel Pastoureau, *Blue: The History of a Color*, trans., Markus I. Cruse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

still to observe my environment, my gaze is a spatial outward movement of my body into the world, and my perception also entails a temporal movement, since perception is always temporally spread out. Perception *brings forth* movement and meaning: Sensory perception extends me in the world and orients me towards possible tasks and towards possible ways of achieving my objectives. I am grounded in perceptual apprehension of my environment, apprehension which requires not thought or reflection, but bodily intentionality which is sensory perception. In that sense, perception is *projection of movement* and meaning.<sup>40</sup> Perception as bodily intentionality is mediated by knowledge of how sensory information would change if or when a particular path of exploratory perceptual movement is pursued. Importantly, this knowledge is tacit, or pre-reflective, in that it does not depend on the actual execution of exploratory movement; rather, it is a tacit sense of an open-ended range of sensori-motor actions and correlated sensory information.<sup>41</sup>

When seeking to understand the relation between body and world in regards to bodily perceptual experience, this kind of conception of bodily intentionality shifts our explanations away from causal conceptions between perceiver and perceived to conceiving of *relations of intentionality*.<sup>42</sup> Relations of intentionality are at least two-fold:

---

<sup>40</sup> For example, as I walk my dog in the morning, I navigate the neighborhood and the path I am taking through it with a certain perceptual understanding of how I can move in my environment, which elements feature as obstacles, as openings, as indications for me (in my specific embodiment and for me in my connection to a dog on a leash), which environmental features will be open to me, which might be treacherous, which might be inaccessible, or which might induce apprehension, fear, or desire. This is a tacit knowledge mediating my bodily perception of my environment and my bodily extensions into it—I might be thinking about what to make for breakfast or how to edit this chapter while I am moving through the neighborhood which holds bodily meaning and significances for me as I walk.

<sup>41</sup> Marratto, 25.

<sup>42</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 220.

The intentionality of my bodily self and the intentionality of the world interrelate. Because I exist as body in an environment and perceptually extend into the world, my intentionality is not a separate consciousness directing outward movement. A kitchen cabinet is high *for me*, a napkin is out of line on the table *for me*; the world is there *towards* and *for me*. The world is intentional, and its intentionality, this about-me-ness of the world in my experience affects my perception and the meaning of my environment in ways I do not consciously choose, in ways that do tie meaning to how the environment appears as inevitably meaning something (i.e., the for-me-ness appears to me as meaning inherent in the object). In other words, it is neither nature nor culture, but the relation between body and world toward and about each other that effects my perceptions and therefore experiences and conduct.<sup>43</sup> And relations of intentionality exist between conscious intentions and pre-reflective bodily intentions, relations which orient me towards the world and my concerns in and with it:<sup>44</sup>

When my mother teaches me how to cook a dish, I already move into this experience perceptually. It is not my mind utilizing my senses to access the situation. I move into the situation bodily by seeing, touching, smelling, hearing, remembering, asking questions, etc. When my mother instructs me to get up from the chair and stir the food on the stove, I do not have to direct my perceptual attention to my hand to intentionally guide it, or figure out how exactly to hold the spoon. I just move to stir the

---

<sup>43</sup> “Everything is both manufactured and natural in man, as it were, in the sense that there is not a word, not a form of behavior which does not owe something to purely biological being – and which at the same time does not elude the simplicity of animal life, and cause forms of vital behavior to deviate from their pre-ordained direction, through a sort of leakage and through a genius for ambiguity which might serve to define man.” Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 189.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 189,440.

food. I move around the kitchen without consciously giving myself instructions on where and how to move my body. I intuitively reach for a footstool to access items on a shelf otherwise beyond my reach. Unless there is a problem—an item I did not see blocking my access to the stove, the spoon greasy and slipping out of my grip—I am moving in my body without having to think about it. I might ponder a shopping list, listen to my mother share the next step of the meal preparation, or absentmindedly gaze out the window. I do not think about stirring food to then execute a plan. Yet I have a perceptual understanding of how my body can move in this situation, and what certain objects in my environment mean to me, how my environment *is* for me. I am not explicitly aware of how my body reaches for the spoon and how my hand anticipates the spoon by taking up a receptive gesture. I have a conscious intention, to stir the food in the pot. Yet my bodily intentionality that is my sensory perception directs my extension and movement into my environment, it orients me by bestowing meaning and significances to my surroundings, specifically in regards to my particular embodiment and capacities. My bodily movements are intentional but do not necessarily occupy my conscious awareness. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls “motor intentionality,” the movements of my body within which my body “disappears,” the ways in which my body operates without my conscious activation of it.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 106.



### *Gendered Bodily Intentionality*

To emerge as female person, to perceive and be perceived as gendered female, is to emerge as a body shaped in certain ways and to move in habitually gendered ways.<sup>46</sup>

*Habits* are patterns of movement, ways of moving, closely connected to our understanding of ourselves-as-bodies seen in our body schema. A habit is always both motor and perceptual; a habit is to tacitly understand what is given to me in my bodily capacities as well as what is given to me in my environment. For example, to know how to type is to have acquired the habit of typing, to have a “knowledge in the hands” of what my hands can do, of where the keys on the keyboard are, and to experience an agreement between what I aim to type and what is given to me to achieve this, to experience the harmony between intention and performance.<sup>47</sup>

Bodily perceptual movements and habits are neither universal nor natural. The fact that I can learn to type, change my ways of typing, adjust to different keyboards or adjust to changing manual capacities demonstrates that. There is a bodily biological dimension of habit: my bodily capacity to acquire habitual movements through repetition. In moving and in learning to move, I have a bodily capacity for habit, and habits are embedded in bodily dimensions.

I am as body in bodily movements that are bodily habits, for example, I do not always create new ways of lifting a cup or holding myself up and swinging my arms as I walk, nor do I have to figure out my walking movements in different but similar (say,

---

<sup>46</sup> I understand sexed and gendered bodies as different, but interrelated concepts. Biological sex is not gender, but we come to perceive and anticipate a gendered body embedded with our perception of a sexed body. This will become clearer as I elaborate further below.

<sup>47</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 143-145.

level or sloping) environments. Yet, acquiring of habits is not simply memorizing a bodily task in order to avoid discontinuities in our experience (such as always figuring anew how to eat with a spoon). At stake here again, if we mistake bodily acquisition of habits with for example memorizing or reflexive mechanical bodily movements, is the invocation of a dualism, either by the installation of a consciousness controlling bodily functions and movements, or that of behaviors simply as sum of mechanically linked reflexes. Maintaining a body/mind dualism when it comes to the acquisition of bodily habits then may lead to essentializing gendered movements (which I will discuss further below) as biological-mechanical linked reflexes tied to sexed bodies (and therefore naturalizing a connection between sex and gender). To invoke bodily habits as primarily under the control of a memorizing or connecting mind might disconnect sex and gender regarding observable gendered habits, but this runs the danger of relegating gendered movements disconnected from the biological matter of sexed bodies.

Understanding my habits as bodily (understanding them as embodied and practical know-how manifesting in my actions) encompass a dimension of bodily adherence to my environment, habits of bodily adjustments to the space I inhabit from breathing, bodily positioning for sleeping, eating, to habits such as typing. The bodily dimension of habit also becomes evident in the ability to make bodily perceptual adjustments and changes in habit, such as improvisation when playing an instrument, or transferring bodily habits such as eating with the fork in the right hand instead of the left, or quickly adjusting to a different size keyboard. Without being a body, I could not acquire habits, and habits would not appear as such without the bodily dimension

“containing” them.<sup>48</sup> To acquire bodily habits is to grasp and incorporate tacit and practical principles, principles which are only ever expressed in the actions to which they belong, and which are always principles acquired within my own body schema and within my pre-reflective relation to my environment.<sup>49</sup> This is most evident in learning a new skill, such as playing an instrument, a skill which I can only acquire by doing, by incorporating or absorbing new bodily competencies and understandings into my body schema. This in turn transforms my way of perceiving and acting in the world (a guitar may transform from *a* musical instrument to *mine*, one which I can pick up in a certain way and produce my musical performance with).<sup>50</sup>

This points to Merleau-Ponty’s claim that “habit expresses our power of dilating our being in the world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments.”<sup>51</sup> He not only points to the acquisition of skills through acquiring habits; rather, he claims that a change in habit, a change “in our patterns of movement, is a change to *our way of being in the world* - a claim that would be utterly extraordinary if we were not already pursuing the problem of how meaning is engendered within bodily movement.”<sup>52</sup> My bodily movements are inherently infused with habits, and my ways of moving, habitual,

---

<sup>48</sup> It should be clear from my illustration that I do not refer to “containing” here in the sense of containment/restrictedness, since acquiring of habits is a matter of learning, a learning which is continuously open to change and never fully accomplished or completed.

<sup>49</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 144. Nick Crossley, *The Social Body: Habit, Identity and Desire* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc, 2001), 127.

<sup>50</sup> Even intellectual learnings, such as reading, are still bodily activities and/or presuppose a competence in bodily activity (such as reading, or engaging in language games which allow me to incorporate linguistic principles as habits into my corporeal schema). Crossley, 128.

<sup>51</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 143.

<sup>52</sup> Morris, "Body," 117. Emphasis in original.

are what give me a body schema, an “I can,” a bodily blue-print that configures my specific way of being in my body in a given environment. My acquisition of habits is realized in bodily intentionality, in my self-transcendence, in the ways I perceptually move and express myself, project myself into my environment, in the ways I act and react, re-work my movements toward an anticipated and perceived environment.

Yet habits are social as much as they are biological, and though these two dimensions need to be distinguished, they are not separate or reducible to each other. My bodily habits are more than mere adaptive instincts; a feature of my life as human is that of being a socio-cultural being, in other words, I do not simply adapt to my environment, but I can also adapt my environment through the construction of material culture, through the settling of my bodily habits into nature (i.e., I do not simply exist in my environment detachedly, but my bodily habits “settle” through constructing houses, roads, villages, churches, implements, spoons, musical instruments, etc).<sup>53</sup>

This physical transformation of the world only functions as culture to the extent that it is used by persons, and used according to the meaning socially associated to it. For example, a kitchen is only a kitchen in its specific socio-cultural construction as long as people are disposed to prepare foods in this kind of structure and habitually refer to it as kitchen. This kind of social habit (cooking in a kitchen) presupposes that the meaning of “kitchen” has been incorporated within my body schema. And significantly, my movements in a kitchen and incorporation of kitchen objects into my habitual movements effect a further and crucial transformation of my way of being in and experiencing the

---

<sup>53</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 346.

world, for example, kitchen tools may become an extension of me as body as I cook. Many of my habits are acquired from what I see performed around me and am able to copy from a social collective pool.<sup>54</sup>

Gender is a bodily perceptual experience in which bodily and social habits are implicated with each other. Iris Marion Young describes the habit-based, perceptually shaped female body in the world emerging via gendered bodily intentionality in her famous essay *Throwing like a Girl*. Bodily intentionality, the tacit understanding of “I can” for women is also an “I cannot,” an inhibited and ambivalent bodily intentionality, grounded in the situation of women (not in their anatomy or physiology) as condition by sexist oppression.<sup>55</sup> For Young, in women this “I cannot” is not *in place* of the “I can”; it is not a female bodily intentionality in place of a male “I can” bodily intentionality. Rather, it is a co-existing “I cannot” with the “I can” of “someone,” and not truly *her* possibilities.”<sup>56</sup>

This gender difference in bodily intentionality, in self-transcendence, is a perceptual difference, a gendered bodily perceptual orientation. And gendered bodily perceptual orientations are both an effect of gendered differences as well as a mechanism for their reproduction.<sup>57</sup> For example, while boys might be encouraged to engage in

---

<sup>54</sup> Crossley, 129. I will discuss this social collective pool further in the third section of this chapter, exploring creativity/innovation and habituation in regards to social and bodily habits, particularly language.

<sup>55</sup> Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" And Other Essays*, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 42. Specifically, she observes particularly gendered modalities of movement when throwing a ball, noting restrictions in movement in girls. Young, 27-45.

<sup>56</sup> Young, 37. Emphasis in original.

<sup>57</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 60.

rough play, a girl in this situation might be warned to not get herself hurt or dirty. To get dirty or hurt during play (as effect of bodily movement and intentionality, and bodily habits of play) can result in disapproval (from parents or peers, through social habits of supervising children's bodily movements), disapproval which signals the failure of extending and moving like a girl, the failure of being a girl as failure of acquiring the social habits of a girl, *as well as* the failure to achieve the perception or the status of being a boy and acquiring social habits of a boy.<sup>58</sup>

Gendered habits, habitually acquired gendered movements, demonstrate how bodily experience constitutes a gendered world, and also in turn how gendered bodily experiences are constituted by the world.<sup>59</sup> My movements constitute my world and what the world means for me in my own idiosyncratic physiological and psychical constitution. But I am also constituted by a world acting upon me; my bodily habits, subtended by my body schema, always already reflect the particularities and generalities of a given situation in which social habits (or better: habits shaped and “moved” by social values) bear on my bodily movements.<sup>60</sup> Throwing like a girl, playing like a boy, sitting like a woman, talking like a man, etc., are ways in which gendered bodies constitute the world and the movement of bodies in it, of the meaning and movements with objects and

---

<sup>58</sup> Weiss, 45.

<sup>59</sup> See also Simone de Beauvoir's works for a sexed/gendered phenomenology of experience. De Beauvoir critiques male philosophers, her contemporary Merleau-Ponty included, for their systematic bias towards male experience. “Woman, like man, *is* her body; but her body is something else than she is.” Emphasis original. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans., H.M. Parshley (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1953), 67. For an analysis of how de Beauvoir's work is more akin to and in critical conversation with Merleau-Ponty (and even eclipsing him regarding matters of difference) than the often assumed philosophical indebtedness to Sartre, see Sara Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003).

<sup>60</sup> Weiss, 11.

within space. And this in turn constitutes the meaning of the gendered body, and how a body and bodily movement are gendered by the world acting upon it.<sup>61</sup>

Bodily intentionality, the sensory perceptual projection or apprehension of significances of my environment that relate to my specific embodiment, imply not only possibilities, but also opacities, resistances, and limits resulting in inhibitions or hesitations in expressive bodily intentions.<sup>62</sup> The gendered subject emerges out of the space where her sensory perception is oriented in reference to her gendered female body. A female body emerges as a body extending through specific gestures, postures, perceptual acts (like speech, vision, or tactile movements), and perceives the world in ways specifically oriented as gendered, namely what is perceptually within grasp or out of reach. In the world, which is apprehended in my perception in relation to my bodily intentionality gendered female, not everything is perceptually available to me, and availability is aligned through my orientation as a female. Being bodily perceptually oriented in the world as female is to be oriented in my movements along certain gendered lines and alignments. This charges me as woman as “herself-as-body-agent” and my environment with gendered significances: What is large or small, what is graspable, what is achievable, what is something I want or desire, is experienced as oriented along certain gendered lines of perceptual orientation.

---

<sup>61</sup> See also Gayle Salamon’s original investigation into bodily experiences of transgendered persons, accounting for the construction of transsexual selves using an intersubjectively produced body schema, the felt sense of a trans (itioning) body, a body that might not “be” one’s material substance. Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>62</sup> Young, 42.

For example, the social habit of cooking in a kitchen is a habit socially shaped for gendered bodies in the context of my childhood environment (familial and social). Thus social mechanisms controlling and enforcing bodily movements also encourage a female “I can” in the specific cultural constructions of this space: As woman, I am not out of place in a kitchen, but rather my bodily intentionality can tap into a social pool of female bodily habit, and kitchen gadgets may become incorporated into my body schema. For a gendered male body, kitchen utensils might come to be perceived as objects to be utilized (rather than bodily extensions of the self) in a space where bodily movements have not necessarily been acquired as bodily habits. Thus the meaning perceptually emerging between body and world is inherently tied to the perception of gendered bodies and their movements. Perceiving myself and my mother in the kitchen emerges with bodily and social meanings related to cooking, provision of food and nurture; perceiving my father entering the kitchen emerges with bodily and social meanings invoking perhaps the entering women’s space to receive a meal. These perceptions of bodily movements emerge out of the interplay between bodily habits and social habits, the interrelation between social deposits of habit and incorporation of those habits by gendered bodies, and the transformation of our ways of being and experiencing the world: In my family we take up gendered roles; my mother, sister, and I incorporate gendered social habits and emerge in socially gendered space within gendered social roles, which transforms our being and experience in the world. As women, we enter the kitchen of our home as extension of our bodily space and tacitly know how to be and move in this space. The meanings emerging between body and world as we move in the kitchen might be



different from those emerging between the body of my father and the world/kitchen. My father, incorporating male gendered social habits takes up movements through which the world perceptually emerges differently, might be bodily and socially out of place and not bodily habituated to a kitchen as cultural space for his body-self.<sup>63</sup>

*Bodily Intentionality and Bodily Perceptual Orientations of Sexuality*

Gendered perceptual orientations do not cause differences nor are they simply given. But within sexing and gendering perceptual norms, bodies and world emerge differently and are perceived differently. Gender, already deconstructed as universalized concept in various feminist works, is an effect of how bodies are aligned within perceptual grids that allow bodies to extend in specifically gendered ways, to take up certain gendered objects, and effects how certain objects are taken up dependent on gendering.<sup>64</sup> The perceived differences in gendered bodily shaping are a sign of perceptual orientations these bodies have taken, towards themselves and towards the world. Bodily perceptual orientations involve inhabiting the world and occupying the world with objects in certain bodily perceptual ways: Walking, speaking, looking, sitting, dressing, scenting, etc., are determined by certain orientations to bodily intentionality. In turn, bodies are shaped by the objects they take up and by *how* they take them up to

---

<sup>63</sup> Christopher Carrington, in his study of lesbian/gay families and embodiments of domesticity, also points out that cooking as gendered habituation of feeding is more than simply an act of food preparation, but involves planning, shopping, preparation, and management of meals. It presumes a variety of knowledges about food, about the household, about cultural rules and practices, about management of related household activities, etc., and the cooking/feeding habituations are also informed by class, ethnicity, and other socio-structural factors. Carrington finds that feeding work plays significantly into the construction of lesbian or gay families, complexly structuring the gendered and spatial movements and connected meanings emerging within the household. Christopher Carrington, *No Place Like Home: Relationships and Family Life among Lesbians and Gay Men* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1999), 29-65.

<sup>64</sup> For example, gendered ways of taking up clothing.

extend themselves into the world, by which positions and gestures they come to be and inhabit their environment.<sup>65</sup>

The contemporary concept of “gender performativity” is anticipated in Merleau-Ponty’s notion of habit and Young’s developing of intentionality to account for gender differences. Judith Butler advanced gender identity as performative, explaining how gender identity emerges from repeated accomplished performances.<sup>66</sup> There is no ontologically “natural” sex or gender; rather, gender is accomplished by repeating certain intelligible performances—intelligible because they already conform to sexual norms regulating and legitimating certain gender perceptions and appearances (and undermining those different from the circumscribed).<sup>67</sup> Sexuality as bodily intentionality, as bodily perceptual movement also shows how we do not simply oriented towards, or transcend towards something, but how our bodily perceptual orientation in the world is a bodily dialectic. The body in its sexual intentionality, the body that transcends into the world, perceives the proximity of other bodies around it and moves along bodily perceptual gendered orientations with other bodies into and within the world.

Merleau-Ponty considers sexual existence to investigate the dialectic of intentionality in body-world experiences, when intentionality of body and world come together so that body and world come to exist and to mean something for each other together. However, Judith Butler notes a heterosexual norm at work in Merleau-Ponty’s account of sexed embodiment and bodily intentionality, with bodily perceptual

---

<sup>65</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 59.

<sup>66</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

orientations aligned with heterosexual desire. Furthermore, Butler points to an alignment in Merleau-Ponty between male sexuality and a specific perceptual movement, namely the gaze, which in gendered bodily perceptual orientations emerges as a disembodied gaze that objectifies what it observes.<sup>68</sup>

Taking this critique into account, we can explore how bodily intentionality as bodily perceptual orientation toward something functions in regards to gendered sexuality. As Ahmed notes, to conceptualize sexuality and sexual desire as a facing and moving towards an object of sexual desire, is to conceptualize sexual existence as hetero-directional perceptual orientation.<sup>69</sup> To put it differently, to “have” a sexual orientation is to imply a directionality, and with it a relational placement of bodies. This reinforces and maintains the already discussed gendered bodily intentionality: To be placed directionally and relationally is to be encouraged or limited in where-from and where-to and how I can bodily perceptually extend and move. The lines establishing bodily perceptual orientation align differently sexed bodies with differently gendered bodily perceptual movements (performances) and align the directionality of gendered bodily perceptual orientations towards the other sex/gender. Thus it is not simply that desire as bodily intentionality orients me in a certain direction, towards the other-body of my desire, but the direction of my bodily perceptual orientation takes also makes some bodies available for desire and

---

<sup>68</sup> Judith Butler, "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception," in *Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, ed. Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 86.

<sup>69</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 66-68.

leaves others un-desirable, unavailable for bodily perceptual orientation and intentional movement of desire and connected sexual habits.<sup>70</sup>

We can connect here two earlier observations, namely that our patterns of movement, our habitual intentionality, are a way of being in the world (and implicitly, that a change in movement is a change of our way of *being*), and that our bodily intentionality is a form of movement within which my body disappears. While the later observation was made by Merleau-Ponty to highlight the ways in which I move my body without consciously activating different bodily parts, I believe this extends to the ways in which gendered bodily intentionalities are movements within which gendered bodies and the gendering work/habituation/circumscribed performances disappear by way of making heterosexual desire the “normal” bodily perceptual orientation of bodies, the “natural” way of being in the world. In other words, sexual bodily perceptual orientations become habituated in a way to make certain directions of (sexual) movement/desire normal, and it is changes in those movements, such as turning from a heterosexual alignment, that make this way of being appear different, not aligned, not straight, not normal.

This is also evident in (modern, habituated) alignments of bodily perceptual orientations with identity, in this case sex, gender and sexual identity. To display a certain bodily perceptual orientation in sexual desire is to *be* that desire, as in being a homosexual or being a heterosexual.<sup>71</sup> Sexed bodies become gendered along heteronormative lines through bodily perceptual orientation and habitual intentionality, as

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>71</sup> See the work of Michel Foucault to trace the idea of sexuality and sexual identity, particularly in regards to subjectivity. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans., Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

sex and bodily intentionality become aligned: being a man is to be bodily perceptually oriented and to move toward (desire) a woman through acquired gendered habits, and being a woman is to be bodily perceptually oriented and to move toward (desire) a man through acquired gendered habits. Bodily perceptual orientations toward sexual others then confirm and establish the meaning of what I am as a body (woman) by directing my bodily intentionality towards what I am not (man).<sup>72</sup> Sexed bodies are aligned with gendered motility, and are aligned with other bodies along heterosexual orientations to line up sex and gender, regulating perceptual movements (desire).

To exemplify: I perceive another or myself bodily as “lesbian,” because my bodily perceptual orientation directs me in certain ways that “lesbian” stands out against those bodies falling in and disappearing behind a heteronormative line. This body stands out to me because it fails to align with and follow gendered bodily motility, such as lines of desire that direct a female body (physically, sexually, emotionally, visually, etc.) towards a male body; it stands out to me because I perceive a bodily intentionality that moves in the presence, but not in the face of (as in perceptually directed towards) male bodies, and thus fails to maintain gendered movements along established perceptual orientations. Thus my bodily perceptual orientations and dis-orientations lead to recognitions and identifications as “lesbian” because I perceive that the sexual orientation—my bodily movement and sexual desire towards another body—turns away from what I habitually learned to face.

---

<sup>72</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 23.

I do remember when my perception of myself changed from “yeah, I can do that” to “I cannot do that because I am a girl,” how my carefree movements and oral/aural extension into the world changed to unconsciously guarded postures and monitored speech. And I remember when my habitual, implicit perception of myself as “straight” (my bodily perceptual orientation aligned to desire male bodies) changed to perceiving myself as lesbian (my bodily intentionality turning from condoned gendered habits to being directed towards female bodies, my bodily perceptual orientation aligning with a “deviant” object of desire). This alignment with a lesbian bodily perceptual orientation is only possible because “lesbian” is already a perceptual line, namely one that crosses those heteronormative orientations established in the first place, one that turns from the lines maintained as “straight.”

These kinds of perceptual alignments of gendered motility extend to perceptions of interior bodily/biological functions as well as conceptual or cultural movements. For example, social habits of perception along gendered alignments of movement (such as passive/receptive femininity and active/aggressive masculinity) shape perception in research on human conception. The descriptive language used betrays the perceptual alignments. For example, the female egg described as dependent in its inhibited motility, drifts along the fallopian tube and perceptually emerges as passively awaiting the arrival of the fastest male sperm with the strongest thrust which will penetrate it: a scientifically gendered perceptual alignment of body parts.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> Martin. Martin also points out that when scientific observations acknowledge a more active role of the egg in the fertilization process (such as discovering that the egg actively takes in the sperm which by its own movement would not be capable of entering through the egg’s membrane), these observations are either still aligned with the above given frame of gendered motility, or framed within other cultural

Another example of conceptual alignment of movement is that of “coming out of the closet.” This figure of speech for a disclosing of a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender identity (remember the above discussed alignment between bodily orientations of desire and identity) invokes a bodily movement from invisibility or hiding towards visibility and social disclosure of sexual preferences towards specific sexed or gendered bodies not typically aligned with one’s own perceived sex and gender. Significant here is that this kind of bodily movement is perceptually assigned to those bodies that are not falling in line with the socially habituated heteronormative orientations of sexual desire (“straight” bodies do not need to disclose their heterosexuality and “come out”). This movement of disclosure towards bodily perception as non-heterosexually desiring body is a bodily motility assigned and required of bodies whose desires are not able or willing to maintain heteronormative alignments. In other words, only bodies conforming to social habits of alignments have the privilege of maintaining their invisibility; bodies crossing lines of orientation make movements that bring them into perceptual focus. “Coming out” is a bodily movement which effects bodily transformations regarding bodily intentionality, habits, and bodily experience in the world.

My sexed and gendered body is an effect of the kinds of work that bodies do, the kind of technologies bodies perform, and this in turn orients and aligns my body, affecting what I “can do,” affecting my gendered bodily intentionality. I am oriented towards certain bodily capacities and the spaces my body can be oriented in and aligned

---

stereotypes, albeit negative, such as the egg as female aggressor luring and capturing the sperm like a devouring spider.

with. In other words, my bodily perceptual orientations align my body with habits, and align my bodily movements with and within certain spaces.

However, alluding to work and technologies of bodies and their perceptual orientations, and keeping in mind that meaning might appear inescapable but is open to change, already indicates that orientations and alignments do not just constitute bodies. The world, the environment, space, inhabits bodies and is inhabited by bodies; it extends bodies and is extended by bodies. This makes subversions possible through the bodily activities performed in spaces that are oriented to not support certain bodily alignments and orientations.

Bodies performing out of line, against certain orientations, bodies out of place can also re-orient and reshape bodies and space.<sup>74</sup> I am thinking for example of bodily perceptual subversions in spaces such as pulpits inhabited by gendered female bodies aligned with certain offices held until then by male bodies only. Or bodies performing marriage rites against and out of line with heteronormative orientations to re-orient and reshape the space of familial homes as public alignments (such as performing woman-man marriage across gender roles orientations, or performing same sex marriage in a church commonly associated with heteronormatively aligned ritual orientations). Bodies and spaces can change through changes in inhabitation, through changes in bodily intentionality/perceptual movement, through re-orientation of bodily motility and alignments. And bodies can change through traveling and traversing space, moving into spaces which are not oriented in ways that a body “knows.”

---

<sup>74</sup> Ahmed gives the example of the kitchen regarding changing of designs as well as bodies performing in this space. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 61.



In this section, I have discussed bodily intentionality, bodily perceptual transcending movements, and how we can understand bodily perceptual experiences of gender, and gender as a bodily perceptual orientation. In relation to the larger project, to understand gender in and as experience, we can now grasp how our senses structure experience—and through it, a world—that is gendered, and how our perceptions are shaped and structured so that gendered experiences emerge. Bodily perception then is shaping and shaped by a socio-cultural world in which meaning and values emerge with gendered connotations.

I already hinted at something like a common ground or dimension from which perceptions emerge or stand out from. I will now explore this dimension of bodily perceptual orientations through “sedimented habits” and by drawing perceptual experiences of “race.”

#### Habits and Perceptual Orientations: Perceptual Experiences of Race

I can perceive a world and be perceived by the world because, and only because, body and world are already attuned. And because body and world are already embedded with each other, bodily sensory experience can be what it inherently is: a communion with the world, a *living in* the world: “In order to perceive things, we need to live them.”<sup>75</sup> This brings us back to a theoretical assertion I made at the beginning of this chapter referring to a pre-reflective dimension, the condition by which I appear and am perceived in the world and perceive the world always already as a body emerging as gendered, raced, and normally able. My perceptions, what and how I perceptually

---

<sup>75</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 325.

experience myself, the world, and things in it, are conditioned by this pre-reflective dimension in which I as perceiving body am situated and immersed. How and where I am situated by this dimension and how I emerge from it (arrive in the context of my experience) is also significant to my perceptual experience, as we have already explored somewhat in terms of directionality of perceptual orientation.

Before I begin to explore supportive arguments for these assertions, I would like to orient us to my illustrative use of “pre-reflective dimension.” What I do *not* mean to imply is that this perceptual dimension is a sort of perceptual layer “below” our conscious reflections, like a base layer which we cannot reflect on. What I want to invoke (and hopefully will be able to reinforce in our imagination) is that this pre-reflective dimension is like a current that “floats our boat of experience,” like currents in an ocean which give a vessel direction and movement, even when this movement is not felt. Or put differently, it is like a layer of sound, a vibration, or current running through our experiences *with* our bodily experiences that are more easily attuned to. Rather than something to unearth or dig up, this dimension is a supporting note implicated in the sounds and pulsating vibrations that make up our being alive, that make up our bodily perceptual orientations in the world (though not inherently creating or implying harmony or disharmony).<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> In what follows, I actually draw somewhat on Merleau-Ponty’s conception of background/horizon, as some of my footnotes quotes will reveal. I will digress from his concepts of pre-reflective dimension and background/horizon, but make use of the latter in order to more complexly explore the significance of the former, and to remain within the already sketched frame of perceptual orientations and habits. Merleau-Ponty inherits the terms background and horizon from the two different schools he is merging in his thought, phenomenology and Gestalt psychology. Both terms function similarly (though not identically) in Merleau-Ponty’s work, connoting an indeterminate and ambiguous background or horizon against which a figure comes into perceptual focus. The configuration of this horizon or background is always changing, depending on context and depending on perceptual focus:

If indeed, as previously explored, meaning emerges between body and world, then the emergence of meaning in the perceptual interaction is never taking place in a void, it always emerges from sediment habits. These habits though, the social collective pool of bodily habits and perceptual meanings are not my fate, they do not determine my experiences as body, rather, they are the “constant atmosphere of my present.”<sup>77</sup> For example, my bodily experience as woman and socially acquired habits of being familiar with a kitchen as a space supporting my bodily movements as woman is supported by a pre-reflective dimension, by the sediment habits of social bodies before me, a dimension which is not easily ignored or experienced “against” through conscious reflection and decision. In other words, just reflecting on the sexist and patriarchal division of home spaces and deciding that the kitchen indeed is not *the* place for a woman does not dismiss or destroy the many dimensions of my bodily experiences when moving into my mother’s kitchen (e.g., the emotional and physical familiarity connected to bodily habits and tacit knowledges of how to move, how to cook, how to *be*).

This pre-reflective dimension of my bodily experience is then not the subtending but buried layer from which meaning springs up seemingly arbitrarily. It is the dimension

---

gathered background changes, and as perceptual focus or orientation changes, what is determinate as figure becomes indeterminate and relegated to the background, and what was indeterminate becomes determinate as it emerges as figure from previously being in the background. There is a difference however in the suggestions invoked by the terms: A “background” in some ways, though it is presented to me as I am facing the figure, also connotes a certain temporal dimension, a past, a gathering which led to an arrival of a figure; and a spatial dimension of what is gathered behind, what supports yet is hidden by the perceptual arrival of the figure. The term “horizon” though appeals (also spatially and temporarily) to a futurity, possibilities, an open-ended range that moves on as we move towards it. As already mentioned above, I prefer to remain with the notion of dimension, partially also in order to elicit an imagery that allows us to conceive of the dynamics explored below as concurrent and embedded with each other, rather than evoking spatial or even temporal distance.

<sup>77</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 442.

in which habits sediment, or the current in which habits join the flow so that when I acquire bodily habits I am already submerged in a current so that my habitual acquisition is as much an individual appropriation as it is my “going with the flow.”

This nevertheless does not negate the powerful, sometimes even violent dynamic inherent in this current as well: Our “coming to be” in these habitual currents, the pre-reflective dimension shaped by cultural and historical contexts, allows a signaling of possibilities and change, possibilities for turning the tide or ripples emerging, or different involvements and significances to emerge. But it also implies that my arrival as experiencing body infers a being surrounded, being immersed in, and being supported by certain dimensions or currents of experience which dominate the conditions of my arrival in a space already perceptually emerging as female or male, straight or gay or queer, able or disabled, white or brown or black body.

Habituation, or sedimentation of habits, is “work,” bodily and social efforts which can violently sweep up bodies to align them along socio-cultural ideologies. This “work” of/in the currents that is our pre-reflective dimension might be obscured though, so that it might appear ethereal or inconsequential to the here-and-now of my experience. Let me explore what I mean by this assertion through investigating the perceptual emergence of racialized bodies. How do I emerge from this pre-reflective dimension, and how is this dimension significant, integral and supportive to my emerging as a perceptual body (a brown woman) and the co-incident emerging of the perceived (race)?

*Perceptual Dimensions and Sedimented Habits of Perception*

My act of perception... takes advantage of work already done, of a general synthesis constituted once and for all; and this is what I mean when I say that I

perceive with my body or my senses, since my body and my senses are precisely this familiarity with the world born of habit, that implicit or sedimentary body of knowledge... The person who perceives is not spread out before himself as a consciousness must be; he has historical density, he takes up a perceptual tradition and is faced with a present... [This body] is better informed than we are about the world, and about the motives we have and the means at our disposal for synthesizing it.<sup>78</sup>

Because my immediate perceptual experience is not of sense data but of meanings or structures, or better, meaningfully structured objects and environments, I perceive in the world within an already given logic and language.<sup>79</sup> It is a “logic of the world to which my body in its entirety conforms, and through which things of intersensory significance become possible for us.”<sup>80</sup> This logic is bodily in the sense that it is “lived through,” in that it is not primarily for a consciousness to account for, but is an imminent meaning that is opaque to itself and is first grasped by the body.<sup>81</sup> To say it differently, our bodily existence in the world is always intelligent, purposeful and skillful. But, this intelligence and intelligibility, this purpose and skilful embodied action, is not derived from a specific act of conscious intellection (prior and/or separate from it).<sup>82</sup> Rather, our embodied existence itself, qua sensory perception, is already and inherently intelligent and purposeful. That is because our bodies and bodily movements emerge from a historical and social (habitual) base. Our perceptual experiences take up habitual

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 36,58-62. I will explore language more thoroughly in the next section.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 48-49.

<sup>82</sup> Nick Crossley, "Body-Subject/Body-Power: Agency, Inscription and Control in Foucault and Merleau-Ponty," *Body & Society* 2, no. 2 (1996): 100.

schemas, or what Merleau-Ponty following Husserl also calls “sedimentations,” and deploy them.

Our bodies and the world emerge from this sedimentation of habit and this sedimentation is bodily: the histories which make up the pre-reflective currents and emergence of body and world are performed bodily, in demeanor, posture, and gesture. Body and world take up sedimented habit, historically and socially conventionalized forms of conduct. To clarify, it is not the *content* of perception, the content of the work of general synthesis, which is established once and for all. It is the general synthesis, the reciprocal relationship between body and world,<sup>83</sup> which is constituted once and for all. Put differently, perceptions, bodily experiences and actions, all embodied dimensions of life are open to historio-cultural change, except for the historicity of the body itself. Our bodily perceptual habits may change, but that we are body-creatures of habit (taking up perceptual traditions with individual expressions in the present) in a reciprocal relationship with the world does not.<sup>84</sup>

When acting in this world, we are grounded in habitual patterns of behavior, collective layers of experience constituted by myself and others which are taken for granted, traditions or histories of bodily motility and perception. Present perceptual movement and behavior is conditioned to conform to a past, yet it is not bound to it.

---

<sup>83</sup> Merleau-Ponty later thinks of this as chiasm, or the reversibility of the flesh. He begins to question his own conception of perception, though this conceptual work remained unfinished. He describes the lived world of the flesh, of which body and world are both part of, as something like the unfolding and differentiation of flesh, yet flesh that is reversible; that touches and is being touched, sees and is being seen. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*.

<sup>84</sup> Crossley, "Body-Subject/Body-Power: Agency, Inscription and Control in Foucault and Merleau-Ponty," 103-104.

Sedimentations establish a certain perceptual perspective, certain orientations (as discussed earlier), but does not determine or confine the ultimate content of perception or character of behavior. Choice/creativity is possible, though it depends on habits/sedimentation, and both are necessary to our bodily existence.<sup>85</sup> Put differently, choice is only possible because there is already a cultural repertoire and meaningful engagement with the world so I can choose in reflection what might be meaningful to me—otherwise this ability to choose amounts to random indeterminacy.<sup>86</sup>

For example, habituated gendered expressions precede me; I am already born into a world in which my geo-socio-cultural group embodies gender roles in a certain way (socially, institutionally, individually). To embody choice in my gender expression, I must already make reference to the gendered habitual system in place; already engage purposefully and meaningfully in socio-cultural and bodily relation with others in my environment. Within my bodily capacities, I then can enact a choice as to creative transformation or change in gendered habit, such as choosing only to wear pants, or shaking hands with a firm grip. This choice can sediment as habit, so that my wearing pants is part of a pre-reflective dimension of my experience (I do not always reflect on my bodily movements and habits as I am wearing pants), or so that firm handshakes extended by women is a sediment habit that is taken up by more women in a social group. These habitual schemata can be understood by remembering the concepts of the body

---

<sup>85</sup> For example, I need both, motor habits and the ability to spontaneously re-orient in new situations to drive a car.

<sup>86</sup> Connected to this then is that choice is not a choice itself. The ability to choose is connected to our inherent embeddedness in a world of bodily and cultural habits. Crossley, *The Social Body: Habit, Identity and Desire*, 134. See also Stephen Priest, *Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Ted Honderich, *The Arguments of the Philosophers* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998), 150-165.

schema, the tacit knowledge of my bodily capacities in a given environment: Like body schemata, habitual schemata are tacit knowledges concerning social habits, socially meaningful, conforming, and communicative bodily movements.

Body and world are dependent upon cultural repertoires and perceptual skills, and just as much reproduce them; bodies “tend to do things” and the world “tends to be things.” Sediment habits, historical and social continuities of bodily intentionalities and movements, form the pre-reflective current in which our perceptual experiences take place; sediments are histories as well as possibilities (in the linking of significances or creating of historical/social intersensory connections). Attending to the currents of sediment history via repetitive bodily action allows cultural theorists to analyze bodily expression within the possibilities and constraints inherent in the dimensions of social habitus or body-power.<sup>87</sup>

Significant to my argument here, our bodies and the world take the shape of certain habituated repetitions, or appropriating Ahmed, habituated perceptual orientations. “Orientations shape what bodies do, while bodies are shaped by orientations

---

<sup>87</sup> Habitus is Pierre Bourdieu’s term. Habitus is systems of durable, transposable dispositions which integrate past experiences through the very matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions that are necessary to accomplish infinitely diversified tasks. Bourdieu, cited in Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 56. Body-power is Michel Foucault’s term, the power of social and political orders to control, direct, delimit and co-opt actions of the body. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans., Alan Sheridan, 2, reprint, illustrated ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). Whether social order is explained via disciplinary technologies, symbolic medium of rituals, habituated etiquette, or internalized restraints, social factors of order, structure, and control depends on bodies, albeit an active one (many theories on the processes of social order depend on a passive conception of the body). Bodily control, conformity and transgression, are possible because bodily experiences can be habituated to conform (and conformity making transgression possible), but it is also through bodies that agents may assert control over the social institutions which they have bodily created and maintained. In other words, habituated bodily movements are created through social structures, and social structures can be re-habituated, re-shaped in bodily movement. See Simon J. Williams and Gillian Bendelow, *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998), 48-66.



they already have, as effects of the work that must take place for a body to arrive where it does”<sup>88</sup> and, I would add, *how* it does. Concepts such as sex, gender, normalcy, race, and sexuality are not originary concepts or experiences. They must be understood as the effects of repetitions, repetitions that are not neutral, but perceptual repetitions that shape bodies in certain ways, and significantly, orient bodies perceptually in certain ways so that in the moment of perceptual recognition, the work of bodily repetition disappears as sediment. Put differently, the pre-reflective currents of our perception are never “just there,” but are the effect of the work of habituating and orienting perceptual experience; they are the sedimented habits grounding our bodily perceptual orientation.<sup>89</sup> Perceptual orientations are effected habits, open to continuity through repetition and open to change through re-orientations.

*Perceptual Experience of Race / Perceptually Experiencing as Racialized*

For example, I also remember a shift in my own bodily orientations regarding race and nationality. My body was a nationalized body when growing up in Germany. Because of the reading of my skin color, it was often demanded that I hyphenate myself, through questions like, You are German and...? I often refused to claim a hyphenated identity as German-Thai in favor of labeling my parents with different nationalities.<sup>90</sup> Looking back, I somehow “knew” through my bodily perceptual orientations that I could

---

<sup>88</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 58.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-57.

<sup>90</sup> The identity of Thai-German also never emerged in my bodily perceptual orientations, since Thai was a national identity aligned with mother, but not with me. My passport, language, and geographical bodily perceptions oriented me spatially, culturally, and even emotionally in ways so that Thai hardly emerged as meaningful in a way to be signified by lining up these identity signs in the order of Thai-German.

not fully extend into space as a German “only,” yet that I indeed was also not German-Thai. I was not aligned in a way that I could for example extend bodily perceptually, linguistically, and culturally as a German-Thai in a Thai context; perceptual orientations by Thais would align me as foreigner. Differences in exposure to food and culinary preferences did not make me a hyphenated German-Thai. Perceptual orientations allowed me to be aligned as German citizen though (e.g. through my unmistakably German name, my linguistic skills, my passport, my geographic-spatial origins), as long as I would not *visually* extend into a space, as long as my inhabitation of space was not *visually* perceived. Because skin color in Germany is oriented along national identity lines, my skin color demanded identification along national orientations.<sup>91</sup>

It was not until I moved to the United States that my body became a racialized body, and it took me a while to be dis-oriented to the ways in which bodies are perceptually shaped (from) within US national (body) borders.<sup>92</sup> Skin color in the US is most often aligned along racial and ethnic orientations first. This, of course, has a history, a sedimentation of bodily habits and activities, from which the perception of bodies and

---

<sup>91</sup> In this section I merely want to explore the *what* of bodily perception, such as race as bodily *orientations*. I will get back to vision and other perceptual processes again below in more depth to explore the *how* of bodily perceptual orientation. I also want to note my indebtedness of this kind of self-analysis from Mita Banerjee, "The Hipness of Mediation: A Hyphenated German Existence," in *This Bridge We Call Home*, ed. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>92</sup> I am leaning here on the differentiation made by Sara Ahmed, who describes racialization as a process, an investment of meaning in skin color. Race is an effect of racialization, not the cause. "Racialization involves the production of 'the racial' body through knowledge, as well as the constitution of both social and bodily space in the everyday encounters we have with others." Sara Ahmed, "Racialized Bodies," in *Real Bodies: A Sociological Introduction*, ed. Mary Evans and Ellie Lee (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2002), 47. I will investigate these processes and everyday encounters below. For essays inquiring into the meaning of skin and other bodily surfaces and their manipulation in spaces of contestation, liminality, and reconfigurations of identity, see Adeline Masquelier, ed. *Dirt, Undress, and Difference: Critical Perspectives on the Body's Surface* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005).

world as raced emerges, and bodies and world hold raced meanings supported and driven by spatial and temporal currents of sediment habits.<sup>93</sup>

Colonization, as global bodily movements, shaped and aligned bodies through the movements these bodies took toward each other. Racial alignments of bodies was not *caused* by white and black bodies meeting in space, rather, in a sense, bodies with different hues of skin pigmentation meeting in space already arrived with sediment history, from which bodily motility and with it bodily alignments emerged.<sup>94</sup> Whiteness is the orienting line which shapes and arranges the emerging bodies and perceptual orientations so that bodies became oriented and aligned as raced. There is a current, or currents, out of which bodies emerged as raced, and through which raced bodily orientations aligned movements in space and with space, and which supported how certain racially perceived bodies could move/be swept up in space along certain lines, or were perceived out of line, out of currency.

By virtue of being pre-reflective, this dimension or current supporting our racial perceptions is the condition by which raced bodies appear, the condition which mutually

---

<sup>93</sup> Currents or dimensions are often imagined spatially, as in the current of a spatially confined river, as the water running through a landscape demarking opposing sides. But currents or dimensions are also temporal in two ways: Dimensions have aspects, such as the dimension of a past that is necessary to the arrival and shape and age of the person or object perceived in the present, or the currents of histories, genealogies which shape the emergence or arrival of something that appears to be present now. And currents/dimensions are temporal in that they are changeable precisely because of the changing temporal situatedness of the present. In a way currents/dimensions accumulate histories and genealogies, and these can be inherited as well as consciously and subversively gathered. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 38,137,143,185n.8.

<sup>94</sup> See for example Comaroff's analysis of the interrelated emerging of biomedical science, colonialism, Christian mission healing, and racial perceptions. Jean Comaroff, "The Diseased Heart of Africa: Medicine, Colonialism, and the Black Body," in *Knowledge, Power, and Practice: The Anthropology of Medicine and Everyday Life*, ed. Shirley Lindenbaum and Margaret Lock (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

constitutes my emergence as brown body in a world with raced bodies and power and privilege predominately in the grasp of white bodies. I do not have to reflect consciously about my bodily skin tone or connect my perception of skin color to the person embodying it: I walk through my neighborhood and see a Hispanic man tending his yard. “*His race*” is not a natural material bodily condition, but sedimented habits of racialization, racial taxonomies and bodily alignments are the current running through my bodily experience. So when I walk through my neighborhood, I already perceive a Hispanic man according to my social habituation, before I might consciously reflect and ponder why and how his brown skin featured into my perception and the emerging meaning (e.g., I begin to wonder why my tacit bodily experience aligned him as out of place in the neighborhood, or perhaps in line with social habits of yard work, but out of line with home ownership in this space).

    Orienting devices that do the repetition which allow for habits to sediment disappear through their work, and they also occlude the presence and force of this pre-reflective dimension by orienting our perception to what emerges: in this case, raced bodies. The current from which bodies and meanings emerge is not necessarily *what* is repeated, what orienting *device* is at work. But the current also supports the *directionality* of perception that is generated (the product of effort that becomes effortless through its own repetition and work, the work that disappears as such through its repetitious enactment), supports the movement of our bodily perceptions as we face “race” through the force of gathered sediment, force determined through acts of habitual repetition.

When we see a boat floating down a river, the alignment, directionality and movement of the boat appear “natural,” though its stability, speed, and floating itself are determined by the amount and force of the moving water. Transferring this image to our discussion of racial perception, raced bodies do not appear as figures in perceptual focus because they emerge from a sea of whiteness and blackness. Racial perceptions or racialization of bodies (what is repeated), the fantasy of racial hierarchy (an orientation device), and blackness as well as whiteness (the orienting lines along which bodies are perceived and aligned) are already supported by pre-reflective currents, currents supporting the repetition of racial perceptions, generating a directionality of perception (in this example, racialism), aided by the ideological notions of racial hierarchies, establishing racial orienting lines. This gathering current, this pre-reflective dimension which supports the arrival of bodies emerging perceptually as raced, might be the political-economic project of colonialism.<sup>95</sup> Racialism as a naturalized orienting line, as natural perceptual directionality in which the repetitious work establishing racial perception disappears, occludes from focus the driving currents of bodily perceptions and orientations containing sedimented habits.

One example for a forceful current of sedimented habit supporting and running through the perceptual emergence of race might be nation and citizenship: At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the US Census Bureau announced the end of the continuous westward expansion. But with the frontier declared closed, the work of establishing the meaning of

---

<sup>95</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968). Sara Ahmed engages Fanon in her discussion of orientation in “Orient” and “Orientalism”, Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*.

the American nation and citizenship continued. The sedimented social habits of nation-building bodily movements “floated the boat” of racial ideologies manifesting in laws and classification systems by which races are invented, defined, characterized, aligned and hierarchically organized.

The work to establish a centering anthropological image for the American citizen to define nationhood plays out in the repetition of racialized bodily perceptions, generating a directionality of perception, thus establishing lines of perception in which raced bodies emerge, but which simultaneously aligns citizens and non-citizens. Social Darwinism, which applies biological principles to social development, becomes one of the orienting devices to building racial ideologies. Efforts of repetition in immigration laws generate directionality of perception which establishes the American citizen as white. The American nation as racially white appears as a “natural” directionality of perception, so that we perceive inhabitants of “American” space as racial bodies.

The pre-reflective dimension, the current of sedimented bodily habits called “nation” gains force through habits and transformation of habits, for example, legal habituation and changing legal habits through acquisition of immigration laws guided by racialized perceptual orientations. Legal alignment of bodily and social habits regarding movement in or as citizen of a nation sediments social habits, which add to the force of the current running through racial perceptual emergences.

More specifically: Immigration legislation, for example, the Naturalization Act of 1790 and those following, up to the immigration act of 1924, established immigration and naturalization along racial lines, though not necessarily maintaining a focus on race. By

1882, regulation at the borders put laws in effect that allowed only healthy and self-supporting persons in, refusing the poor, physically and mentally ill, criminals and moral delinquents.

Medically and morally oriented perceptions aligned immigrant bodies, as certain groups were associated with certain ailments. For example, Asians were screened specifically for worms, Mexicans for lice, Jews for tuberculosis, Italians for criminal behavior. Thus the perceptual orientation to raced bodies was aligned through, for example, medical orienting devices, and race and ethnicity were visually aligned by perceptions of health and economic ability (medical exclusions increased from 3% in 1898 to 69% 1917). For example, a Romanian family is described by an officer as looking forlorn and frail, typical of the poor class. They stood in contrast to immigrants from Scandinavia described as fine looking and healthy persons.<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>96</sup> See Martha Mabie Gardner, *The Qualities of a Citizen: Women, Immigration, and Citizenship, 1870-1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). Compare this also with Barbara Welter's famous exploration of the Cult of True Womanhood, the establishment of the female citizen shaped by purity, piety, domesticity and submissiveness, which emerges out of and maintains the American nation by perceptual alignments along class, race, and gender lines. Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1976). Another investigative comparison could be drawn from the racial and religious orientations of immigrant bodies in social gossamer Rev. Josiah Strong, the reports of the Dillingham commission on immigration, or Jane Addams writings about Hull house and her work on the Americanization of immigrants. Josiah Strong, "Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis," (Bibliobazaar, 2010). William Paul Dillingham, *Reports of the Immigration Commission: Statements and Recommendations Submitted by Societies and Organizations Interested in the Subject of Immigration* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1911). Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House: With Autobiographical Notes* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1911). Of course, "nation" is not the only current, but rather one of genealogical dimensions gathering sediment. The "West"/Occident or "civilization" are other sediments in our pre-reflective current. And race is not the only perceptual orientation establishing the grid of national alignments; class, gender, and religion are among other perceptual orientations and orienting lines drawn, and any of these can also serve as sediment from which other orientations can emerge. See for example Foucault's tracing of the emergence of "sexual identity," which in this framework can be understood as emerging partially from a background of "modern democratic society" which requires regulation of social bodies, "sexuality" turning into one of the political technologies, or orienting devices, along which to perceive and align social and political bodies.

Thus, only certain bodies can inherit or gather the kind of habitual schema which aligns their bodily emergence within reach of objects of privilege (e.g., citizenship, marriage, employment). Whiteness as a line of orientation aligns bodies just so in a space that is oriented around a privileged kind of embodiment; certain bodies can more easily take up social habits aligned with/aligning them with privilege. And consequently, all others in this space become aligned and oriented in a way that the habitual schemata available for bodily habits and movements leave certain things hard to/out of reach, or leave their bodies out of line, even rendering certain bodies (non-white, non-heterosexual, non-citizen) objects rather than subjects.<sup>97</sup> The orienting lines of whiteness also serve as vertical and horizontal lines of coherence, allowing certain bodies to move up or reach across spatial, institutional, educational, economical, etc., lines.

Bodies can also “disappear” behind certain perceptual lines such as whiteness,<sup>98</sup> for example, when the sediment habit of perceiving citizenship leads to perceptual orientations of American bodies as white bodies, bringing to focus those bodies differently raced. This allows white bodies to disappear, or perceptually emerge race-less, while racially perceived bodies—those with darker skin hues—emerge incoherent from the sediment habitual schema regarding citizenship. For example, a social bodily habit regarding legal enforcement of immigration, aligned through devices such as the 2012 Arizona law provision known as “show me your papers” (allowing Arizona law enforcement officers to demand proof of citizenship/immigration status of people

---

<sup>97</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 112-113, 159.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-137.



suspected of residing on US soil without proper legal documentation) emerges along perceptual lines which allow bodies raced as white to appear in line with citizenship, whereas bodies perceptually emerging as questionable in regards to citizenship/residency are bodies racialized. The tacit knowledge concerning nationhood and citizen bodies supports and is supported by perceptual orientations to race.

To stress an image presented above again: pre-reflective dimensions of bodily experience are not simply deeply buried layers, barely impacting our perceptual orientations. As illustrated above, it is a current which is implicated in and fed by our bodily and social habits, supporting and supported by repetitive bodily movements which allow for acquisition of habits which again sediment and gather in a current to be taken up, repeated, and/or transformed.

To give another example, as a culturally Euro-Western woman, I might walk down the street in a city. When a black male comes towards me, I unreflectively reach for my wallet, to assure it is safely tucked away and out of reach from the passerby. I am not consciously aware of doing this, though on a pre-reflexive level of bodily experience my behavior is intentional and meaningful. When called to attention, I may be surprised at my bodily movement and my orientation of intentionality. Through critical inquiry and reflection I would be able to account for the meaning of this act through an account of its historical dimension: Perhaps I have been mugged before, and any approaching man is perceptually apprehended as a threat; the securing of my wallet aligns certain objects outside of the bodily perceptual reach of the other. I may not have been robbed before, but my bodily perceptual orientations are gathered in a current of cultural and historical

sediment, such as the criminalization, vilification, outlawing, and violent extermination of black male bodily intentionality and motility, the extension of black male bodies in space.<sup>99</sup>

This history and social sediment is contained now in my lived bodily perceptual experience, it is the current from which my body and the other body emerge as raced: a brown female body, curiously aligned now along lines of whiteness, mutually emerges with a black male body, now perceived as criminal threat, and with that, the meaning of our bodies moving in our shared environment emerges also. The history which I now inhabit as I inhabit the colonized territory called United States of America sediments in bodily gestures, bodily intentionality. I may reflect on the meaning and significance of bodily perceptual orientations by attending to the sedimentations of habits, and discover that in the pre-reflective dimension I find a gathering of relations supporting my perceptions (such as socio-historical and cultural stereotypical images circumscribing my perception of a black body as criminal) as well as an indeterminate current gathering perceptual possibilities (such as socio-cultural and historical bodily gestures like conquest, slavery, abjection of black bodies, which turn the focus of my perception on the habitual gestures that sediment these alignments and possibly even turn the focus on orienting lines such as whiteness and white heteronormative patriarchy allowing for perceptual re-orientations in the face of black male bodies).

But nation and citizenship remain a perceptual dimension which supports perceptions of raced bodies, even when not-perceived bodies-out-of-space may come to

---

<sup>99</sup> See for example Tina G. Patel and David Tyrer, *Race, Crime and Resistance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2011).

be perceived as bodily perceptual orientations shift. For example, abject bodies denied citizenship and denied bodily extension in the nation as spatial community, such as invisibilized undocumented domestic workers, may perceptually emerge as either “illegal” or “undocumented” workers. But they may still be perceived along racial and ethnic lines (brown bodies aligned with illegal immigration), and these orienting lines are supported by and reinforce the pre-reflective current whose force divides who will be part of the nation and lined up on a path to citizenship and who will be deported and aligned behind national lines/border fences.

By focusing on the content of our perception, rather than the processes of bodily perceptual orientations, we are oriented to overlook the subtending currents which provide the conditions for our habits, their sedimentation, as well as the conditions for new habit acquisitions. But it also occludes differences from our perception, things that are out of line: for example, it occludes how our discoveries about race are dependent on the creation and perpetuation of this very category itself. Just like currents are shifting and indeterminate, so are the relations between sediment habit and perceptual orienting lines or devices. For example, an orienting line such as whiteness can provide the habitual schema supporting perceptions of gender, feminizing the racial other or denying the racialized female body alignments with femininity.<sup>100</sup> Sedimented habits regarding perception of nationhood can become an orienting device, aligning perceptual orientation

---

<sup>100</sup> For those studying postcolonial theory, none of the arguments I just very superficially traced appear new, in fact, they might remind us of works of Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1962). Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). Ward Churchill, "Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of American Indians," (1998). Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

towards religious bodies (as seen for example in perceptual orientations towards Persian men aligned with emerging meanings of Islamic fundamentalist religiosity, which then contribute again toward sedimentation of bodily habits—emotional, legal, cultural—toward these bodies, as in fear, incarceration, wars against terror, etc.).

Understanding our orientations and perspectives on the world as fundamentally embedded in and emerging from our bodily manner of existence then allows us to begin grasping how it is not reason or intellectual reflection alone which effects and therefore can address perceptual alignments which might appear problematic to us (such as perceptual alignments of female bodies as submissive, queer bodies as deviant, or black bodies as criminal). Rather, as we have explored thus far, habits and socio-cultural practices are not simply matters of belief or conviction held in a disembodied mind, but embedded within our bodily perceptual orientation as condition of our existence. Only from this perspective can we understand more complexly how mechanisms of perception lead to prejudice and oppression of bodies perceived as different, mechanisms so powerful that appeals to intellect or mindfulness fail to prevent violence against bodies perceived a certain way.

Relating back to the larger aim of this project, to develop a robust understanding of experience for body theology, we can now understand how experiences of race (or racialized/racializing experiences) come about in visceral ways, that is, involving all our senses and the bodily ways in which we use them or are “used by” them. To interrogate bodily perceptual orientation in order to usefully and complexly understand bodily experience is to heed perceptual orientation as that through which one comes to terms

with meanings (such as race, skin color, other bodily markers) in the world, and it is to heed perceptual orientations not as structures of consciousness, but as bodily experience, bodily expression, bodily motivations, bodily intentions, bodily behaviors, bodily styles, and bodily rhythms. These orientations are not firstly and fundamentally expressed at the level of thought, but give rise to thought, thought that embodies the precision and nuances of bodily perceptual orientations.<sup>101</sup> Below, in the third section of this chapter, I will investigate this notion of thought, more specifically in connection to language as habit and perception of normalcy.

### Language and Perception of Normalcy

In the previous sections I have attempted to explore how it is that our being in the world is fundamentally grounded in bodily perceptual orientation. Those explorations could still leave room to posit interior conscious processes, such as a conscious subject

---

<sup>101</sup> Here I am appropriating again Charles Long's definition of religion: "Religion will mean orientation – orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the world." And in the following paragraph, he further clarifies: "The religion of any people is more than a structure of thought; it is experience, expression, motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles, and rhythms. Its first and fundamental expression is not at the level of thought. It gives rise to thought, but a form of thought that embodies the precision and nuances of its source." Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 1996), 7. Long shows how specific orientations in and of the world give rise to the creation of knowledge. To put his definition to work, the modern Enlightenment project framed the experience, expressions, motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles, and rhythms of the bodies in the Western world in specific ways as these bodies expand into a world 'other' to them. And the origins of the study of religion, just like the category of religion, cannot be fully understood without acknowledging and accounting for these bodily and conceptual orientations which gave and give rise to thought and knowledge productions. While Long defines religion here, I hope that my argumentation thus far has already demonstrated that religion is but one dimension and alignment of bodily perceptual orientation, like race or gender. Long points out the specific configurations and lines of orientation in the study of religion, the way history was invented, constructed and oriented, if you will. Religion as a concept oriented the European colonization, documentation, and categorization of those conquered and subjugated in "other" worlds. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 106-108. I am elaborating on the connection between Long's religion as orientation and Ahmed's investigation of orientation more specifically in Heike Peckruhn, "Bodies as Orientation in/to the World – Bodies in Queer Phenomenology and Religious Studies," in *American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting* (Chicago, IL: 2012).

directing recognition of different bodies along cultural schemata through interior mental acts, disconnected from bodily experience and engagement in the world. At stake in misunderstanding our processes of perceptual orientation as interior mental acts is that we might mistake the pre-reflective dimension conditioning, our “take on the world” (how I come to interpret and assign meaning around me), simply as a set of thoughts or beliefs rather than a complex, internally heterogenous set of perceptual orientations embodied through me.<sup>102</sup> If the former were so, if our takes on the world, our views on race, gender, and normalcy were simply a matter of internal thought, then changing those beliefs emerging out of thought in accordance with “rationally” pursued knowledge should affect our perceptions and embodied experiences in some ways so as to be in alignment with our intellectual convictions.

For example, if I know “in my mind” that skin color makes no difference in regards to the value or intellectual capability of a person, then I should no longer perceive skin color in hierarchical ways, nor should I experience reactions to skin color that have evaluative effects. Yet I do because there is knowledge tacitly present in my embodied being which orients me towards others, as I have discussed above. And how is it then, that I can “know in my mind” that my grandmother is still a human being as she is seemingly unresponsive to personal interaction, but I seem to have to keep telling myself that this is indeed so, all the while my visceral response to her betrays a perceptual orientation incongruent with what “I think and know”?

---

<sup>102</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 113.

To address this question, I want to explore the relationship and dynamic between bodily and social dimensions of our existence by using the concept of “normalcy” as pivot point and through exploring the role of language. This will help us understand how the bodily and social dimensions of perception might interrelate, yet this interrelation is paradoxical and the dimensions irreducible to each other. In what follows, I will explore the bodily perceptual social relations which shape bodily recognition, especially as it concerns the shaping of bodily difference in terms of deviance and/or normalcy and the system of social, economic, and political empowerment buttressed and justified by such bodily perceptual orientations, manifest in language as always corporeal *and* social.

*Language in/as bodily perceptual orientation*

To help conceive of language as corporeal and social, of language as inseparably related to body/mind and the world, it is useful to think of language through the previous frame of perception. I have discussed in the previous chapter how separating perception into, for example, bodily sensation, and evaluation and judgment in the mind, is problematic: We experience the seeing or tasting or something not as separate entities of a process (e.g., I do not experience stimulation on my retina, which I then evaluate as distinct information regarding light, and then make a judgment as to what I perceive as “person in front of me”), but rather, I see a friend coming through the office door. This is because perception is always bodily (I have physical capacities in my bodily functions, the interplay of my organs, neural system, etc.), conscious-ly (perception extends me into the world, it is an engagement with the world that is more than just bodily reception of sense data, perception makes sense of my world and how I bodily “fit”), and world-ly

(the way I bodily perceive and which meanings emerge is also influenced by the world, the social contexts, meaning systems and bodily alignments into which I am born and which shape my acquisition of perceptual habits).

Now thinking of language, we can understand how there are different components at work for language to emerge, components which are irreducible to each other, but nevertheless inseparable. I have a bodily capacity for articulation and voice; I use my lungs for a certain kind of breathing, which, coupled with my vocal cords, produces sound; with my tongue, teeth, lips, and force of breath, I make speech sounds. I can use my bodily capacity for voice to express myself, as form of communication. This extends me into the world and is a form of engagement with the world, it involves conscious acts of using voice and articulation intentionally, about something, towards a purpose. And the world is also involved; without a world, there would be nothing to use voice and articulation in reference to, and/or nothing to express myself for. My social context also provides the socially shared rules, the sediment habit of linguistic rules such as grammar, a meaning system within which I can use speech to communicate.<sup>103</sup>

In regards to understanding language as corporeal and social, none of the above aspects can be separated from the other. While I might not be able to use my vocal cords in ways to use my voice, I can nevertheless “speak” with my body, through bodily gestures forming signs and even “tonality” through gestural emphasis (as we can see in

---

<sup>103</sup> Swiss Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure defined language as *langue* + *parole*: *Langue* is the language system, the sedimented system of signs of the community in which we learn to speak; *parole* is the act of speaking by a person, the social activity of using words to speak or write to communicate something in a specific context. There is an interdependency between *langue* and *parole*; *parole* develops *langue*, but *langue* is also implied by *parole*. Language as the sum of the two then also incorporates the bodily capacity to speak. Ferdinand de Saussure, Albert Sechehaye Charles Bally, and Albert Riedlinger, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans., WadeBaskin (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1986).



sign language, which is not a translation of spoken language, but has its own grammar, rules, and system).<sup>104</sup>

Research into language acquisition and cognitive development shows that phonology (organization of sound), morphology (formation and structure of words), and syntax (arrangement of words) indeed are acquired through neural mechanisms in the brain. By way of cognitive development we can observe timetables of linguistic maturation connected to physical, biochemical, and neural development. By way of pathology we can observe absence of capacity to organize sounds considered proper in a given language, or an inability to arrange words according to cultural rules of syntax connected to injury or disease affecting the brain. Yet the learning of words itself is not reducible to a biological capacity. Cognitive linguistic research shows that it is rather a rich and complex system of conceptual representations, capacities to infer the intention of others, and perceptual sensitivities to cues given regarding meaning in the speech and gestures of others.<sup>105</sup>

---

<sup>104</sup> I do appreciate Elaine Scarry's argument regarding the undoing of language in extreme pain and suffering; extreme physical pain (as in torture) is inexpressible in the given cultural vocabulary. Yet her argument is based in conceiving of language mainly as linguistic expression, while I would conceive of her world-making activities such as artistic and cultural creations also as dimensions of bodily language. In the end, however, our conceptions might turn out to complement each other, as the kinds of extreme pain she describes might be accounted for in my framework as experience with no readily available/emerging meaning, unmaking orientations and alignments we are habituated to. See Scarry. Sonia Kruks also comments that while pain might be difficult to represent discursively, it does not necessarily lack communicability. In fact, pain might be "spoken" through bodies expressing their condition in ways that can be "felt" by others. Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 165.

<sup>105</sup> Paul Bloom, "Roots of Word Learning," in *Language Acquisition and Conceptual Development*, ed. Melissa Bowerman and Stephen C. Levinson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

In other words, body, mind, and world are involved in language. Looked at from a different angle, language then cannot be conceived of as a property of an independent consciousness, given the ways in which our bodily capacities and our social context are involved. If we then reflect on Merleau-Ponty's assertion that "I think through and with and by means of language,"<sup>106</sup> and we think of language as described above (as inseparably related to body, mind, and world), then language is not simply the outside to a prior existing interior thought. Rather, thought and language are simultaneously constituted by our bodily capacities and embeddedness in a world—my capacity to think is inherently related to my bodily biochemical capacities, to my bodily intentionality (to extend into the world bodily and consciously), and to my social context (within which I learn language and parole, see footnote 103 of this chapter).

Put differently, because I am a body, because I see, smell, touch, feel, hear things in reference to my body-self, language "makes sense to me" in reference to my situation in the world, and language has sedimented as a result of corporeal reference and habitual meanings, and my bodily and social habituations allow for creative expression, allow for

---

<sup>106</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 389. Merleau-Ponty's conception of language is one he repeatedly returns to, but also repeatedly reformulates and revises. His thoughts on language are not continuous, but transforming with each reiteration in terms of other issues he is articulating. What is most useful to my discussion is that Merleau-Ponty points to parameters within which he places language: the ambiguity of significations (it is always open to more than just a consistent network of significations) and the expression of a style (the achievement of saying something as an expressive gesture, which is bodily intentionality intertwining with the world/being an embodied point of view, making it possible to say something "new"). Hugh J. Silverman, "Merleau-Ponty and the Interrogation of Language," in *Merleau-Ponty: Perception, Structure, Language*, ed. John Sallis (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1981), 123. Linda Singer, "Merleau-Ponty on the Concept of Style," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson and Michael Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993).

new meanings to emerge.<sup>107</sup> Yet I also “do” language as a living, speaking, perceiving body, which also limits “my language;” I am limited in/by my bodily capacities, my conscious engagement with the world in language, and the socio-cultural world in which I exist.

Let me elaborate further on how language is bodily and social, and how the different dimensions of language are interrelated. For example, my mother’s native tongue, Thai, is a tonal language, so that the same string of syllables can make up different signs/words by way of intonating it differently. Thai has five different tonalities: high, middle, low, rising, and falling. The syllable *maa* for example can signify *dog* if spoken in rising tonal register, but signifies *come* when spoken in the high or middle register (there are also regional differences—tonal dialects—in Thai.). Tonality is a bodily capacity to arrange vocal cords and breath to reach the desired sound, yet it is also a bodily habit which needs to be acquired.

While it is not impossible to learn a tonal language as second language, for those growing up in language systems in which tonality expresses emotion or takes on grammatical functions (such as shouting when angry, or raising one’s voice to signify a question), it is a different bodily habit to learn to listen for tonality, learning to identify it, and even reproduce it. Misspeaking *maa* to a Thai person can turn into an insult when rather than inviting someone to come closer, I referred to her as dog.

---

<sup>107</sup> Merleau-Ponty is not the only or first philosopher to make this observation. See also, for example, Wittgenstein on the biological underpinnings of language, or Polanyi on the tacit reliance upon the body for all forms of knowledge. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans., G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1958), 188-189, 280-283. Michael Polyani, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 61-66.

Similar examples of bodily linguistic habits and acquired linguistic knowledge can be observed in regard to German diphthongs. The sounds of *ä*, *ö*, and *ü* are embedded in my native German language system, and I grew up learning to produce these sounds bodily perceptually, identify them as I hear them, and use them as I speak. Yet these bodily capacities and/or habits do not necessarily emerge together. Trying to teach American students German diphthongs, I could teach them how to form *ü* with their lips and tongue, so they could for example speak the word *fünf* (five). Yet when asking them if they could hear the difference between *fünf* and *funf*, many of them were unable to do so even after much practice.

Another example could be found in Thai language again. The sounds distinguished in English or German as ‘r’ and ‘l,’ produced through certain movements of the tongue either in the back or the front of the mouth, are sounds not distinguished in Thai, so that the word for *foreigner* can alternatively be pronounced as *falang* or *farang*. While both soundings are distinguishable to the Thai ear, the meaning signified is not, and both pronunciations may be heard.<sup>108</sup>

To engage in Thai language systems though is more than just learning how to produce and recognize tonalities. Socio-cultural processes of personal and communal engagements and meanings are also bound up in language, language again understood as corporeal and social. Foreigners often perceptually emerge not solely based on their

---

<sup>108</sup> A similar example can be found among the Kikuyu in Kenya. Members of this tribe tend to mix up ‘r’ and ‘l’ in the English language, the meaning emerging then depending on context (e.g., the Kikuyu politician Mary Wambui spoke in her acceptance speech of having experienced a hard “erection.” Official news media outlets would adjust the linguistic sign to match the context—political election—, whereas social media maintained the r/l mis-pronunciation in order to invoke the sexual meaning within the political context). Thank you to Patience Kamau for bringing this example to my attention.

visual appearance, but for their lack of “passing” linguistically. For example, Thai language does not tend to imbue speaking with emotional qualities, speaking is then not necessarily a cultural tool to express emotions or make emphasis (though not impossible, but it is not the main way to do so). A question, for example, is indicated by an added word, rather than the raising of the voice at the end of a sentence (in English words may be added as in *Where did you go?* or one may simply raise the voice as in *You went there?*). This may make sense when considering that Thai culture puts great value in public presentation, presenting and “saving face” through a certain way of performing language, such as measurement in vocalization, but also in the many meanings embedded in a smile.<sup>109</sup> The cultural values of how one presents oneself publicly to others then also sediments in the manner of speech, so that to speak Thai is to be bound to a cultural language system in which measured tonality, voice, and bodily expressions are highly valued.

Again then, language operates similarly to perception: I discussed the paradoxical operation of perceiving along pre-established alignments which stabilizes perceived meaning through sedimented habits, while still always being open to new or different perceived meanings. Language follows a similar paradoxical dynamic, in that in my speaking, I am dependent upon my bodily capacities of word formation, I am dependent on past uses of language in order to convey anything meaningful (in thought, speech, writing, etc.), yet I can say something new or different by fitting and using my linguistic

---

<sup>109</sup> Thailand is often called “the land of a thousand smiles.” A smile might suggest a humorous situation, friendliness, or kindness; it may express politeness, forgiveness, readiness to listen, gently expressing one’s doubt or opposition; it may indicate defensiveness, even anger or hurt, sadness, or feeling insulted. The Thai practice of smiling eludes my perceptual capacities and linguistic abilities. I might see my mother smile, but I have yet to become “fluent in speaking/hearing/known/being Thai smiles.”

expression into my context. This new speech and associated meaning now takes on a “social life” and may be a part of linguistic sedimentation.<sup>110</sup> The “social power” of this new meaning depends on if and how this meaning sediments through habituation.<sup>111</sup>

To pick up on concepts used above, I can say that I enter into a world in which language is already sedimented. I am born into a pre-existing linguistic arena within which I learn to think and express my thoughts through words, within which I learn to use my bodily capacities for, e.g., voice and gestures to “say something,” to make use of my bodily capacities within the conventional signifying system. And while words and rules of grammar and syntax might exist before I bodily-consciously use language, my actual saying something is not a fixed reference. Language is ambiguous and open to bodily change (change in how we pronounce words or intonate them) and new meanings, even new rules and structures.

For example, the English word *dog* and the associated pronunciation already signifies a furry animal of a certain shape which can adapt to living with humans and emits certain barky sounds. Yet there is no necessary univocity or consistency when I use the word *dog*—the meaning emerges in the interrelation between the sedimented language and my taking up language in a speech act. Put differently, there is no direct and consistent connection between the word *dog* and the bodily being it signifies. But neither

---

<sup>110</sup> “Speech is, therefore, that paradoxical operation through which, by using words of a given sense, and already available meanings, we try to follow up an intention which necessarily outstrips, modifies, and itself, in the last analysis, stabilizes the meanings of the words which translate it.” Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 389.

<sup>111</sup> It should also become clear here then that language is more than expression. While expression or communication are functions of language, language encompasses the social systems of signification within which we express ourselves, the bodily capacities for sound, voice, gesture, tonality, etc., cognitive capacities of association, learning, memory, etc., social abilities such as relating physically and emotionally, and more.

do I create this meaningful connection anew every time I utter the word. Rather, there is a paradoxical relation between existing linguistic meanings and the not-yet-emergent meaning expressible in the speech act. This paradoxical process (present meaning can only emerge because of previously emerged meanings and because of the possibility of new meanings) takes place in the interrelation between speakers, signs (the word as spelled and pronounced), prior language use (socio-cultural sediment) and current speech (my bodily utterance in the moment referring to something). This paradoxical relation is what makes creative individual and communal expression possible.

This paradoxical relation also helps us understand the significance of context in the use of language: If my saying *dog* actually refers to a *furry barking animal*, or to a *sausage put between a bread bun*, or is a *derogatory reference* to another human person, or is creating a new contextual meaning nevertheless perceivable to others, is only determinable in the situational *and* socio-cultural context while at the same time depending on the dynamics of socio-cultural sediment (the occurrences of linguistic habits forming). For example, cultural linguistic habits of using *dog* as a slur formed because of habitual sedimentation through repetition, i.e., the slur became a slur through repetitive derogatory speech acts (again, involving the bodily capacity for speech, but also specific intonations that may be habitually aligned with speaking insults, the cognitive capacity to think about ways in which to creatively use words when we wish to insult a person, and the social habit of providing me with linguistic habits so that certain words are recognized as insult, rather than a random act of misplaced reference).

But if *dog* emerges with derogatory meaning depends not just on past repetitive habits, but also on the situational context, including my actual bodily performance of this speech act encompassing other sensory dimensions (such as sound, gestures, etc.). As all meaning is ambiguous and indeterminate, so are linguistic signs and meaning open to change: For example, *dog* as derogatory reference to a human person is open to change so that *dawg* (phonetically similar, though visual-textually different) emerges as sign to refer to a close friend in speech acts between two African-American men in an urban US cultural context.

Without bodily and cognitive capacities, and without using these inherited frames of linguistic references, I cannot “accomplish” language, though language is not a fixed system with static reference to meanings.<sup>112</sup> The meaning of linguistic expressions emerge over time, are changeable in new eras and social contexts. The emergence of meaning is a dynamic process, where linguistic signs (a word and the associated sound and textual representation) that have sedimented (the word “dog” habitually and most commonly referring to the furry barking animal) can be taken up and metamorphose anew through a spontaneous speech act: I might call a person a dog and it is understood as insult, not as misrecognition or mis-speaking; or I might still mis-speak due to bodily perceptual alignments which lead to failure to perform recognized linguistic gestures (even if I may accomplish speaking *dawg* bodily, in my specific embodied existence, I probably cannot call an African American friend *dawg* and expect the other to feel addressed in a friendly manner).

---

<sup>112</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 178,197. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, trans., John O'Neill (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 13.



Now, recalling my insistence that the condition of my existence is my bodily perceptual orientation in the world, I cannot exempt language and posit it as separate from the intertwining of body/mind/world. I speak as body, physically; I speak from my corporeality, in reference to my bodily being; I speak to an embodied world, in reference and communication with world within which meaningful discourse emerges, and within which I am but one of the players in an active and creative process of meaning. In speaking, I speak through my bodily gestures and perceptual capacities—I do not think a thought and then command my body to carry out the thought through language. I think through and with and by means of language as body.

As I have explored through the example of Thai language, language is proper to the body in that my bodily perceptual orientation in the world inscribes the meanings emerging in/through language as bodily perceptual intentionality. Language is not strictly only the words I utter within a grammatical system, but language is bodies in movement, and bodies extending physically and socio-culturally towards others in the world. In other words, I “do” and embody language through being a thinking/gesturing/speaking body (even as I silently type, I do this as body and through my bodily capacities). And the manner in which I emerge via language is embedded in my bodily capacities and habits, my bodily perceptual orientations in and towards the world, and interacts with socio-cultural sedimented habit (such as specific linguistic habits or culturally informed bodily gestures) in bodily form, in a specific context.

To extend linguistically then, to speak, write, think, etc., is a form of bodily intentionality, to extend into the world through bodily-linguistic movements towards

cultural expression (though language, like perception, is always more than this function of expression). This movement takes bodily being beyond biological limitations/capacities, and body and culture become implicated with each other and incorporate each other.<sup>113</sup> Put differently, I can extend into this world and relate to and about my dog—thinking and speaking about it, touching it—because I have a bodily relation and reference to this furry animal. But I am also already moving bodily beyond my biological capacities; I am already extending myself towards and through cultural means. Namely, I use the signifier *dog* and relate to this animal as my pet; I engage in culturally determined social, economical, moral, individual, etc., habits of pet care.<sup>114</sup>

Significant here is that without others, there would be no need and no sediment habit to extend myself (with). Using language is already a relational bodily movement, moving intentionally towards an other; extending linguistic gestures the meaning of which emerges in the relation between me and other. But to communicate, to transmit meaning in gestures that are reciprocal, bodily intentionality must already take place in a *reciprocal* perceptual grid or current, where my bodily intentionality and the other's intertwine in order to be meaningfully grasped. In other words, language, gestures, bodily movements, perceptual intentions, already need to be part of a sediment habit, repeatable

---

<sup>113</sup> Silverman, 125.

<sup>114</sup> How these are culturally determined bodily expressive intensions becomes more clear when reflecting on other cultures, in which “dog” might emerge within meaning systems where this kind of furry animal is related to as food source. For an investigation of perceptual alignments of animals, see Melanie Joy, *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows: An Introduction to Carnism* (San Francisco, CA: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2010).

and performable (though not fixed or static), in order to be appropriable in relation between bodies.<sup>115</sup>

Language is inscribed in any of the problems we explored previously—be it perception as fundamental to our being in the world, be it gendered perceptual intentionality, be it racialized perceptual alignments—and can help us explore the relational dynamics at work. But language itself is also bound to the knowledge frame in which we undergo these explorations.<sup>116</sup> I will discuss and elaborate on this latter assertion more fully in the following chapter. In the space remaining in this chapter, let me discuss language and the relational dynamics at work in the issue of “normalcy,” in order to further understand how bodily perceptual orientation *is* how we exist in this world.

#### *Language and Bodily Perceptual Orientation of/to “Normal”*

Just like I can only know about my experiences by experiencing, I can only know about my perceptions in perceiving, and I only know about language by thinking, speaking, writing, reading, etc. The significances of our experience, perception, and language as bodily movements are manifest *in* our movements.<sup>117</sup> The ground from which meaning and significances emerge is the mutual constituting of space between body-body/body-world through bodily movement (bodily perceptual intentions). As

---

<sup>115</sup> Silverman, 125.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 122. For example, my using language in this project is already bound to the knowledge frames which tend to separate body and mind, so my thinking and writing about it in some ways binds me to this pre-reflective epistemological frame, and I might have to create ways of speaking about body and mind which appear cumbersome (or even writing about the “problem” of a body/mind dualism, which might not be a problem in a different cultural context where there might not even be differentiating words).

<sup>117</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 394.

discussed above, this relation is inherently an open relation (meanings such as those emerging in language are not fixed, they are ambiguous and indeterminate), one that exposes me to an interrelated bodily reality. Therefore our cognitive achievements, even complex and sophisticated ones (such as concept formation and linguistic abstractions, like language and concepts referring to normalcy) are fundamentally grounded in embodied life.<sup>118</sup> In fact, conceptual movements are essentially rooted in embodied life and embodied structures. Exploring language can point us “back” to the sedimentation of habits, the pre-patterned historio-cultural perceptual behaviors, which establish a certain perceptual perspective from which our bodies emerge.<sup>119</sup>

I explored bodily perceptual orientations in terms of gender, sexuality, and race above and gave personal examples of perceiving myself as a girl, as a lesbian, or shifting my self-perceptions from a nationalized to a racialized body. I also notice my own habitual perceptions regarding what counts as a normal body and normal mind; I notice how I habitually perceive body and mind as distinct but connected entities: sitting with my grandmother in her still-early stages of Alzheimer’s as she appears to be ignorant to the smell of burning milk on the stove, wondering if she is losing her mind (“how can a ‘normal’ person not respond to this acrid smell?”); or helping my father change her diapers, when “she is losing control” over “normal” bodily functions. These kinds of

---

<sup>118</sup> Marratto, 19-20.

<sup>119</sup> Merleau-Ponty describes this relationship as a phenomenological principle of “foundation,” identified by Husserl as the necessary connection which can unconditionally serve as basis for valid inferences and necessary truths. Merleau-Ponty designates this connection as a two-way relationship in which neither originator nor originated can be ordered, because the latter makes manifest the former. For example, the relation of thought to language is a founding term, but a two-way relationship: language is thought as originator and thought presented as originated, yet it is only through thought that language is made manifest. The two cannot be absorbed, their ambiguity not resolved. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 177-199.

perceptual orientations to “different from normal” may also connect meanings in a way so that a specific deviation from “normal” can make a difference in how other bodily or intellectual abilities are perceived. For example, I might catch myself judging a wheelchair user in my classroom as intellectually inferior, or feeling surprised to learn of an outstanding athletic skill of a person with a mental impairment.<sup>120</sup>

How do these perceptual associations and connected social hierarchies come into play and how can we understand further the social relations at work in bodily perceptual orientations and experiences of “normal”? How exactly is the living matter of our bodies connected to the social aspects of our embodiment? Where are the differences, and what are the dynamics of this dialectic that might lead to perception along hierarchical perceptual lines defined through “normalcy”? And what might language as corporeally embedded show us about this dialectic?

### *Habitual Sediments of Normalcy*

Cognitive linguists Lakoff and Johnson analyze language and cognitive structures to argue that linguistic metaphors are always essentially rooted in embodied life and embodied structures and in turn structure the world we live in and our experiences of it.<sup>121</sup> But when primarily focusing on metaphors, even when agreeing with the embodied

---

<sup>120</sup> I am referring here to James McElwain, a person with autism, who became a news sensation after scoring twenty points in four minutes during a high school basketball game. His position was that of team manager, assistant to the coach, though when his team had achieved a significant lead, the coach put McElwain on the court as a thank-you for McElwain’s dedication to the team. In news media and internet platforms such as youtube, McElwain’s “undiscovered” or “unexpected” aptitude continues to circulate as inspirational story for able-bodied and able-minded persons.

<sup>121</sup> Johnson and Lakoff argue that embodied schemas, as they arise from our perceptual interactions with the world (our bodily movements, our motile engagements, our bodily perceptual grasp), are crucial for the intelligibility of language. These embodied schemas include for example bodily projection (front-back, near-far, up-down), or force dynamic schemas (push, pull, support, balance, gather), and other schemas less easily categorized (part-whole, cycle, link, contact). Mark Johnson, *The Body in the*

nature of metaphors and the embodied effects of linguistic practices, one might still posit that language actually does refer to biological realities given, that it is merely the social association or meaning inferred in signifying language that might possibly take a derogatory turn. Therefore, we ought to simply cease using language with devaluing meaning or re-value language with positive meanings.

For example, I could have ceased to refer to my grandmother as a “vegetable” when she seemed cognitively incapable, and instead continued referring to her in personal terms in order to change my emotional and behavioral attitude towards her. Or while “cripple” as a referent to a person with physical disfigurement points to biological occurrences of a crooked or uncommonly bent body part, we can recognize that the associated meanings of cripple as damaged, worthless, lacking person are a social construction which might have effect on a person’s perception of social worth. So we can address this by either using language imbued with positive meaning or initiating a repetitive linguistic habit connecting cripple with a positive value (as has been done, for example, by reclaiming “crip” in a socio-political act of disability pride).

However, considering linguistic differences, differences in sedimented habits in sign language of American Deaf communities reveal the indeterminacy of linguistic meaning and the discontinuities, but interrelations, between the biological and social. Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, in their investigation of the linguistic meaning of “deaf” and related signs illustrate the following: The signed phrase A-LITTLE-HARD-

---

*Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 29-45. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 31-36. See also George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980; reprint, 2003).

OF-HEARING, a phrase in audist cultures linked to meaning referring to someone who is slightly hearing impaired, was used in Deaf communities to refer to persons who are *slightly hearing* (but mostly deaf).<sup>122</sup> The signed phrase VERY-HARD-OF-HEARING, a phrase in audist cultures linked to meaning referring to someone who cannot hear well at all, was used in Deaf communities to refer to persons who can hear well (and are only a little hearing impaired).

How is it that biological givens and linguistic signs are seemingly discontinuously aligned? Audist explanations offered trace this back to lack in proper English skills, a case of mixing up “normal” meaning associations. But, as Padden and Humphries demonstrate, this linguistic difference emerges out of social habits connected with specific communities: in Deaf communities, HEARING is the opposite of what Deaf people are. In the larger world of meaning emerging in Deaf communities and sedimented linguistic habits, different bodily alignments emerge: DEAF, not HEARING emerges as dominant bodily habit and socio-cultural value (deaf is normal) in hierarchical perceptual alignments, with HARD-OF-HEARING representing deviation of some kind. Thus, A-LITTLE-HARD-OF-HEARING emerges meaning slightly deviating from normal-deaf, whereas VERY-HARD-OF-HEARING indicates greater deviation from normal. Therefore, because for Deaf people the greatest deviation is HEARING, A-LITTLE-HARD-OF-HEARING emerges as mostly deaf, and VERY-HARD-OF-HEARING emerges as mostly hearing.<sup>123</sup>

---

<sup>122</sup> I am following here the habit of capitalizing linguistic signs which are not spoken, but gestured.

<sup>123</sup> Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, "Deaf People: A Different Center," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).

Regarding the social habitual schemas, the tacit knowledges concerning social habits expressed at the level of thought and language and their implication in bodily experiences, disability scholar Rosemary Garland Thompson helps us by remarking:

Thus, the ways that bodies interact with the socially engineered environment and conform to social expectations determine the varying degrees of disability or able-bodied-ness, of extra-ordinariness or ordinariness. Consequently, the meanings attributed to extraordinary bodies reside not in inherent physical flaws, but in social relationships in which one group is legitimated by possessing valued physical characteristics and maintains its ascendancy and its self-identity by systematically imposing the role of cultural or corporeal inferiority on others.<sup>124</sup>

Here we can detect that linguistic gestures are not simply a measure of thought expressing itself in language, and meaning achieved on the level of thought and an interiorized mental activity. Social ideologies pervading social imagination indeed are expressed in and do their work through social gestures, language being *one* of the dimensions of social enactment and habitual repetition. Below I will further explore how language is one of the ways in which normalcy emerges through bodies and social world interacting, and how language can demonstrate this dialectic (because embedded in it), so that bodily perception can be understood as immediate and mediated.

To explore the role of social ideology at work and the implications of language, let me return to our previous discussion of how a difference in our bodily movements is also a difference of being in the world. This implies that differences in bodily capacities—which influence our bodily perceptual movements—are differences in being in the world. It is important here to slow down and investigate the linking between bodily

---

<sup>124</sup> Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997), 7.



difference and cultural and corporeal values made in references and representations of normalcy as able-bodied-ness, to be normal is to be not disabled.<sup>125</sup>

What is at stake in implicit or overt inattention to the corporeal dimensions of language and discourse is that, in terms of bodily differences, the perceptual and conceptual connections may be closed at one end by presupposing a naturalized discursive concept of bodily difference, i.e., bodily difference materializing through production and regulation of hegemonic symbolic orders. Embodied difference then might be taken to be a real bodily experience only insofar as it is a materialization of discursive concepts, as it is bodies coming to matter and taking shape within discursive productions of values. And while materiality is not reducible to the discursive, such inattention might make it difficult to engage in any discussion of materiality of bodies beyond cultural constructions within which these bodily differences materialize as such. It also might bring us close to a naturalization of the discursiveness of bodily difference as ordinary perceptual experience, privileging cultural concepts in the same breath with which we insist on the embeddedness of material embodiment and discourse. To put it differently, inattention to bodily experiences as material differences might make it difficult to understand the bodily experiences of for example a paraplegic beyond social

---

<sup>125</sup> Discourses on “disability” engage (to use or to deconstruct) the distinctions of the World Health Organization between impairment, disability, and handicap: impairment is defined as an abnormality in function, disability as not being able to perform an activity considered normal for a human being, and handicap as the inability to perform a “normal” social role. While these distinctions are useful when discussing physical or mental difference over against socio-culturally imposed barriers or inaccessibility, these terms still inherently draw on a medical classification system which makes assumptions about normalcy and maintains the focus on the perceived/experienced impairment and solutions to it. This keeps disability within the confines of individualized experiences and bodily difference and its desired normalization, rather than highlighting social and cultural disabling mechanisms. Colin Barnes, “A Brief History of Discrimination and Disabled People,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 29.

constructions of disablement, which might imply (through inattention) the discursively constructed meaning of “paraplegic” as originary to this kind of bodily experience.

However, thinking with Merleau-Ponty here and remembering his description of the body schema points to a dynamic of embodiment which—while not free from cultural inscriptions—is nevertheless an experience and engendering of meanings that is a deeply bodily experience, where difference is engendered, but not necessarily discursively dominated. Remember that my body schema is my bodily blueprint that structures perceptions and my sense of self and/in relation to my environment. If it configures my movements and postures which also affect my bodily sense of unity, then no matter what body I find myself in, one dimension of bodily experience (which is not separate, or beneath, but concurrent/a co-current with other bodily experiences) is that of myself as a bodily unit.

For example, a person born without limbs holds a complete body schema (her legs have not been severed through perhaps amputation), and her body schema and bodily intentionality (such as her proximal movements) are established according to her tacit understanding of herself as bodily unit. Also, what are usually considered as objects different from bodies might also come to be part of our body schema and bodily extension, for example, a pianist with visual impairment comes to incorporate the piano into his body schema so that the piano is part of the bodily unit that is him, similar to the ways in which a cane can become not an object or tool of a person who is blind, but a tactile bodily organ, part of the unifying/-ied body schema.<sup>126</sup> Bodily perceptual

---

<sup>126</sup> Miho Iwakma, "The Body as Embodiment: An Investigation of the Body by Merleau-Ponty," in *Disability/Postmodernity*, ed. Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare (New York, NY: Continuum, 2002),

intentionality, my movement in the world, is synthesized in the various motions my body and bodily parts are capable of, and my body schema is that of a whole, unified body.

Being deaf/Deaf might again help to illustrate this point. While common ableist modern perception of this difference in bodily perceptual capacity is that of *deaf* as lack of hearing, the *Deaf* instead see themselves as a distinct cultural group that uses a different language. The culturally Deaf (those considering themselves as part of a linguistic and cultural minority), understand themselves to function as an adequate, self-enclosed, self-defining culture and community, yet a cultural minority which functions in an “audist” society, a society that is biased towards the auditory mode of communication. This is not simply a linguistic redefinition but a bodily perceptual experience and orientation. The bodily experience of a deaf person is not necessarily one that is immediately or solely a materialization of an audist/ableist conceptual inscription. Rather, the person born deaf extends bodily as a whole unit within and through the bodily capacities of her individual sensory perceptual intentionality, rather than as an incomplete unit, extending with perceptual deficiencies. From this perspective, the absence of hearing is no more a deficiency, abnormality, or disability than the absence of English speaking skills is.<sup>127</sup>

Of course, as both disability and feminist scholars have pointed out, fragmentations of body *image* are not only possible, but a bodily experience shared

---

78-81. See also Merleau-Ponty’s description of a blind person walking with a cane, the cane being how the person is aware (aware with the cane, not of it). Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 143-146.

<sup>127</sup> Creamer, 97. Harlan Lane, "Construction of Deafness," in *The Disability Studies Reader* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 86-87. I will return to deafness/Deafness again in chapter four.

amongst those subjected to becoming the embodiment of difference.<sup>128</sup> But the body *schema*, this pre-reflective perceptual understanding of my bodily capacities and motility, is an experience in which bodily difference emerges as such. I realize my bodily self-transcendence as/in my body, and my body schema informs how I perform my “I can” in the world.

Now, if I were born without legs, I am not just “compensating” for what others with four limbs might perceive as a lack. My pre-reflexive bodily experience, my tacit knowledge of my ability to extend bodily in a given environment, is not of lacking a certain capacity and then adjusting to this lack. But my body image as impaired, disabled, or abnormal is a concurrent dynamic influencing my bodily experience, not separate and/or following from my body schema entering a social world, but another current in which I am bodily immersed. My bodily intentionality, my bodily movement towards cultural expression, then takes my bodily being beyond my biological capacities of movement with two limbs, incorporates sediment habits of language (“I have a mobility impairment,” “I am disabled,” “I cannot walk on legs,” “I do not move like a normal person”) as I speak of my bodily condition.

All the while my self-experience of myself as fully functioning and capable person in my specific incarnation runs against the currents of sedimented linguistic habits of “normal,” taking up words and gestures as expressions in their ambiguity and

---

<sup>128</sup> See Lennard J. Davis, "Nude Venuses, Medusa's Body, and Phantom Limbs: Disability and Visuality," in *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, ed. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997). Jennifer C. James, "Gwendolyn Brooks, World War II, and the Politics of Rehabilitation," in *Feminist Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Kim Q. Hall (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 153-157. Weiss, 50-51. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 44, 141.

indeterminacy within cultural schemata, yet I am always “speaking against” concepts of normalcy as I am embodying and speaking through cultural linguistic signifiers of normal: “My different body is normal”—extends expression within the language of normalcy, while seeking to make use of the indeterminate meaning of “normal.” My self-perception is immediate—I concurrently can perceive myself as different *and* normal, because the meaning of these words has a corporeal dimension and I *am* those signifiers as much as I *use* them. And meaning is mediated through my body *and* culture, because I understand the meaning of these words in reference to my body but within the cultural habits of understanding them, even as I bodily invoke new meanings.

Body schema and body image are then not reducible to each other nor are they internally simple. Body schemas, as indicated above, are fluid and can change according to my embodied material condition: I grow older, might lose physical flexibility, experience changes in perceptual capacities, etc.; I might learn how to drive, how to drive vehicles of a different kind or size, might learn an instrument, etc.; and my body schema, my tacit knowledge of bodily comportment, enables and supports these changes and the acquiring of bodily habits.

Body images are also fluid and changeable, according to the dynamics of social relationships aligning value and meaning to specific bodily emergences and how I move as (changing) body in (changing) contexts. In other words, my bodily perceptual orientation is a dialectic of complex and heterogenous currents. I extend outward through a tacit body knowledge *and* through socially mediated perceptions of what “there is to know” about my body.

I know how to move into a classroom as an able-bodied woman; my bodily difference is manifest in my bodily comportment (I am physically fit, of a certain height and strength), but my habits also display a certain caution or restrained bodily motility around male students. I perceive interactions with students along gendered lines, which influences my affect and other bodily gestures—I move around the classroom with a range of bodily abilities (I walk around chairs on two legs, write on the whiteboard while listening to my students), but also control my movements in alignment with perceptions of gendered bodies (I approach male students differently aware of my gendered body than I might perceive myself around male friends or female colleagues).

It is not until I experience a back injury which temporarily affects my bodily motility that the currents of my body schemas and body images might “run through me” differently, though not necessarily harmoniously. I might learn to adjust bodily postures to alleviate pain and compensate for impaired movement; I might still hold a body image of an able-bodied woman who needs to return to able-bodied-ness, but I also might feel social pressure to perform professional femininity *and* able-bodied-ness (out of sync with what I tacitly know my body to be capable of in the moment) in the classroom in order to maintain social power as a teacher through repetitively established perceptual alignments. Put differently, while I hold a tacit or pre-reflective awareness of my-body-self without having access to my body as an object of my awareness (I know where my body is and know how to move my body, but I cannot be aware of *my* body as separate from *me*), I can still be perceptually aware of my-body-self by engaging in a cultural world. “I” as my-body-self am that subject who has taken up the mechanisms of culture and has

achieved awareness of myself as normal or different/deviant—within the bounds of my culture.

Sediment cultural habits might precede my subjective individual bodily experience, my habituated patterns of perceptual behavior and consciousness as subject. But I am also embodied in this world with tacit knowledges of my bodily intentionality, I hold a body schema which organizes my movements without conscious attention. And my engaging in language and other bodily expressions as body and as body in a pre-subjective world can show the compelling character of perceptual demands of normalcy within which I find myself recognized and through which I reflect: Perceptual concepts (gender, race, normalcy) might change; my contextual engagement with these concepts might change; the contextual meaning emerging in the corporeal dynamics between bodies and world might change; but the fact that I perceive and emerge as subject with culturally given perceptual concepts does not.

And because I take up perceptual mechanisms of culture, I take up political relations of perception: My perception of normalcy is intertwined with relations of power which align me with certain perceptions of normalcy and otherness that are not neutral or innocent. For example, the persistent mind-body dualism and the cultural hierarchies preferring “mind over matter” in Euro-Western concepts of human existence more often than not instill us with doubt that a life without “normal” cognitive function might be a life worth living. Not only can we not imagine existing without our mental capacities (after all, we are habituated to embrace our imagination as a mental, not a bodily act), but

our social value systems idealize the mind and all the control over life we *think* it affords us, for example, as the locus of intention for our actions in the world.

The habitual schema I am immersed in of perceiving preferentially mind-over-matter also has a socio-political force inherent to it. Alzheimer's disease or dementia, for example, emerge as fear-inducing because the loss of mental control signals a loss of identity and human agency. An uncontrolled mind is to blame for a body out of control, so that recent socio-political public conversation regarding violence focuses on control of bodily restriction of access to weapons and legal provisions for mental health providers, using language and imagery which frame "normal" people as "reasonable" and "mentally stable" and therefore in charge and empowered to control "crazy" people who are perceived as out of control and bodily violent.

We perceive normally-abled persons because we come to recognize certain bodily and mental capacities as common to human persons, at a time when identification and control of normal bodies and minds is important to the organization and structuring of human bodies in cultural and political space. The bodily perceptual experience of abnormality (deviance from normal) alerts us to the dynamics between body-bodies-social world from which the other body might not emerge as subject analogous to "normal." Because some bodily perceptual movements (gestures, movements, gaze, etc.) are socio-culturally not recognizable as "normal" in the field of interaction—or at least not recognized in their specific form (a limp, a slur, the absence of vision) due to perceptual orientations—the *mutual constituting* of space between bodies, the ground



from which bodies are perceived, is a dialectic from which *unequal* bodies emerge into perceptual recognition.

Thus, the “abnormality” of bodily function which defines “impairment” is already the transition towards and entering into representational relation to another concept, that of normalcy—so that an impaired body materializes as body image framed within socio-cultural conceptions of normal/abnormal. Yet while these perceptual alignments have real embodied effects, and can produce complex, multiple, and fragmented self-perceptions and body images, bodily difference comes to be matter also in the dimension of body schemas, a current in which difference is not necessarily experienced as pathology. The relationship between meanings—specific bodies relating with and through linguistic signs—once reflected on within the parameters outlined in this chapter, is not one of necessity, but rather one of discontinuity. There is no natural or necessary linking between bodily difference and meaning in language (though a linking between the two always *is*), which implies that other meanings and links are possible, especially when remembering the histories and possibilities potentially to be gathered on perceptual backgrounds.

Just like bodily perceptual orientations are aligned to support some perceptions over others and are directing our perceptions to focus on some emergences over others from a supporting pre-reflective current, so do our bodily perceptual alignments support a construction of normalcy which invests perceptions of difference with meanings that endow perceptual dialectics with taxonomical, ideological, political, and cultural significance.

## Conclusion

Our involvement with others, our mutual immersion in the currents of social bodily interrelation, *haunts* us, as Merleau-Ponty sometimes describes it:<sup>129</sup> My style of walking, how I hold myself or silverware even when nobody is watching, what my eyes are drawn to in an image, my reaction to unexpected touch, how I consciously and unconsciously respond to music; our most intimate bodily lives indicate this dimension of pre-reflective interrelation, this involvement in a current of incarnate otherness which precedes my consciousness though it is present “in the flesh” at every moment. My bodily movement, gestures, and postures do not enable communication between me and others, but depend on it. Our bodies and bodily lives inherit the memory of a pre-reflective contact with otherness, a contact which might be irretrievable to conscious reflection, but which nevertheless haunts our experience in the here-and-now. Put differently, as this pre-reflective dimension precedes my subjective coming-to-be, it precedes my individual experience while it always embeds me in a historical context that both is and is not mine.<sup>130</sup> In other words, this pre-reflective dimension provides an inexplicable familiarity of me as body with things and bodies of others and a same inexplicable sense of strangeness of “my own” body.<sup>131</sup> This is the bodily perceptual dimension from which individual and communal achievements emerge historically and culturally.

---

<sup>129</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, 162.

<sup>130</sup> Marratto, 9.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

The pre-reflective currents in which I and the world are embedded imply an exposure, and even more, an inherent openness and ambiguity, in which my being-in-the-world is grounded and on which it depends. In other words, inherent to my existence is a relation *to* the other/world, which shapes our capacities and possibilities of relation *in* the world. But this relation marks our bodies as open to and pervaded by a reality which is beyond our grasp insofar as it does not wait for us to set the terms of its appearance (as a Kantian *a priori* would have us do), and this appearance therefore brings exposure and vulnerability (and with it fecundity) to my experience as sentient body:<sup>132</sup> I am always already in the world as body interrelated with this world, and as such I am already inheriting certain ways of moving in and relating to the world. This leaves my body open to and pervaded by currents which are beyond my grasp; in other words, as body I am immersed in a world already marked by gender, race, and normalcy; the world does not wait for me to enter it and dictate the terms of these concepts. I am already exposed and vulnerable to the bodily effects and alignments of these concepts, though in my bodily experience I also embody creativity and choice in how I employ these concepts as social and bodily habits.<sup>133</sup>

The significance of conceptualizing my being as always bodily perceptually oriented and always embedded with pre-reflective, intercorporeal dimensions, is that it

---

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> See for example a sociological discussion of three ethnographies (of bodybuilders, HIV/AIDS in heterosexual men, and obesity in men), discussing the social aspects of bodies, the fluid and mutable meanings and experiences depending on processes of symbolic interaction in Lee F. Monaghan, "Corporeal Indeterminacy: The Value of Embodied, Interpretative Sociology," in *Body/Embodiment: Symbolic Interaction and the Sociology of the Body*, ed. Dennis Waskul and Phillip Vannini (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006). Monaghan carefully highlights how bodies have no intrinsic meaning, rather, meanings emerge *because* of this indeterminacy, meanings are forged bodily-creatively, and social meanings are transmitted and habituated in embodied ways.

enables me to think of the meaning emerging from bodily perceptual experience as always traceable back to bodily experience, but neither experience nor meaning are properties of an individual self. Rather, being as body is the indispensable condition of one person's sharing of experience with another.<sup>134</sup>

Implied in the observations about bodily intentionality and pre-reflective dimension of perception was a pushing of the subject's boundaries beyond the skin "out into the world:"

Whether we are concerned with my body, the natural world, the past, birth or death, the question is always how I can be open to phenomena which transcend me, and which nevertheless exist only to the extent that I take them up and live them, *how the presence to myself (Urpräsenz) which establishes my own limits and conditions every alien presence is at the same time derepresentation (Engegenwärtigung) and throws me outside of myself.*<sup>135</sup>

What Merleau-Ponty problematizes is that the environment, or the world of the subject, has often only been of interest as object of perception, and also only insofar as its features correlated with perceptual structures and capacities. To assert with Merleau-Ponty that our bodily existence is organically interrelated with that of the world strongly implies that this interrelation of being is a dependency in becoming. In other words, becoming and existing as embodied subject is to depend on other living bodies and the world I relate in and with. This dependency or intertwining of embodied experience and world is not simply a product or manifestation of being.

The pre-reflective dimension, the current of sedimented habitual schemata, inhabits me as body and other bodies at the same time. We have seen that the parts of my

---

<sup>134</sup> Samuel Todes, *Body and World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 2.

<sup>135</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 363. Emphasis in original.

body and my sensory capacities form an organic unity and my perceptions come together in things (such as my perception of a lump of dough rolling between my fingers). In the same way,

as the parts of my body together comprise a system, so my body and the other's are one whole, two sides of one and the same phenomenon, and the anonymous existence of which my body is the ever-renewed trace henceforth inhabits both bodies simultaneously.<sup>136</sup>

The previously explored body schema, my tacit knowledge of bodily capacities in a given environment, is possible because of the mutual involvement of interrelated bodies. Only because I am already immersed in sedimented habits—and therefore in communion with other bodily movements and other bodies forming social relations that precede me—can I emerge with individual bodily movements. In other words, it is not “I” who enters the world and chooses my own style “from scratch.” Rather, because I am already always bodily involved in a world in which bodies before me and around me are already relating to each other, already taking up habituated relations, I can emerge as a bodily being who “knows” how to be in her body.<sup>137</sup>

My subjectivity, my individual experiences, transcends me. My experience is that I do not feel that I am the constituting agent either of the natural or of the cultural world: into each perception and into each judgment I bring either sensory functions or cultural settings which are not actually mine. Yet, although I am outrun on all sides by my own acts, and submerged in generality, the fact remains that I am the one by whom they are experiences...<sup>138</sup>

---

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 354.

<sup>137</sup> Marratto, 145. It is not by accident that Merleau-Ponty invokes “communion,” as he sometimes refers to this interrelation of bodies as transubstantiation, as mysterious intertwining in the process of perception: in perception, the perceived is inseparable from the perceiver. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 320.

<sup>138</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 358.

I and others are “outrun by [our] world, and [we] consequently may well be outrun by each other.”<sup>139</sup> I am not completely ignorant about the other’s existence as subject: Once I encounter the other as bodily perceptually oriented intentionality (i.e., a subject who perceptually transcends, as in movement or speech), then the other is not an object of my perception, or a subject-mind hidden in a body to me, but a perceivable subject-intention.

For example, as my grandmother moves her hand to cover herself with a blanket, or moves her eyes around the room in search of something, she is not a body-thing with questionable cognitive abilities, nor a consciousness hidden away in a body cut off from communication with me. Rather, in her bodily perceptual movements she has an intention towards and an orientation in the world. And while I have no absolute access to her or her experience (just as I have no complete access to mine), we are both inserted and participate in an interrelated bodily world in which our perceptual movements are as much our own as they are the other’s. She cannot *not* be an experiencing subject, because she still inhabits a shared world on which she holds a bodily perceptual grasp. We are both present in a world, and our bodily perceptual intentionality opens us both to a world; we are both enmeshed with each other as we are enmeshed with the world.

As I join my mother at our German home in the outdoor kitchen, and she instructs me in the preparation of a Thai dish, our bodily perceptual orientations to each other and to our environment are full of alignments, orienting mechanisms, and pre-reflective currents which allow for indeterminate meaning to emerge as we get ready for a meal of gaeng nuea. My underlying discomfort or embarrassment of cooking outside is more than

---

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 353.

just mental knowledge that “something is not right”; it is also emerging out of bodily habituations of taking gendered home spaces outside the family home, of not having acquired bodily perceptual capacities of moving with my mother and within this space. Emerging are also “imported” (habituated during my living in the US) bodily perceptual orientations, such as a tacit awareness of two racialized brown women pushed to the margins of a German home, infusing the home space from the outside with ethnic fragrances. My apprehension, judgment, evaluation, thoughts, memories, emotions, etc., in this situation are arising out of and within my bodily perceptual orientations, out of and within my bodily experiencing and perceiving the situation, and emerging out of and within social sedimentation of habits that encompass me as body.

It should not strike us as paradoxical or surprising anymore that the English term “sense” implies the ambiguity or duality of bodily perception and meaning as discussed in this chapter: *Sense* can connote “making sense,” inferring sense as meaning found in order and through understanding. And *sense* or *the senses* refers to our perceptual experiences, our sensing and feeling of ourselves and/in the world through sensory capacities. The Latin *percipere* (from which the English *perception* derives) denotes “to take a hold of, to feel, to comprehend.” Here too, the ambiguous connotations of the word *perception* in common usage describe reception of information through sensory capacities and as mental insight or activity of sense-making, meaning derived from sensory information. The dual use and implied aspects of *sense* and *perception* point to sensory perception as the reaching out, the extending into the world we have explored and to the understanding of the world gained in perceptual processes. Bodily perceptual

experience is grounded in and dependent on my individual bodily capacities and history, and framed by socio-cultural orientations and habits.<sup>140</sup>

Sensing, perceiving, understanding, and knowing are inseparable dimensions of bodily experience; they are sides of the same coin (though I am stretching the coin metaphor here beyond the usual two sides). A complex understanding of bodily perceptual experience needs to recognize this ambiguity, which must not be resolved in favor of the bodily or mental aspect, lest we reinstate a body/mind dualism. But we must understand this interrelation and embeddedness of body-consciousness in its complexity, or we resort to naïve conceptions of perception without accounting for the way in which bodily perceptual experience is a relationship to the world, a mutual constitution with the world, a meaning-making process with respect to that world, and a habituated, culturally specific, style of being in the world.

In the following chapter, I will continue this exploration of bodily perceptual orientation, but focus more deeply on the complexity in *how* this being in the world through touching, smelling, feeling, hearing, seeing, speaking, etc., manifests. Bodily perceptual orientation is not simply a biological process connected to mental activity, but because our human existence is also personally and socio-culturally situated, bodily perceptual orientations do not only differ individually or across different groups in a society (as we have explored in this chapter), but also across time and cultures. Therefore, our exploration of bodily perceptual orientation will now turn to socio-historical and socio-cultural differences in bodily perceptual orientations.

---

<sup>140</sup> Rodaway, 5,10.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: COMPARING BODILY PERCEPTUAL ORIENTATIONS**

If you have ever travelled away from home, you might have experienced your immersion into a different place, a different culture even, as an “onslaught on the senses.” We encounter new places in a variety of perceptual dimensions: we perceive the distinct smell of a city made up of exhaust, street food vendors, the types of garbage rotting in the street; we sense a place having a certain “touch” or “feel,” the pace of traffic, the bodily proximity of people passing each other, the feel of architecture, clothing and other objects; we are aware of new sounds on every corner, different musical harmonies making up popular local tunes, intonations and gestures in personal communication, car horns, coins clicking, steps on pavement; we taste different foods and drinks, we notice how fruit familiar to us tastes different, and dishes tasted at home are experienced with new flavors. Maybe we even get to stay long enough that certain experiences deemed “exotic” or “strange” to us become familiar, even cease to be the focus of attention of our perceptions and experiences. We might even begin to notice subtleties previously unperceived: the different kinds of spiciness of chili, the different accents or dialects of a language we still don’t understand; we learn to appreciate a culture’s music and notice different styles.

It is in traveling, in leaving the habituations of our socio-cultural environment, that our bodily perceptual orientations may be highlighted via the experience of difference, the experience of not being “properly” bodily oriented in ways to blend in. In

the previous chapter, I have explored what bodily perceptual orientation in the world entails, and I have investigated how bodily experiences and sensory perception shape our existence via explorations of perceptions of gender, race, and normalcy. In this chapter, I would like to evoke a certain kind of disorientation through historical and cultural “travels,” brief examples of different bodily perceptual orientations. Like any short term vacation or even long(er) term stay, full cultural competency may escape us, and while as experienced traveler I might learn to understand aspects of other ways of being in the world, the subject more fully and complexly understood through exposure might be myself. Because I can no longer take certain sights, scents, sounds, etc., for granted, I can reflect on the ways in which I presume certain perceptions and perceptual orientations.

We explored above that perception does not conform to preexisting laws tracing an independently existing world, but rather, the perceived world and the norms of perception emerge together in mutual immanence.<sup>1</sup> This then implies that what might guide the processes of perception is open to change, and importantly, there is no fixed structure within which perceptual indeterminacy moves, but perception has an indeterminate structure, operating within always to-be-decided customs. In other words, there is no fixed grid of meaning which then guides and limits the perceptual potentialities, but the perceptual grid itself, the currents supporting perceptual emergences, is always open to change, changes that come with bodily as well as historical and cultural transformations.

---

<sup>1</sup> Marratto, 95.

Below, I will continue the exploration of bodily perceptual orientation, but shift towards a comparative approach in order to explore more complexly the “how” of sensory perception. The aim in these examples is to highlight the ways in which *our own* bodily perceptual orientations are far from natural or universal.<sup>2</sup> Neither are the currents supporting the perceptual emergences familiar to us universal, nor are the perceptual capacities and orientations familiar to us natural. This chapter seeks to de-center and maybe even exoticize our own ways of “making sense,” and help us consider more closely our own too-often taken for granted bodily perceptual orientations.<sup>3</sup> I will therefore show how bodily perceptual orientations are complex heterogeneous dynamics, within which perceptual hierarchies, orders, and interplays can be found. This will also

---

<sup>2</sup> Among those, of course, is also the bodily perceptual orientation towards a body/mind split, and the questions guiding this project in regards to how we may more adequately conceive of our bodily existence as a unified and interrelated body/mind/culture experience. As we shall see, this problem might indeed be a Western problem; if I were to find myself embedded in a different socio-cultural context, the questions pursued in this project might be nonsensical.

<sup>3</sup> Doing so, I am very aware of the inherent difficulties and dangers in providing many very different sites for exemplary investigation, staying with neither site long enough to adequately represent difference. Furthermore, I am providing glimpses into these sites often from second-hand “others,” making respectful and thoughtful discussion more difficult and also important. I bear in mind Barbara Mann’s description account of Eurocentric vanity, which falsely universalizes European themes (in the case of this project, conception of experience, the senses, sensory divisions and hierarchies) superimposing Christian European metanarratives on indigenous cultural difference, though more often than not, cultural metanarratives hardly coincide. “It is just another face of colonialism, the *our-size-fits-all* mentality at work, busily retrofitting the monoculture of the ‘West’ over all Other cultures, straining, stretching, lopping, compressing, and, if expedient, annihilating the original the better to cram it into the “metanarrative” most comfortable to Euro-observers in a process I have elsewhere dubbed, ‘Euro-forming the Data.’” Barbara A. Mann, *The Gantowisas: Iroquoian Women* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2000), 62. Emphasis original. And while I am convinced that I cannot escape Euro-forming myself, I aim to undergo this comparative travel to expose my own Western bodily perceptual orientation. I am also cautioned by Iris Marion Young regarding privilege, applied to this project as scholarly and Western academic privilege, and hope that the representations and images conveyed serve greater self-reflection, rather than perpetuation of objectification of others. Young remarks that structural privilege and oppression may give rise to falsifying projections, damaging stereotypes and ideologies which often legitimize privilege and oppression. “When members of privileged groups imaginatively try to represent to themselves the perspective of members of the oppressed groups, too often those representations carry projections and fantasies through which the privileged reinforce a complimentary image of themselves.” Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 48.

help us understand how perceptual differences, and different perceptual orders are already present in real historical and cultural worlds worth “visiting.”

Above, we explored that bodily perception is not a matter of gathering information but a fundamental dimension of meaning making, the domain of cultural expression and conceptual alignments/orientations, the medium of enactment of social values. Perceptual experiences, then, are cultural acts, and perceptual differences are not only bodily differences, but also cultural differences, as culture inscribes how the senses are formed, utilized, and attributed.<sup>4</sup> If meanings are invested and conveyed perceptually, then different ways of perceiving the world also imply different modes of consciousness and knowledge formation.<sup>5</sup> We already explored this in regards to gender, how perceptual intentionality shapes a gendered grasp on the world, or how perceptual alignments of bodies form racial perceptions and alignments of normalcy. Perception shapes that we “know” a body is a raced body, and how and what we know about being “normal.”

Ethnographic fieldwork inquiring into sensory epistemological frameworks shows that “the five senses” are not a universal occurrence. Sensory perception varies within and across cultural groups, and the quantities and organization of the senses can vary as well.<sup>6</sup> This has important implications for understanding how meanings are invested and

---

<sup>4</sup> Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 5. David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003), iv.

<sup>5</sup> Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures*, 1. Howes, 245,n3.

<sup>6</sup> The number of senses, their differentiation, interrelation and prioritization, are cultural articulations. It was Aristotle, following Plato’s distinction between the mind and the senses, who established five as the number of senses commonly theorized in Western culture, and also established a hierarchy (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, descending in epistemological value). Though the numbering of the senses is neither a biological nor universal given, but a philosophical strategy to match and support a

conveyed phenomenologically. Differences in sensory perceptual ordering in a culture affect a person's (bodily) experiences. The culturally inscribed number and ordering of senses and the interplay of sounds, silence, modes of vision and cultural meanings attached to it, affect one's positioning in and orientation to the world, and thus make up the sensory constitution of the emerging experiencing subject.

In this chapter, the works of sensory anthropologists and ethnographers will serve in my comparative exploration of how bodily perceptual orientations work. Where psychological and philosophical studies have focused on consciousness and epistemology (and have displayed a tendency to universalize the senses), the cultural study of the senses (sensory anthropology or anthropological phenomenology) often begins with inquiries into (cultural) differences in sensory perception.<sup>7</sup> My comparative method aims

---

relationship between the senses and the five elements identified by Aristotle, Western philosophers remained loyal to this classification and hierarchy up until Hegel. See Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures*, 2. Touch, for example, can be broken down into a multitude of specialized perceptions (movement, temperature, pain), which are given a sensory category of their own in different cultures. Moreover, sensory orders are not static, but can change over time with changes in culture and cultural values (Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures*, 3-5.). For an overview of Western thinking about sensory perception from Plato and Aristotle to Hegel and Marx, and their connections to epistemological concepts, see Anthony Synnott, "Puzling over the Senses: From Plato to Marx," in *The Variety of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, ed. David Howes (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1991). Also Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 11-37.

<sup>7</sup> Sensory anthropology as a "re-thought" anthropology has some of its origins in cross-cultural anthropological comparisons of sensory perception, and since the beginning of these inquiries, three decades or so ago, while drawing on interdisciplinary fields, it also increasingly incorporates a critique and contestation of the universality of modern western categorization of the senses. The emphasis on the relationship between the senses, between sensory differences and sensory ideologies, is useful to my concern with bodily perceptual experience and difference. Especially in regards to expanding the attention given previously to highlighting subjective perceptual experiences towards tending more explicitly to communal and social perceptions in various cultural contexts, and cultural differences in perceptual practices, the inquiries undertaken in this field will be useful. Sarah Pink, "The Future of Sensory Anthropology/the Anthropology of the Senses," *Social Anthropology* 18, no. 3 (2010). Pink and the below cited Howes engage in an academic dispute over the contours and trajectories of sensory anthropology/anthropology of the senses. The disagreement between the two is of no significance to my use and appropriation of either scholar's work.

to follow two trajectories: The first one has a hermeneutic intent, reading the previously given phenomenological account of perceiving gendered, raced, and normalized bodies in conjunction with another from a different historical location or culturally distinct community. As my travel analogy above indicated, this will help us understand our own (modern Western) perceptual orientations more complexly by pointing out its non-normativity in other contexts.<sup>8</sup>

The second kind of trajectory has a constructive and supplemental intent, engaging the issues explored in chapter three to take my investigation of bodily perceptual orientation and perceptions of gender, race, and disability further. Specifically, it is supplemental in its more complex exploration of the “how” of bodily perceptual orientations, as it adds arguments, distinctions and new illustrations.<sup>9</sup> I will show how some organizing assumptions regarding the aspects of perception and the tools for

---

<sup>8</sup> I want to dis-affirm that we may understand both (as in “ours” and “theirs”) *fully or better*, simply because my understanding and the descriptions of difference I depend on here are still dependent on being articulated in English and within a Euro-Western framework. While I might understand some of what is described, I also want to acknowledge the lack of translatability of certain things that will remain inaccessible to me.

<sup>9</sup> Philosophically, it is also supplemental in the Derridian sense. Derrida provides two definitions of “supplement:” the surplus addition which enriches the self-sufficient plenitude, and the addition which fills a void, the adjunct which intervenes in-the-place-of. However, as Derrida argues, common to both meanings of supplement is assumption of the marginality of its addition, yet the very fact of its necessity points to the lack of the supposedly complete. It is always the exterior, the outside to which it is supplemented, yet as such it is the condition of possibility of the interior. At the core of the logic of supplementarity is the process of exclusion, the process which establishes exterior and interior and thus establishes the plenitude and the supplement. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans., Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 144-145, 167. In short, to explore these examples as supplements, I also want to posit them as that which also makes possible our cultural interior by being constituted as the exterior to our self-sufficient knowledge, yet that which is necessary to our own self-understanding.

description employed are universalized conventions (such as the numbering of five senses, four tastes) not necessarily found across histories or cultures.<sup>10</sup>

I will return to the concepts of intentionality, habits, and language to explore how bodily perceptual orientations not only instill differences, but are also constituted differently. As in the previous chapter, the aim is not to give comprehensive accounts of constructions of, for example, gender. Rather, I seek to elaborate on difference in sensory orders, interplay of perceptions, and perceptual hierarchies. Taking a closer look at culturally varied bodily perceptual experiences of, for example, gender or normalcy will allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the “how” of bodily perceptual orientation in the world. I will start off with gender perceptions, returning to bodily intentionality and perceptual movement, and showcase historical and cultural differences in order to deepen our understanding of perceptual processes.

### **Bodily Perceptual Orientations: Historical and Cultural Differences**

Euro-Western cultures in pre-modern times aligned bodies along different perceptual lines, some similar or familiar to contemporary sensory hierarchies, some seemingly strange to us today. In *The Color of Angels*, Constance Classen provides an account of how the self and the world were conceptualized sensory-perceptually in

---

<sup>10</sup> I want to stress again that none of the examples used in this chapter seeks to give a comprehensive account or deliver full knowledge. Readers interested in further elaboration are encouraged to engage in their own comparative travel to my sources. But my intent is not to make my readers more “competent” (as in “knowing more”) about differences regarding bodily perceptual orientation (as in becoming an expert on the bodily perceptual orientation of others). To hold such an aim would be counterproductive to the aim of this project, which is to make a case that bodily perceptual orientation matters, and that if we begin theological analysis with bodily experience, we must be clear about the dynamics of perception which make up our bodily existence. Therefore, the examples used here are neither full case studies nor exhaustive demonstrations of perceptual orientations. But I utilize them to highlight differences in order to explore the limits or “forgotten” horizons of our contemporary Western perceptual habituation.

Western cultures during different periods.<sup>11</sup> She notes that the common organization in Western cultures of perceptual experience into five senses is not a universal phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> This five-fold distinction is evident in Western Christian cultures due to the influence of Aristotle. While he did not introduce this partition of perception into five distinct senses, his philosophical authority established this number, division, and ranking. Aristotle's *De Anima* and the psychological theories, problems, and formulas proposed in it influenced not only discourses in ethics and religion, but also the subsequent thought on the senses (as well as the connection between the senses and the soul), considering sight the highest and touch the basest primary sense.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> See Constance Classen, *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> This common division in Western sciences also led to the development of cultural theories of the senses, e.g., Marshall McLuhan's oft cited theory of orality or "great divide" theory, which arranges geographical, historical, and cultural spaces into basic sensory groups (oral-aural, chirographic, typographic, electronic). McLuhans binary theory is sweeping in its claim and significantly depends on Western sensory exclusive divisions and displays the above mentioned "Euro-forming of Data." Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1962). For critiques of the theory, see Smith, 8-18. Also Howes, xix-xx.

<sup>13</sup> Louise Vinge, *The Five Senses: Studies in a Literary Tradition* (Lund, Sweden: LiberLäromedel, 1975), 15-21. For Aristotle, this division was more of a philosophical strategic product to match and support a relationship between the senses and the five elements he identified. Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures*, 2. Touch and taste involved direct physical contact and were connected to animal pleasures for Aristotle. Sight, hearing and smell were ranked higher as "human" senses. Smith, 28. While this Aristotelian five-fold taxonomy of perception is not evident in Christian scriptures, medieval Christianity utilizes it as structural metaphor for the cosmos and as ethical model. It was the senses that led to the fall (the forbidden fruit was pleasing to Eve, and the perceptual enjoyment of it was the sensory dimension of the original sin); redemption of humanity is then acquired through control of sensory impulses, the spiritual mastery of bodily perception within a moral code. Classen, *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination*, 3. Early Christian thinking was already highly visualist, and Aquinas gave theological sanction to an already established philosophical and cultural hegemony of vision. Smith, 29. To explore sensory cosmologies is beyond the scope of this chapter, for more detailed descriptions see Classen, *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination*, 13-60. See also an investigation of the sensorium found in the Hebrew Bible, sensory vocabulary revealing a septasensory model. Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible* (New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 2012).



With the emergence of modernity in the West, perception and knowledge became increasingly tied to an epistemology of visual models and representations which sought to provide viewers with direct access to reality.<sup>14</sup> This perceptual privilege of vision in terms of knowledge has not always been prevalent, as sensory orderings are changeable through time.<sup>15</sup> Pre-modern Western cosmologies were imagined through a variety of sensory symbolism, for example, through touch and smell, and these cosmologies were imbued with and reflected social ideologies. An emerging visualism worked to obscure the sensory imagery of previous eras, and visual imagery—transparency, photographic representation, maps, graphs—became the sensory symbolism underlying modern Western culture, carrying with it an aura of rationality and objectivity.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> The supremacy of sight may be traced to the afore-footnoted taxonomical hierarchy established by Aristotle. The negation of perceptual capacities as epistemological tools for learning about the world traced to Descartes in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, though the exclusivity of sight in philosophical treatises is best connected to 18<sup>th</sup> century Immanuel Kant (though he should also be understood as thoroughly immersed in the philosophical trends of his time regarding perception). Michel Foucault locates the shift to sight as superior sense in popular Western culture to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when semantic shifts in sensory vocabulary occur with the philosophical, cultural, and scientific changes in European space (for example, the phrase “seeing is believing” emerges, though it is a transformed or shortened version of the previously popular phrase “seeing is believing, touching is the truth”). Avrahami, 5-7. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (London, UK: Tavistock Publications, 1973).

<sup>15</sup> See for example Barbara Maria Stafford’s investigation of the epistemological shift to imagery beginning in Europe in the 1700s, a shift she observes in all areas of life (she specifically investigates science and art). Stafford traces how Enlightenment aspirations to perfect experiences (perfect as in untainted revelation about reality), connected to dualistic constructions of the material and the metaphysical, led to a compulsion to find clarity about the metaphysical within the material. Stafford carefully connects visual imagery and its deployment in science and art to the epistemological/pedagogical, i.e., she traces how visualization of what is typically unperceivable (from invisible bodily functions and mental/moral experiences to far distant stars) is central to the Enlightenment project, yet significantly, always required the guidance of discourse, Logos, or logic, lest the visual appearance deceive the unenlightened/uneducated mind.

<sup>16</sup> Classen, *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination*, 1. However, not all cultures in which we find vision to be the highest sense understand vision in the same way in which it emerged in Euro-Western understandings. Among Nepal’s Yolmo Buddhist’s, for example, one might find more than twenty ways of conceiving of vision, including a form of action and interaction, a means to communicate, a tool for spiritual practice, etc. Vision is not confined to epistemological and physiological purposes, but also includes metaphoric, pragmatic, political, moral purposes and many more. See Robert Desjarlais, *Sensory Biographies: Lives and Deaths among Nepal’s Yolmo Buddhists* (Berkeley, CO:

This privileging has not only led to studying vision scientifically more than the other, considered “lower,” senses—which are still very much at work as well—a visualist regime does not imply that our perceptually emerging meanings are effected through sight alone (as I will discuss in more detail in the second section of this chapter). It also informs our scholarly inquiries into perception, or into any subject for that matter: I take *perspectives* on an issue, seek to *focus* my investigations, *illuminate* a point with *illustrations*, or employ a theoretical *lens*. We investigate an inner world through *introspection*, *demonstrate the scope* of an issue and then provide a *synopsis* or an *exhibit*.<sup>17</sup>

I will begin by exploring some pre-modern Western perceptual orders and culturally different sensory hierarchies regarding gender in order to strengthen our

---

University of California Press, 2003), 54-101. Further, even when describing Western orientations as visualist, I do *not* mean to infer a dominant visual order that is singular in structure or universal in scope. For readers interested in the multiplicity and plurality of visual regimes in modern and postmodern Europe, specifically France, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993). For example, Jay suggest a plurality of scopic regimes, e.g., the Cartesian perspectivalism which framed modern epistemology, the detached scientific Baconian empiricism, and the baroque regime which encompasses opacity, surplus images, bizarre and peculiar visualizations. Jay’s significant contribution to understanding the visualism of the West is his pluralization of visualism, in which visual regimes may interact, compete, overlap, and interrelate.

<sup>17</sup> Perspective, inspect, introspect, speculate, aspect, circumspect, etc., derive from the Latin *specere*, to look at or observe. Demonstrate comes from Latin *monstrare*, to show, scope from Latin *scopium*, to look at or examine. *Synopsis* is Greek for general view. This project itself does not escape the assistance of visual metaphors to explain a point (and I will discuss language related issues again in the third section), as my explorations in the previous chapter illustrated some bodily perceptual orientations through vision, and some of the examples used might have invoked visual imagery or analogies for the reader. Stafford also notes that visual preferences, especially with the rise of photography, perpetuated an epistemological-perceptual hierarchical division. Scientific inquiries into experience and scientific experimentation for example sought to rationally produce knowledge through repeated cause-effect experimentation and deduction, perceptual faculties were divided and ordered, underestimating and neglecting the complexity and intermingling of perceiving, feeling, thinking, understanding, etc., none is experienced without the other. Barbara Maria Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imagining the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 469.

understanding of bodily perceptual intentionality presented previously.<sup>18</sup> In a visual culture, in which vision is often analogous to objectivity, truth, and rationality, bodily perceptual aspects such as touch (like thermal perception) or olfaction might be described as the most subjective, and thus least reliable, perceptual capacities in terms of gaining knowledge. It is to these perceptual capacities that I will turn in order to highlight differences in sensory hierarchies.

### Differently Gendered Bodily Intentionality

In the previous chapter, I discussed bodily intentionality via gender and elaborated how gender emerges as an effect of how bodies are aligned within perceptual grids that allow bodies to extend in specifically gendered ways. These gendered ways shape which objects we take up, the manner in which objects are taken up, as well as what shapes up to be an object of gendered desire. I asserted that bodily perceptual orientations involve how we as bodies inhabit and occupy the world in bodily perceptual ways. But these bodily perceptual orientations are not universal, neither historically nor culturally.

From today's standpoint, it would be easy to dismiss the examples provided below as pseudo-science and superstitious beliefs. However, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, bodily and social habits are patterns of movement, perceptual movements which constitute one's world and what the world comes to mean. Habitual

---

<sup>18</sup> As already noted, my previous chapter drew heavily on illustrations and descriptions invoking vision, such as the notion of "background." As Western cultural epistemological frameworks privilege vision, I am guessing that as we read the previous chapter, some/most of us might not have been able to escape a close association between "perceiving" and "seeing" when reading about perceptual processes (e.g., the alignment of gendered bodies for some of us invokes imagining the visual alignment of feminine/masculine bodies).

movements, bodily movements emerging from a socio-historical pre-reflective dimension, are tacit knowledges which are socially meaningful, and they shape our way of being in the world. We find ourselves in a visual culture, and more often than not, our first sense impressions of persons are visual: I perceive a woman, because my initial perception might include my seeing a person with long hair, swaying hips as she walks, perhaps wearing a skirt. Only when my perception emerges with ambiguous meanings do I have to “zero-in” and take a closer look: that person has long hair, but dresses somewhat masculinely, or does not perform a very feminine posture; is this person a female tomboy or a long-haired male teenager?

But what if our primary perceptual sense is not about visual appearances, but about someone’s smell, or even temperature? Historically, we do find different perceptual hierarchies, so that, for example, thermal perceptions align gender. And these are, in fact, not simply beliefs and/or nowadays disproved pseudo-scientific theories, but bodily located and embedded knowledges and habituated orientations in that world; they are part of the complex body-mind existence in and response to the world. While it might be difficult to “imagine” this kind of perceptual orientation from a hypervisual cultural standpoint, it also shows how bodily social habits can change through time within a given culture, and with them, the tacit knowledges regarding how to be as bodies.

In this section, I will begin with comparative travels to historical contexts in Euro-Western cultures, investigating different perceptual alignments and movements regarding gender. I will then explore culturally different sites in order to provide examples of

gender perceptions and perceptual intentionalities which are employed within different perceptual orders and hierarchies.

*Gendered Perceptual Intentionality: Historical Differences in Euro-Western Cultures*

Different sensory fields in medieval Europe were gender-typed, but sensory qualities within a field were also cast with gender distinctions. Sight and hearing were typically male senses and classified as distance senses, whereas smell, taste and touch were female senses and senses of proximity. Within those fields, men were typically associated with what was understood as the nobler quality of the sense (employing the sense for intellectual and public activities), women with the more ignoble (making use of the sense for sensual and selfish ends). The gendered social realm—men in the public sphere and women in the domestic realm—is also perceptually constructed, as for example, the ideal sensory realm for women was of proximity to her body, and her “natural” inclination the use of smell, taste and touch to fulfill domestic duties.<sup>19</sup>

A variety of sensory symbolism (e.g., tactile or olfactory symbol systems) reflected social ideologies in pre-modern cosmologies. Paralleling gender sensory symbolism, Euro-Western class ideologies and distinctions were also expressed through a range of sensory metaphors. Lower classes associated with the lower senses of taste, touch and smell were typed as foul-smelling, preoccupied with their bellies (food and drink consumption) and sexual satisfaction. Variations in social roles and class positions were reflected in variations of symbolic sensory realms, yet without significantly disrupting gender hierarchies: a male laborer might be associated with the tactility of his

---

<sup>19</sup> Classen, *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination*, 65-66.

work, which is still public, while an upper class lady might have been able to read and write, though it was considered to be more suitable for her to do domestic handiwork.<sup>20</sup>

Gender divisions in medieval Europe were encoded along delineations of gendered perceptual capacities as well as gendered differentiation within a perceptual capacity. To perceptually emerge as a gendered female in pre-modern Europe was to perceptually extend and move in specific perceptual ways, to emerge with a gender-specific perceptual intentionality and to embody a sensory perceptual capacity in a gender-specific manner.

One prominent perceptual orientation drawn from ancient authorities like Aristotle and supported by contemporary scholarship and folklore was that of temperature, the gendered contrast being that of “cold” women and “hot” men. Similar to the perceptual orientations towards body parts and biology discussed previously in the example of perceived gendered movement of egg and sperm, medieval perceptions of body parts or bodily interiors were perceptually oriented to align gendered intentionality, in this case through temperature. Male bodies perceptually extended through movement of heat, as perceived by the outward extension of genitals and the evidence of baldness in males (lack of hair was a sign that the excessive heat in men tended to burn up their hair). Women’s innate coldness and moistness (due to being “half-baked,” insufficiently gestated males) inhibited their bodily movement, since coldness was associated with inactivity. It also framed female bodily movement as inwardly directed; rather than

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 67-69.

burning up food, women stored it, in order to bodily move inward for processes of pregnancy and nourishment of children.<sup>21</sup>

Perceptual orientations towards gendered bodies and bodily functions aligned along temperature divisions also effected social bodily intentionality and motility. For modern visualist perceptual regimes, Iris Marion Young had located the origin of inhibited intentionality observed in women in the objectifying gaze; visual perceptual repetitions turn the female body into a thing and thus create a double spatiality of the female body rather than a bodily unit, the social power of visual perception affecting female bodily perceptual motility. In this European medieval situation though, thermal perception was a social power effecting the gendering of bodies through the orienting device of the science of temperature. Bodily perceptual intentionality, movement, was perceived and structured through temperature. “Acting like a woman” was understood then to refrain from vigorous physical activity (it used up the internally stored heat and burned up their fat and menstrual blood, preventing pregnancy). Visual perceptions of gender transgressions—male genitals or external female genitals of a size larger than “normal,” facial hair, lower voices, broader shoulders, etc.—were perceived according to and as effect of transgression of perceptual alignments in terms of perceptual overextension of temperature (generation and outward movement of too much heat).<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 65. Perceptual meaning and assigned values could shift, such as heat symbolizing racial perceptions with the beginning of the renaissance. The thermal scheme now aligned non-Europeans, particularly Africans, South Americans, and Indians with heat, representing feminine sensuality and indolence in contrast to “cold” European masculine rationality, industry, and order. Classen, *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination*, 67.

Another medieval European gendered perceptual alignment is that of smell. Rooted in pagan lore and classical philosophy which described the uterus as a kind of animal with the power to move and a sense of smell, women's bodily intentionality was perceptually aligned with a scented womb capable of olfaction. In other words, women's outward bodily movements were connected with movements of the womb which could smell (in both meanings of the word) and move about the body. Thus, body technologies to perceptually align female bodies included scented treatments, such as encouraging a displaced womb (a case of her sex getting to her head) through administering scents to lure it back into place.<sup>23</sup>

But not just female bodies, but gendered positions and perceptual recognitions of gender were made along scented lines. Women were perceived as particularly productive of odor, and perceptual constitutions aligned women in general with malodor, most often associated with the functions of a female womb. The science and lore about the womb functioned as orienting devices regarding bodily movements aligned with gender, and repetitive association of perceptual productions (smells) with gendered bodies and bodily functions then also served as perceptual orienting lines of morality. For example, sexual activity was considered to particularly increase the odor production of the womb. Virgin maidens perceptually emerged as fragrant, with pleasant aroma; a malodorous woman was aligned with lesser virtue: since women of bad character gave off the worst smells, malodor was perceptual proof of sexual licentiousness.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Classen, *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination*, 69.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.



Gendered bodily perceptual orientation and gendered habits are then not necessarily, universally, or primarily visually aligned. Habitually acquired gendered movements and bodily intentionality also take place in olfactory dimensions, and, for example, the gendered female body emerges as such by extending in specifically scented ways, and is perceptually recognized through alignments of odor. These olfactory extensions and productions are both an effect of gendered differences (body-specific fluids involved in sexual arousal, menstruation, childbirth, etc., have particular odors, though the association, meaning, and value associated is variable) as well as a mechanism for their reproduction (e.g., medical science employs olfactory technologies such as scents to move body parts, perfuming as perceptually significant act).

This also aligns the gendered subject in her environment along olfactory lines of significance: only bodies extending with certain scents or lacking others can achieve or access certain objects or spaces (especially when odors were considered to affect and penetrate body and brain directly: social habits sedimented and allowed for public health regulations regarding public spaces to emerge); others remain out of reach, what is desirable or not is oriented along lines of scent: male priests extended through the fragrance of rose garlands and incense (scents associated with and obtainable by the divine and restricted to male clerics); the dead bodies of saints (male and female) extended fragrant scents aligning them with holiness; rich families buried their deceased with spices and herbs to effect the alignment with sanctity over against malodorous moral

corruption; women can effect redemption through emptying themselves of ill odors (e.g. fasting to repress menstruation) and being divinely infused with sacred fragrance.<sup>25</sup>

The significance of olfactory alignments and olfactory sediment habits continued through Euro-Western cultural perceptual knowledge, as olfaction took on class significance in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century with urbanization and industrialization. Ideas about selfhood were linked to class formation, which was aligned along olfactory perceptions. Laboring classes were aligned with reeking bad scents, perceptually emerging as foul and dangerous smelling, the bourgeoisie, with the power to shape social habit and with it habitual sediment, “disappeared” scent-wise behind these olfactory alignments (similar to my discussion of “disappearing behind heteronormative lines”) and emerged perceptually as inodorate, without bad scents—thus able to re-emerge through individuated smells and habits of perfuming.<sup>26</sup>

Alain Corbin analyzes in depth the bodily olfactory orientations of the French from 1750-1880, illustrating the social and physical alignments of differently “smelled” persons and groups, sedimented in cultural segregation of public and private domains and also significant in the emerging of identity and understanding of notions of the self. Individuated fragrances also allowed for persons of a certain class to perceive their own body-self differently than before, a change in bodily olfactory movement, new patterns of perceptual intentionality changing one’s way of being in the world (even inaugurating new kinds of narcissism and sexual desires/alignments). The “I can” of a perfumed

---

<sup>25</sup> Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 52-54. Classen, *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination*, 70-71.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, 67.

bourgeoisie male is olfactorily very different from, for example, that of a lower class housemaid, whose “I cannot” smell a certain way is experienced in conjunction with the “I can smell like *myself*” of someone other.<sup>27</sup> The emergence of an individual self in Europe then can be more complexly understood when taking into consideration the kind of individualized and individualizing scenting in modern Euro-Western cultures to stand out against malodorous “others” and to perceptually appear as discrete individual.<sup>28</sup>

To inquire into possible subversions of social hierarchies, such as gendered alignments of status or moral capacities, we must take into account the bodily perceptual orientations that are work. For example, in a cosmology ordered by smell, the stench of hell and sweet scents of heaven were perceived as in bodily and worldly realms in the Hildegard von Bingen context. The abbess of a Benedictine convent is known for her medical writings, liturgical music compositions, and is most famous for her recorded mystical visions. Her scholarly productions already strike historians and theologians as subversive for a woman regarding her socio-cultural world, and often her ability to gain theological credibility is traced to her embracing the mystical and therefore sensory realm, rather than what was considered the scholarly rational pursuit of theology proper reserved for men.<sup>29</sup> But significant here is also that it was through her bodily perceptual emergence that she could extend and move intellectually the way she did: She perceptually emerged exhaling the *odor* of sanctity, aligning her emergence with the

---

<sup>27</sup> Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

<sup>28</sup> David Howes, "Olfaction and Transition," in *The Varieties of Sensory Experience*, ed. David Howes (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 145.

<sup>29</sup> See also chapter two, footnote 13.

divine in ways women commonly could not; and because in her socio-cultural world, to smell was to know, this perceptual emergence aligned her with authority (a female body exhaling divine knowledge) to subvert gendered spiritual and theological hierarchies.<sup>30</sup>

In the previous chapter, I have discussed bodily perceptual intentionality regarding gendered movements and inhabitation of space. As patterns of movement, our habitual intentionalities are a way of being in the world, to walk like a woman or look like a man. Sensory capacities are not separable or distinct functions but are always interrelated and implicated in each other.<sup>31</sup> Interrelated subversions and crossings of socially habituated gendered perceptual alignments can be seen, for example, in 19<sup>th</sup> century European perceptual orientations of gender and smoking. Smoking as male bodily movement, a visual, tactile, oral, and olfactory perceptual extension, was a bourgeois male social habit, a way of being a man and *with* men in the world. Extending male bodies through smoke was a bodily movement grounded by tacit knowledges of masculine assertiveness and supporting emerging meaning regarding male vitality. Women who took up smoking were perceived and described to “smoke like a man,” or if a wife was found smelling of smoke, she was perceived as crossing female wifely perceptual alignments and accused of marital unfaithfulness (to smell like smoke

---

<sup>30</sup> Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures*, 47-48,59. Crossing bodily alignments of gender perception did not necessarily result in subversions and attaining of respect or sainthood, as in Hildegard von Bingen’s case. More often than not, crossing perceptual alignments in medieval Europe, such as taking up public speech or unabated visual extension, led to perceptual alignments with evil and witchcraft, a perceptual crossing of alignments violently punished. Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures*, 78-82.

<sup>31</sup> Merleau-Ponty speaks here of synaesthesia, a certain intermingling of the senses which does not conflate different perceptual capacities, but highlights the implication and interplay of the senses. For example: we always see a color as the color of a surface with a texture, or we “see” the coldness of an icicle. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 134.

indicating a woman must have been penetrated olfactorily and bodily by another man; or to take up smoking behind the husband's back would indicate crossing gendered and sexed lines of habituation). Smoking as a bodily habit involving touching, inhaling/exhaling, smelling, and visually extending through smoking projectiles was not only a way to depict and represent sexuality (with advertisements and literary productions depicting sexual meanings through depictions of smoking), but actually involved complex and interrelated bodily perceptual movements sedimenting gender and sexuality.<sup>32</sup>

We have seen thus far in the examples of historical differences how different perceptual intentionalities (like temperature and odor) were gendered bodily movements which brought about meaning emerging with bodies and bodily functions. Gendered intentionality, like the co-existing "I cannot" with the general "I can" of someone, for European medieval or nineteenth century women, had thermal, tactile and/or olfactory dimensions not easily grasped today (though not completely without connections to, and thus conceptual understanding within, our current perceptual orientations). For example, female self-perception as effect and mechanism of perceptually produced gender differences includes a female bodily intentionality in which a body schema is shaped into a gendered body image which contains an "I cannot bodily extend through my smell, or my touch through \_\_\_\_\_ or other than \_\_\_\_\_" because it crosses lines of bodily intentionality which orient male subjectivity or threatens the bodily perceptual extension of bodily possibilities, of an "I can" reserved for male bodies.

---

<sup>32</sup> Dolores Mitchell, "Women and Nineteenth-Century Images of Smoking," in *Smoke: A Global History of Smoking*, ed. Sander L. Gilman and Zhou Xun (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2004).

Female subjects in pre-modern times emerge as bodies more than just visually extending into space through recognized physical bodily movements. For example, embodied olfactory habits are acquired knowledges “in the nose,” tacit understandings of what odors are given to me, what scents my body is capable of, and tacit knowledges about my environment and others according to olfactory emergences. The body schema, the blueprint informing and configuring specific ways of being in the world, involves ways of knowing herself as a body with certain odors and temperatures which affect her being in the world, and the meaning of her movements in/as her body and in her environment. The perceptual grid aligning bodies with gender and morality as well as social status includes olfactory, tactile, and thermal orienting lines guiding bodily movements and creating bodily connections.<sup>33</sup>

To complexly consider bodily perception as orientation, as being oriented towards possible tasks and ways of achieving objectives, then, requires extending our understanding of bodily *facing* something beyond *eyeing* something. I have discussed thus far how bodies might be positioned as gendered in space and time in a variety of perceptual modes, through seeing, smelling or thermal feeling. Perceptual processes, however, should not be solely understood through considering perceptual capacities separately (though the differentiation of senses has served as an illustrative point thus

---

<sup>33</sup> Medieval Christian rituals returned to incense (after rejecting it for its alignment with Pagan practices) and associated it with knowledge of God, in an interesting connection between cognitive-sensory, material-spiritual life. Pre-Enlightenment gardens displayed roses because of their social olfactory importance, the transformation of visual aesthetic trumping (though not replacing) scent came with the Reformation and Enlightenment. Gardens as enclosed scented spaces were also places of regulation of personal encounters and regulated gendered movements. Classen, Howes, and Synott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*, 51-92.

far). We always perceive within an interplay of perceptual processes: I smell what I see what I might touch and hear.

We can imagine this connection conceptually. As I have argued in the previous chapter, my body schema, the tacit sense of my bodily “I can,” comes about through bodily perceptual movement. My bodily intentionality and body schema always situate me as a bodily unit. I experience as body-unit because my bodily movements are coordinated so that my various bodily parts cohere. And since my perceptual capacities are bodily movements, I perceive as body-unit with cohering and interrelating perceptual capacities (as well as perceptual capacities interrelating with other bodily functions and abilities).

Put differently again, my bodily perceptual schema, to which my perceptions cohere and within which they are coordinated, functions as a perceptual unit. To imagine this through illustrations, we might express: I see snow and have a tacit sense of its coldness; I hear the soup on the stove come to a boil and tacitly sense its heat; I hear a loud, low voice behind me and tacitly feel where it may come from and tacitly “see” a large man behind me (and it is in disconfirmation, not confirmation, of these tacit perceptual schemata that something appears surprising to me).

I highlight this aspect of perceptual interrelations because some of the examples I will provide below will not only include differences in perceptual orientations in regards to gender; the cross-cultural comparisons presented will also bring to our attention complex interrelations and sensory coordination in perceptual orders different from our own. As “sensory travelers,” this may help us raise questions regarding interrelations in

our own perceptual orientations, which perceptual capacities might support, contribute to, or even be in creative and ambiguous tension with our world we see.

*Gendered Perceptual Intentionality: Cultural Differences*

When considering cross-cultural differences in perceptual ordering, it is important to remember that dominating perceptual concepts and structures are not universal givens. In other words, in patriarchal Western cultures, gender might often be a subsuming concept structuring socio-cultural institutions and personal relations. Yet this might not be the case in other cultural/perceptual systems.

For example, in indigenous Latin American cultures, we are able to find thermal bodily orientations. The Tzotzil of the Chiapas highlands of Mexico consider heat the basic force of the universe, ordering space and time.<sup>34</sup> We might detect gendered thermal alignments among the Tzotzil which appear to be similar lines as the medieval European ones discussed above (men possessing more heat than women), but we need to consider heat as an overarching perceptual orientation (i.e., subsuming gender and other concepts).

While public spheres are male dominated and land ownership is aligned patrilineally, to label such gender divisions as patriarchal might be a misnomer, or to seek understanding from Western gendered perspectives might be misguided, as it grounds observations of difference in Western habituated perceptions of social dynamics. For example, women and female powers are associated with beginnings, endings, and chief agents in transitional and critical moments in the life cycle and historical cycles. Yet

---

<sup>34</sup> For example, the six directions have thermal signifiers (e.g., emergent heat), and times of day are named according to heat perceptions (half-heat is the middle of the day). Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures*, 122-123.



these cycles (daily, seasonally, yearly, etc.), while displaying gender valences, are thermal cosmologies forming the pre-reflective, deeply embedded decision-making schema, the sedimented socio-cultural habit from which present actions emerge and are accounted for.<sup>35</sup>

Thermal lines pervade all areas of life such as food, education, gendered relations, communal architecture, infrastructure, and political structures. Everything from rocks, plants, foods, animals, and humans to ceremonies, rituals and symbols possesses a degree of heat, the basic force of the universe. Newborns of either gender possess little innate heat and are bathed in warm water, wrapped in blankets and presented with “hot” peppers until they have acquired enough life/heat of their own to survive. Heat is felt throughout the Tzotzil body: as the dominant perceptual orientation, it structures bodily orientations towards specific foods (imbued with different thermal values) and social relations (exchanges of heat).<sup>36</sup>

Gendered bodily perceptual intentionality is aligned through thermal orienting lines: women sitting on the (cold) earth, walking barefoot, men sitting elevated, closer to the heat-force in the sky, and wearing sandals, to maintain thermal alignments. Occupying the world in thermal ways like this displays a gendered occupation of space. But again, it is important to note that the thermal value of objects or meaning of bodily intentionality is not aligned with gender first and then repeated through thermal perceptual orientations. Rather, thermal schemas run through the environment, connect

---

<sup>35</sup> Gary H. Gossen, *Telling Maya Tales: Tzotzil Identities in Modern Mexico* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 170-178.

<sup>36</sup> Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures*, 123-125.

bodies and world, and align bodies and objects in ways that structure and gender bodily intentionalities. Heat and gender are not reducible to each other; women do not sit on the floor because they are women, but their bodies are thermally aligned with the earth and from that alignment they perceptually emerge as cold/woman.

As visualist travelers, oriented to visual hierarchies (e.g. up over down), at first sight we might perceive meaning emerging according to our pre-reflective perceptual orientation: We might perceive women as valued less than men as we observe social habits. However, meanings emerging for the Tzotzil (and possibly perceivable in our imagination now) align earth, darkness, waning heat, with the feminine as creative force, with reproductive capacity. The bodily positioning of women emerges perceptually in alignment with certain seasons and creative and revitalizing periods in a life or community's history.<sup>37</sup>

Thermal perception, as perceptual intentionality—bodily movement extending us into the world—is a culturally different perceptual orientation than that of Western knowledge of heat as a proximal perception aligned with touch. For the Tzotzil, thermal perception is a sense extended through the whole body (not just parts of it), and the heat extended in working, the eating of hot and cold foods, the movement of temperature throughout the day, the positioning of bodies and objects around heat sources in the home, the movement of heat through the material social body, etc., constitutes the emerging perceived meanings in the world, gendered bodies being one of them. The Tzotzil body schema can be imagined like a blueprint on thermal fabric—the tacit

---

<sup>37</sup> Gossen, 172-173.

knowledge of how a Tzotzil moves in the world, the sense of bodily unity, the meaning of movement and postures in a given environment, is a tacit sense of thermal dispositions and capacities.

As a Western subject, my tacit understanding of my own situatedness as/in my body in my environment might be informed by a tacit visual sense. For example, I have a tacit knowledge of how I may navigate through a building with various kinds of doors and winding hallways, because I have a tacit visual and interrelated physical-tactile sense of what this navigation might entail (I know if I will fit through a door and how). This might even include bodily extensions, so when I carry a backpack, hold an umbrella, or walk my dog on a leash, I have a tacit sense of how to chart a path to reach my goal, and how to adjust my bodily posture to, for example, enter through a door.

I may find it difficult to conceive, possibly because of my tacit knowledge dominated by visual perception, how a Tzotzil might be oriented to the world through tacit bodily perceptual knowledges. I do not have a dominant tacit thermal sense or any habituated movements which allow me to know myself and the world through temperature, how I as body-heat move and extend, am obstructed or challenged; I have no innate understanding of thermally inhabiting my environment and the thermal meanings emerging in and with my environment.

Another cultural comparison can be made with the Ongee in Southeast Asia who also inhabit a world differently perceptually organized from Western hierarchies, namely through olfactory intentionalities. The Ongee consider the identifying characteristic of life force to reside in smell. Smell is *the* fundamental cosmic principle: even time is

conceived of as cycles of smell, and the calendar is a calendar of scents. References to the self are made through pointing at the nose, as the identity of every living being is composed of smells, and disruptions in bodily functions (e.g., illness) are conceived as imbalances of odor, with death being the loss of personal odor. Personal growth is marked and symbolized through olfactory development, and social relations are expressed and limited through customs and rituals concerning odor control/flow.<sup>38</sup>

For Ongee perceptual intentionality, odor is not an elusive, intangible sensation, but rather one that has a weight and must be regulated. Women's bodily capacity for menstruation is a natural means of odor-weight regulation, whereas men are more prone to olfactory imbalances. Monitoring of olfactory bodily intentionality thus has different techniques aligned with sexed/gendered bodies.<sup>39</sup> Again, gendered bodily perceptual orientation is not a visual extension, though a visualist observer notices gendered patterns of bodily decoration through Ongee habits of clay body paint and tends to interpret these bodily perceptual practices as images and visual symbols of social status. But rather, clay paint body "decoration" is an odor control act: application of clay paint is understood as regulating temperature in order to bind smell to the body and also altering the perceptual intentionality, the release of smell, in particular ways.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures*, 126-130. Vishvajit Pandya, *In the Forest: Visual and Material Worlds of Andamanese History (1858-2006)* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009), 36-47.

<sup>39</sup> Vishvajit Pandya, *Above the Forest: A Study of Andamanese Ethnoanemology, Cosmology, and the Power of Ritual* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 120-122.

<sup>40</sup> This is important, for example, in bodily movements when hunting, where tracking, hunting, and interactions between animal and human are conceived of as variables of movement and smell. The smell emitted from a body is described as moving slowly or like a snake. White paint is considered to cool the body, inhibiting the release of smell from that particular bodily location, with red clay paint effecting

As we try to untangle gendered bodily intentionality from our modern Western perceptual perspectives, we find that olfactory bodily orientations differ from our habituated perceptions of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth: Ongee women conceive by eating food substances in which a spirit is trapped, and the spirit released from the food in the act of consumption becomes a fetus. This spirit resides in the bones of a human being and at night gathers odors scattered by the individual during the day to enable continued life.<sup>41</sup>

Bodily perceptual orientations of gendered desire also cannot be understood through perceptual symbolism that privileges sight (such as a Freudian Oedipus complex or a Lacanian mirror image would have us do). Attraction and desire, while including adorning and ornamental practices, are orientations and manipulations of scent within an olfactory perceptual grid, establishing, aligning, controlling and regulating odors. This is of course not to indicate that odor is the *only* bodily perceptual extension regulating Ongee life. Sensory perceptions intermingle and interact (we will explore perceptual interdependencies below), though perceptual orientations may be formed with hierarchies, or better, preferences of one/some perceptual ability informing others.

The preferred couplings among Ongee, for example, are unions between the two principal groups of their society, turtle hunters (associated with the seaside and its smells) and pig hunters (associated with the forest and its odors). Turtle hunters are those perceptually extending with keen eye sight, pig hunters are aligned with superiority of

---

the opposite. Pandya, *In the Forest: Visual and Material Worlds of Andamanese History (1858-2006)*, 109-115.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 114.

hearing. Marriages between these two groups are preferred to establish a union of sight and hearing, the alignment of these perceptual capacities following olfactory divisions of land and sea. The marriage ceremony is a ritual of body painting—again aligning bodies through aligning mutual olfactory desire, penetration and release of scent, if you will.<sup>42</sup>

Directionality of bodily perceptual orientations which make some bodies available for desire and others undesirable are then not primarily aligned within a heteronormative grid ordering sexual bodies. Rather, sexual identities and erotic desires are oriented through identities as pig hunters and turtle hunters, the recognition and identification as sexual subject follows bodily olfactory motilities and is directed along olfactory lines—habitually learned facing of the hetero-scented group. This is not to imply that there are no gender divisions or no technologies to ensure heterosexual couplings (in the sense of heterosexuality as perceived identity and bodily orientation). Marriage is bodily movement of a man out of his clan’s territory into that of the woman’s clan, but the meaning emerging is that of “hetero-odorous” couples, if you will.<sup>43</sup>

What I want to highlight in these examples is that, while we might understand and agree with scholarly work highlighting the emergence of sexual identities, with modern visualist accounts in academic inquiries, and with the social construction of gender within heteronormative hegemonies, cross-cultural comparisons must be careful not to be undertaken with preconceived hegemonic epistemological/perceptual hierarchies. This would make it easy to subsume everything to an analysis perceiving gendered and sexual

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 115-127.

<sup>43</sup> Pandya, *Above the Forest: A Study of Andamanese Ethnoanemology, Cosmology, and the Power of Ritual*, 21-24.

identities, without noting discrepancies in self-understanding, where, for example, gender might not be a visually-oriented concept and might follow other socio-cultural bodily orientations. The differences in bodily perceptual orientations, perceptual hierarchies and alignments presented here are patterns of bodily and socio-cultural movement in the world that indicate a different way of being in the world. To emerge as body within different perceptual habitual schemata is to embody different tacit knowledges about emerging meaning, socially meaningful communicative habits and repertoires.

Yet these examples, while they might appear alien to us, should also offer us some understanding into our own bodily perceptual orientations and the perceptual interplays at work. While I might be habituated to recognize gender visually, I might also experience that certain aural extensions might “throw me off” or change the perceived gendered meaning (e.g. speech patterns might change my perception of a masculine man and the meaning emerging now is that of an effeminate gay man). Or I catch a scent as I move around the hall corner and expect to see a man, yet it is a woman extending in perfumed ways usually aligned with men and men’s scent products. Modern Western perceptual orientations towards gender are aligned in a myriad of perceptual ways and interrelations, though we tend to “forget” and only “remember” when we perceive things “out of line” with the given dominant sense in our meaning making.

#### Perceiving Others’ Bodies Differently

Returning to sedimented habits of perception more explicitly again, I will now comparatively present differences in perceptual emergence of bodies that are *other* against a pre-reflective current into which those aligned with bodily and social habits of

perceptual movement blend in as *same*. By doing so, I hope to continue unfolding our understanding of sensory differences and perceptual interdependencies/interrelations in bodily perceptual orientations in the world. While a specific perceptual capacity might be dominant, other bodily perceptual capacities are interrelated and implicated in it, or might come to be dominant in other realms of experience or meaning. Maintaining the rhythm of this chapter, I will begin with exploring historical contexts before traveling again to culturally different sites.

*Sensory Interdependencies/Interplays in Historical Perceiving of Raced Bodies*

Pre-modern and modern articulations of racial differences were not simply cast visually, associating the darkness of skin color with the supposed “darkness” of human nature in the racially different person. Mark Smith’s sensory history of race in the United States shows how racial identities have been mediated and articulated through sound, smell, taste and touch, not only before, but *especially with* the emergence of modern racial stereotypes. Increase in racially mixed populations began in the colonial period and made clearly defined racial identities unstable, and one could no longer rely on modern eyes to verify visual racial identities. The preference for visual detection of race is as much a socio-cultural construction as race itself, and as visual orienting lines of white/black lost their potency, the techniques and work of perceptual repetitions of race needed to transform to maintain the mediation and articulation of racial meaning.<sup>44</sup>

Racial constructions and identifications increasingly relied on other senses as detector of racial identifiers: innate body odor, animalistic sound and noises, tactile

---

<sup>44</sup> Mark M. Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 3-7.



differences and ascribed blindness to moral offenses. The aforementioned Aristotelian taxonomy and ranking of the senses guided the perceptual encounter of colonial elite whites with black slaves, aligning black bodies with the lower senses: Black bodies were perceived as emerging perceptually through the lower senses of smell, sound, and touch; they were aligned with those senses in regards to their bodily intentionality, i.e., they smelled different but also had a keener sense of smell.<sup>45</sup>

Because perceptual hierarchies are also employed in the emerging of class, one of the complications in racial perception is the approximate material conditions—similar oppressive and exploitative working conditions—of poor whites. The ensuing crisis demanded “buffers,”<sup>46</sup> which were bodily perceptually installed. Poor whites, too, were aligned with, for example, malodor and poor taste on perceptual grids, but orienting lines were dominated by the prevailing need for racial distinctions, thus perceptual values and meanings were sensory interplays of vision and smell/sound/touch which maintained racially segregated perceptual orientations. Put differently, while both might emit the smell of a laboring person, poor whites still smelled, sounded, and sensed differently from black slaves.

This material-perceptual segregation was partially accomplished through the alignment of certain bodies with the power to suspend or cross perceptual orientation lines. White bodies were aligned with the power to cross racial lines and sound or look like a black body, and to act on the desire for black bodies by suspending prohibitions of

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>46</sup> Jennifer Harvey, *Whiteness and Morality: Pursuing Racial Justice through Reparations and Sovereignty* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 67-69.

touch (a power more often than not embodied through brutal violence).<sup>47</sup> But where visual alignments of whiteness and blackness were challenged or subverted by black slaves “passing” as white, aural markers were important interrelated perceptual extensions; to pass visually as white, one needed to also pass with “white sounds” in order to be seen as white.<sup>48</sup>

Pre-reflective currents supporting racial perception shifted, in this case, for example, from an industrialized agricultural economy and political assemblages of a union of states encountering an abolitionist threat to national unity to a postbellum nation under reconstruction and struggling with waves of immigration. These currents provided the ground for the sedimentation of habits so that bodily movements and alignments of perception and movement emerged with racial meanings. Sediment history and sediment bodily socio-cultural habits established perceptual perspectives, which are open to change and choice as they are feeding into conventionalized forms of conduct, such as racial perceptions and alignments. The end of slavery, then, did not initiate an end to perceptual segregation; rather, physical/sensory intimacy of racial bodies was regulated through fluid perceptual alignments (not consistently following a strict logic), with the power and authority to draw orienting lines in the perceptual grasp of white bodies.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*, 24-26.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-52. Smith also argues that it is exactly the failure of visual perception to clearly align racial bodies that increased racial anxiety and led to legal definitions such as the “one-drop-rule” (any parentage or ancestry of non-white origin, no matter how far removed, automatically assigned a person’s identity to the social group with lower status). Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*, 41. This adds a “legal” and “pedigree-oriented” eye to the perceptual repertoire, preparing the way for racial perceptions in modern genetic science and eugenics. Miscegenation became aligned with criminality, as it was scientifically perceived to produce biologically flawed human bodies. For the influential voice presenting arguments in favor of racial eugenics, see Madison Grant, *The Passing of the*

Racial perception, sedimented habit supported by the strong currents of, for example, political desire for nationhood and economic expansion, is a perceptual alignment and reference already socially established.<sup>50</sup> The instability of perceptual meaning, then, can also allow for not just individual choice or expression, but changing sediment habits regarding perceptual movements. When visual alignments of racial bodies led to increased ambiguous emergences—such as interracial coupling producing a variety of skin hues—other perceptual capacities and mechanisms may support or replace the perceptual “deficiency” of vision to maintain racial alignments. In other words, when vision fails to support meaningful emergence of race, touch, odor, and sound may become the perceptual habits to conform to sedimented social habits and tacit knowledges. The meaning emerging perceptually is indeterminate and ambiguous in two ways: The perceived meaning of hair (texture, style, etc.), sound of speech, or body odor is indeterminate and may allow for emergence of a classed or raced body; or the

---

*Great Race: Or, the Racial Basis of European History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922). For a contemporary discussion of the politics and perception of genetics, see Anne Kerr and Tom Shakespeare, *Genetic Politics: From Eugenics to Genome* (Cheltenham, UK: New Clarion Press, 2002). Lennard J. Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 15. Mark Sherry, "(Post)Colonizing Disability," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 101.

<sup>50</sup> However, Smith is also careful to note that while certain perceptual habits and alignments might come to be dominant orientations of the dominant social group, it does not follow that these habits, alignments, or resulting perceptual emergences are also uncritically transferred to those dominated and oppressed by these perceptual orientations. Smith finds little evidence that black slaves in the colonial and antebellum South perceived whiteness similarly aligned as the perceptual construction of blackness. For example, Olaudah Equiano's narrative counters white stereotypes of blackness without applying ethnological stereotypes to whites. While he resists and refutes perceptual orientations of blackness (stressing habits of cleanliness, good taste), he does not present ethnological arguments by describing perceptual evaluation of white bodies (loose hair, red faces) as/with innate traits. Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*, 29-32.

emerging perception of, for example, a raced body might be tacitly known through a perceptual extension previously “insensitive” or “not sensing” of race.<sup>51</sup>

The currents supporting orienting lines of modern racial segregation, then, up to the contemporary industrial prison complex segregating racial bodies, are the products of repetitive and adjustable perceptual alignments and bodily movements, perceptual orientation of our attention to say, crime and/or violence (the perceived moral inferiority of a racialized group).<sup>52</sup> The orienting lines of race may be violently enforced, though again, crossing perceptual lines was also a perceptual control and extension of power: threats and acts of lynching enforced racial orienting lines by prohibiting a black man crossing perceptually by touching a white woman (or being perceived to have touched her); the act of lynching itself was a violent suspension of rules regulating sensory proximity and alignments. Gender differences were also significant in this complex perceptual alignment, as interracial touch was permissible between men in organized violent encounters such as boxing; white men could rape black female bodies without legal consequence, but black male bodies perceived as touching a white woman embodied a manifold transgression into the perceptual domain of touch inhabited by white males.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of the industrial prison complex, criminalization of racial bodies, and legal discrimination against “criminals,” see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2012).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 58-61. The perceived transgression of forbidden touch between black and white, esp. when extending from black men to white women, could then be violently suspended in lynching, the violent touching of black flesh being put to death by white bodies. The bodily perceptual experiences of lynchings were then extended through the dismemberment and sale of body parts, the taking and mailing of photographs. These were visual, tactile, and olfactory (through the smell of burnt flesh or fibers)

The repetitions of racial perceptions played out in various sensory realms, though the perceptual orientation directing bodies to perceive raced meanings occludes the thickening sedimentations of white supremacists' heteronormative patriarchy, a current which supports efforts to align economic, political, social, cultural, religious, etc., capital and desire along racial lines "naturally". Sediment perceptual habits then worked to give rise to alignments of social interactions, as segregation, legal decisions and social activities were ordered using perceptual qualifications that were racially aligned: segregating railroad cars aligning bodies socially through haptic, olfactory, and auditory orientations.<sup>54</sup>

The example of smoking can also illustrate again the power of bodily perceptual orientations and sediment habits regarding difference: Spanish Jews, who had been expelled from Spain in 1492, were visible outsiders to the European cities to which they migrated and had a positive association with smoking by way of the Spanish trade of still exotic tobacco. Jewish acculturation and unstable visible perceptual identifiers, however, necessitated new perceptual habits to support racial orienting lines. The alleged connection between smoking and Jewishness was supported by sedimenting social habits of racialization, the racial essence of Jewishness perceptually emerging through the sensory qualities of tobacco consumption. The racialized pathologizing in Anti-Semite

---

extensions, the suspension of segregation through the cradling of blackness in the hands of whites, perceptual reminders of white power.

<sup>54</sup> Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*, 59-62, 79-87. For example, lower class railroad cars emerged as having stench, being coarse, and dirty, aligned with the bodies meant to inhabit them. Black bodies and poor bodies perceptually emerge out of reach of the softer, quieter, sweeter-smelling material spaces of upper class whites. The assignment of places was up to the railroad conductor, who used his perceptual capacities of sight, smell, and touch.

discourse of modern Europe sedimented in part as social bodily habit *after* communal desegregation, so that smoking aligned perception of innate physically and psychologically different Jewish bodies.<sup>55</sup>

The sensory aspects of smoking, then, also highlight the interplay of perceptual capacities, and that an interrelation of sensory impressions and values may be conflictual or contradictory within perceptual habits, effecting reordering and changing in perceptual interrelations and meanings. If a person passes as white but doesn't sound "right" or smell/look "right," perceptual habits can change and be reordered so that aural, olfactory or tactile perceptions guide or dominate bodily perceptual orientations towards certain bodies's emerging.

In underestimating the bodily perceptual orientations to, for example, race so thoroughly sedimented in the contemporary context of US social habits, we risk missing the force of Paul Gilroy's argument of the "continuing dangers of race-thinking," or as I may put it now, race-knowing, or race-sensing. Gilroy, like Smith, shows that the powerful appeal of "occult, militaristic, and essentialist theories that are currently so popular, should be seen as symptoms of a loss of certainty around 'race.'"<sup>56</sup> While we might assert that in 21<sup>st</sup> century US society race seems more unstable than ever, bodily

---

<sup>55</sup> Sander L. Gilman, "Jews and Smoking," in *Smoke: A Global History of Smoking*, ed. Sanders L. Gilman and Zhou Xun (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2004). Gilman also points out that passing as a "good Jew" prompted Western Jews to contribute to the sedimentation of perceptual habits of Jews as social misfits perceptible through their tobacco use, perceptually aligning Eastern Jews with smoking. This kind of bodily perceptual orientation and bodily movement to perceptually disappear as Jewish body over against othered Jewish bodies, though, only strengthened the pre-reflective current to racial perception of Jews. The West-East alignments as social habit only joined (though not seamlessly) the sediment of other perceptual habits regarding Jewishness as race, such as perceptual alignments with mental and physical ailments.

<sup>56</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 8.

perceptual orientations to race still operate, for example, in biomedical sciences, perceiving and seeking to confirm genetics through visual racial alignments, employing a gaze penetrating raced skin to align raced bodies on microscopic and molecular levels (though increasingly confirming the opposite, namely the inability to uphold racial patterns in genetic alignments).<sup>57</sup>

“There is no raw, untrained perception dwelling in the body. The human sensorium has had to be educated to the appreciation of racial differences. When it comes to the visualization of discrete racial groups, a great deal of fine-tuning has been required.”<sup>58</sup> This education, as Mark Smith’s work shows, has a long sediment history of social habits training bodily perceptual orientations beyond visual imagery, including a full-body sensorium. To come to terms with the persistence of racial imaginations is to heed the perceptual construction of race and otherness in multi-perceptual dimensions.

*Sensory Interdependencies/Interplays and Cultural Differences*

I hope to show in this section how it is necessary to conceive of bodily perceptual orientations and habituated ways of perceiving as ways of thinking and knowing, as epistemological schemata. Knowing difference differently, or knowing what is same and other differently, can help us conceive of ways in which otherness or strangeness may be aligned in ways strange to visual determinations of, for example, race. This might help to further critiques of dominant discourses on race, which construct theories of race based on physical criteria. Critical race theorists, for example, theorize race as social

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 48,217-218.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 42.

construction, dynamic and fluid, and racial grouping as binding together social groups of people loosely sharing historically contingent, socially significant elements of geography, morphology and/or ancestry.<sup>59</sup> To understand the sediment of social habit as grounding various dimensions of our perceptual experience and bodily habits might further our understanding of the bodily and socio-cultural forces supporting and maintaining structural barriers, ideologies, and individual actions (which, as we have explored, are always bodily habits and bodily extensions shaped by perceptual orientations).

The exploration of sediment habits and bodily perceptual orientations towards race in this section as well as in the previous chapter demonstrated a linking of racial perception to visual recognition. The modern concept of race worked in the visible realm, a learned ability which needed support from or transformation through other perceptual realms when visual perception alone was not sufficient in upholding the stabilization of indeterminate racial categories. I have shown above how non-visual perceptual capacities are interrelated with it and support recognition of emerging black or Jewish bodies.

However, as might have become clear, it is not by accident that race and visual perception emerge together. The meaning of race aligned with visual markers of skin hues emerged when currents of rationalism, Enlightenment philosophies, scientific objectivism, and colonial expansion sedimented perceptual schema. The bodily emergence of race and its meaning therefore could not but emerge as a Western visually-dominated perceptual habit. Cartography and other scientific tools of measuring and

---

<sup>59</sup> Ian F. Haney Lopez, "White by Law," in *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge (2nd Edition)* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000). Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formations in the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994).



recording were perceptual tools sedimenting vision (and images, photography, textuality) as intellectual, civilized, and “white” perceptual activities. And while vision might have been and continue to be the culturally prominent sensory field, it operated interactively with other perceptual domains, not least to map out and test the “lower” senses of “primitive” people, their olfactory, tactile, and aural capacities.<sup>60</sup>

To better understand these dynamics regarding tacit knowledges of racial otherness and sedimented habits regarding racial perception, it will be useful to make cross-cultural comparisons. To do this beneficially, I must shift my language here and explore the perception of socio-cultural “others” in order to gain a more complex understanding of what perception of others within a differently ordered structure of bodily perceptual orientations might show us.<sup>61</sup> How might otherness be perceived if it is not something that hits the insider’s eye?<sup>62</sup>

To bring up a comparison through olfaction again, a culturally different example can be found in the Tukano-speaking tribes in the Amazon, which show a complex

---

<sup>60</sup> The data gained from hierarchical sensory investigations was often inconclusive in European exploration of “savage” peoples, though it was interpreted to support the perceptual orientations in place. Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*, 4-6. See also Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, Inc., 1995), 49-61.

<sup>61</sup> Especially when taking into account Omi and Winant’s racial formation theory, which highlights that race, rather than a biological and universal concept, is a field of social conflict, political organization, and cultural meaning. While race operates in individual and social dimensions, and as concept is deeply embedded in modern Western consciousness, it is not a universal or a historical phenomenon. Rather, it becomes a social habit, a tacit knowledge of bodily perception, or a “common sense” idea about and orientation in the world. Omi and Winant, 52-62, 106.

<sup>62</sup> I do not wish to imply, however, that in order to shed the prejudices inherent in a visualist emphasis of Western epistemology we need to dismiss sight and take an “antivisualist” approach, as this might make us prone to dismiss sight in culturally different epistemologies. While a culture might be olfactory or oral, sight might still be an important avenue for knowledge, though its role and nature might be conceived of and embodied differently. See Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures*, 135-137.

perceptual order and hierarchy. Cosmology and social life are structured through interrelations of color, odor, temperature, and flavor. Odor for example is a combination of color and temperature and makes up perceptual alignments of people, animals, and plants, for example, different odors function as a marker of tribal identity and territory. All members of a tribe are understood to share the same general body odor, the word for which can be translated into *sympathy* or *tribal feeling*. This shared body odor is considered to be caused by the different food customs and to mark territorial boundaries through distinct odor trails. The different odors also have specific symbolic associations which serve to order intertribal relations.<sup>63</sup>

Olfactory identifications and divisions may also be found among the Dassanetch of Southwestern Ethiopia. Bodily orientations to odor include that humans, who are considered naturally inodorate, acquire their particular smell through inhabitation of particular environments, thus Dassanetch social groups are identified with the odor of the species of animals a respective group depends on (fish or cattle). Odors of fish and associated scents then not only emerge as malodorous to pastoralists, but fish and fishermen emerge as alien, foreign to the community, outside of cycles of creation and community life.<sup>64</sup>

These are not simply superstitious attitudes or mythical beliefs, but bodily perceptual orientations towards sameness and otherness. If race appears as a dynamic and fluid meaning, attaching to a group of people sharing socially significant elements of

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 81. Classen, Howes, and Synott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*, 98.

<sup>64</sup> Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures*, 84-85.

amongst other things, morphology, ancestry, and geography, then we need to understand how these markers may be perceived through means other than visual means:

Morphology, ancestry, and geography may be perceived olfactorily or aurally rather than being visually mapped or textualized, and may depend on cultural habituation rather than genetic tracing.

For example, soundscapes (sounds arising in a specific environment) in Israel create networks of belonging and identity, socially shaped sounds which serve for perceptual movements and meanings of group identification.<sup>65</sup> Publically performed sounds collect certain people around common interests and highlight cultural and political differentiation: popular radio music on Jewish radio stations invokes not only nostalgia, but traces origin through Slavic melodies and seeks to unite Jewish identity as it also perceptually excludes the ancestry of half the Jewish population from African and Near Eastern countries; sirens signaling emergencies and alien hostilities direct and require a homogenous and ritualized performance of a unified national population (all are threatened, all act out protective measures, strengthening performance of state and citizenship); Muslim prayers offered in mosques and via loudspeakers are aural and bodily movements uniting the participants and aligning Muslim identity, sounds which to others might emerge as noise, disturbance, and potential perceptual signal of mobilizing political action against the state.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Devorah Kalekin-Fishman, "Sounds That Unite, Sounds That Divide: Pervasive Rituals in Middle Eastern Society," in *Everyday Life in Asia: Social Perspectives on the Senses*, ed. Devorah Kalekin-Fishman and Kelvin E.Y. Low (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-34.

National belonging and ethnic and racial otherness here perceptually emerge via sound and connected bodily and social movements. In neighborhoods where Jews, Muslims, and Christians dwell together, the sounds of daily prayer or church bells on religious holidays signal the presence of group belonging. Otherness also perceptually emerges in connection with these sounds; those not preparing for prayer, or those not bodily observing the Sabbath, perceptually emerge foreign and other.

Below, in the third section of this chapter, I will again turn to the concept of normalcy. Like the sounds described above, the same sounds in different ears may either create a sense of group belonging or a sense of otherness/group distinction. In regards to normalcy, definitions and conceptions of normal may either create a sense or desire for belonging (to “normal”) or a sense of otherness. Understanding changes and transformations of “normal” in other contexts will help us understand how our own perception of ourselves in regards to (or as) normal might require re-conceptualization.

#### Perceiving Normalcy Differently

In the previous chapter, we explored how language may relate to perception by investigating language as sediment bodily habit, using “normalcy” as pivot point. Below, I will provide some historical and cultural examples in order to provide us with a more complex understanding of how sedimentation of habits and corporeally and socially embedded language connect to our bodily perceptual orientations in the world. This will help us understand further how language is not simply a referent to bodily experience with fixed and determinate meanings, nor a disembodied discursive power shaping thought and materialization of bodies without itself being embedded in bodily

experiences. Rather, language, like perception, is embedded in the body/world/culture complexity; it emerges from it and is implicated in our linguistic experiences in it, its meanings indeterminate and emerging in body/world/culture contexts that are historically and culturally contingent.

In the previous chapter, I have explored sedimentations of racial perception and outlined how a pre-reflective current of colonialism and nationalism might have supported the emergence of racial bodies and their perceptual alignments. Below, I will once again first explore historical examples of differences in language and perceptual orientations towards deafness, particularly through investigating the (changing) pre-reflective currents supporting (changing) perceptual alignments of deaf bodies. I will then provide us with cross-cultural examples of wellness/illness related to perceptual orientations and language.

#### *Historical Perceptions and Habitual Sedimentation of Normalcy*

Inquiring into the origins of perceiving disabled bodies, Lennard J. Davis advances that “normalcy” as a concept constructed the problem of bodily difference labeled “disability.” As a construction, it is not a universally perceived condition but has a history, a social process, a gathered background, which led to the perceptual emergence of disabled bodies in a certain kind of society at a certain time.<sup>67</sup>

Davis describes the emergence of the idea of the “norm,” and with this perceptual concept the socio-cultural imperative of “normalcy” in the Euro-Western world. The word “norm” as sign had signified something “perpendicular” with reference to a

---

<sup>67</sup> Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," 3.

carpenter's square in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The word "normal" as referring to a conforming to a common type only entered the English language in the mid 1900's. The rise of objective (and objectifying) sciences and industrialization connected perceptual orientations of bodies with generalized notions of normal as imperative through repetitive gestures in various socio-cultural arenas. For example, using medical data compiled in the new field of statistics, generating an "average" body as exemplar of normal life and the normal worker.<sup>68</sup>

Medical, political, and mathematical science, economics and social science, all repeat habitual gestures which sediment "normal" as a concept and as language in reference to bodies, implying the imperative and desirability of normalcy over against the undesirability of difference and deviance: The scientific notion of average or middle develops into a philosophical justification for the mean position of the bourgeoisie in the great order of things;<sup>69</sup> the notion of an average human supports and justifies Marxian theories of average workers and average wages and thus average human value;<sup>70</sup> and the

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 4. Though Davis acknowledges the somewhat simplistic chronological division, he usefully points towards preceding notions of the "ideal," for example, an ideal body found in the divine, which no individual human bodies could embody. The grotesque was inversely related to the ideal, but as a signifier of common life, of common humanity, rather than the marginal.

<sup>69</sup> And many words are used to support the meaning associated with "normal" in the social imaginary, manifesting in the cultural production of the novel. For a study of disability as a literary trope, see David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

<sup>70</sup> Marx quotes French statistician Adolphe Quetelet in *Capital* to acknowledge that while individual bodily differences may exist, these "errors" might compensate for one another whenever a certain minimum number of workmen are employed together. Marx's labor theory of value/average wages is thus partly based in his positing the idea of the worker as an average worker. It is only from the idea of an average worker that "abstract labor" may be thought about (as in reflecting on work and wages in relation to what an average—"normal"—worker can be expected to accomplish). Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans., Samuel Moore, vol. 1 (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1970), 323. Davis explores Quetelet's notion of the average human, applying the mathematical "law of error" to physical and moral averages of human attributes, in Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," 5-7.

notion of average human capacities supports and justifies the demand, need, and moral imperative of surveying, controlling, and eliminating individual deviances for the sake of the normalcy of the community.<sup>71</sup>

Cultural scientific tools such as fingerprinting and genetics embed into these perceptions of corporeal normalcy ideas and concepts such as heredity and identifiable essential differences: bodily perceptions become cues for a coinciding identity located in perceivable bodily differences. Perceived bodies are not identical with a presented identity, and this identity may be unchangeable and indelible. In connection with notions of deviance as undesirable existence against the norm, bodily perceptual orientations aligned irrepressible physical or mental qualities with moral qualities identified and possibly criminalized. Bodily perceptual orientations in the modern industrial West loosely aligned what we now call disability with criminal activity, mental incompetence, sexual license, etc., a legacy still influencing perceptual emergence of meaning today.<sup>72</sup>

Yet “normal” as *perceptual* habit remains ambiguous and indeterminate, and so is the use of “normal” as linguistic habit: When normal comes to be perceived as “ideal,” as the imperative towards which human progress must align, the problems of extremes as well as the apophatic definition (defining normal through its negative, through determining abnormal) of “normalcy” demand supplementation through other notions

---

<sup>71</sup> Lennard J. Davis, *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 102-118.

<sup>72</sup> The technologies or embodied effects may change though: Eugenics for example was a scientific tool hailed to improve the national body by eliminating unfit individual bodies. Similarly to race, disability or deviance then emerges in perceptual focus against the background of nation/citizenship. Institutionalization of deviant bodies (prison, mental health hospitals) or social control through professionalized fields of care (psychology, social work, police) are of the same aim, namely constructing and upholding the normal by identifying and controlling (or inhibiting) the “spread” of the abnormal. Barnes.

and demand the continuation of the work of repetition. This leaves “normal” caught up in the evolution of nature and culture. To elaborate: If normal (as in “common” or “average”) is the ideal, then extreme deviation comes to be undesirable. Yet with notions of progress, human perfectability, and perceptual preferences already connected to perceptual orientations, processes of ranking supplement the ideology of normalcy to perceive of the normal as always moving towards one end of the spectrum, not the other. For example, higher than average intelligence is perceived today as preferable to lower than average intelligence, therefore normal is perceptually aligned leaning towards perceiving lower intellectual capacities as deviant abnormal, whereas higher intellectual capacities come to be perceived as desirable hopefully soon-to-be normal.<sup>73</sup> In conjunction with solving the problem of extremes by substituting ranking for averaging, notions of progress and human perfectability sediment ideologies of normalcy and produce habits of elimination of deviance in favor of a dominating hegemonic perceptual vision of a normal—“must be”—human body.<sup>74</sup> “Normal” in reference to desirable body types is caught up in how human bodies adjust to changing environments and how cultural images of normal health or beauty transform over time.

The habit of perceiving normalcy is embedded in linguistic habits. For example, a bodily perceptual orientation of a deaf person extends bodily in reference to this individual bodily incarnation and through bodily movements and capacities within the given bodily perceptual capacities and orientation. Yet when the meaning of “normal

---

<sup>73</sup> Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," 9.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-9.



human body” emerges as a perceptual fully capable body, then the absence of hearing is perceived and linguistically expressed as *lack* of hearing, or as sensory abnormality. Scientific and economic efforts as bodily movements then are geared towards “fixing” this abnormality or towards “restoring” *normal* hearing.<sup>75</sup>

The pre-reflective currents supporting the perception of deaf bodies and the emergence of meaning can change, and with it the linguistic signs referring to deafness, and the bodily perceptual orientation to/of deaf bodies. As with gender and race, deafness involves a perceived physical difference, yet the meaning emerging is subject to change and transformation, meaning embedded in socio-cultural dynamics as much as corporeal ones. For example, until the middle of the nineteenth century, moral models of personhood defined deafness as a physical condition that isolated the person from the Christian community. Deafness, as affliction and blessing, was a separation from the “light” of the gospel (which needed to be heard), yet was also perceived as an ignorance of the “darkness” of the world. Innocence and ignorance of deafness were compared to virginity and barrenness (the blessing of virginal innocence becomes the curse of barrenness if not lifted from that state). Sign language became the educational (visual gestural) device to perceptually align deaf bodies with the values of a Christian community.<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> I have explored aspects of deafness/Deafness in the previous chapter. This reference again hints at the various issues involved, such as the question regarding standards to determine “normal” hearing, or the capacity to hear as requirement for a “complete” embodiment, and the fluidity of normal as perceptual orientation, since hearing is not necessarily a bodily capacity constant throughout a person’s life span.

<sup>76</sup> Douglas Baynton, “A Silent Exile on This Earth”: The Metaphorical Construction of Deafness in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 38-40. This perceptual orientation is what is framed in disability studies as the “moral model.” Social evil is traced to the weakness or deficiency of the individual, reformation of society can

Yet currents of nationhood and the building of the national body (see also the section on race in chapter three) then support the shifting of meanings regarding deafness, aligning the emergence of bodies with national desires. To be deaf then perceptually emerged as a physical impairment (not primarily a moral sign or insufficiency) which cut off the person from English-speaking American culture; the tragedy was no more the loss of salvation via the hearing of the gospel, but the lack of national identity via the participation in the hearing of America.<sup>77</sup>

This change can be traced in the sedimentation of language habits. As we explored above, language has a corporeal dimension and sediments as corporeal reference and habitually established meanings. A change in culturally habituated movements (e.g., nation building), then, is a change of a culture's "being" in the world which then effects the emerging meanings between body and world. Let me elaborate: The first schools for deaf people in the United States were established during the Second Great Awakening. Evangelical Protestant reformers established residential schools where deaf children were brought together to receive a Christian education, teachers conducting education via signed language in order to allow for knowledge, salvation and moral messages to be "heard." One significant effect of these residential schools for deaf persons is that it led to the emergence of the Deaf, that is, the alignment of individuals with a cultural and linguistic community. Previously separated individuals now began forming distinct

---

only come through moral reform of individual members. A certain duality was at work though, as physical impairment, though located in the individual, would emerge as holding moral meaning for the community, either as affliction or possession by evil forces, or as blessing and divine message. Creamer, 19.

<sup>77</sup> Baynton, 33.

communities, sharing a history and identity, embracing a common language and common experience.<sup>78</sup>

However, as the unity of the national body became an important bodily orientation, the separation and perceived isolation of deaf communities from the life of the nation was increasingly perceived as troublesome, the assimilation into the national body of greatest importance.<sup>79</sup> The change in bodily and social habits regarding education for deaf people was signaled with linguistic expressions referring to “progress” (the same language referred to in the education of immigrants discussed above, and in the education of American Indian children, to which I will turn below). Taking Davis’ conceptual exploration of “progress” and “normal” into account, to progress as a national body, citizen bodies must become “normal,” meaning they must be able to disappear behind perceptual orienting lines of bodily abilities which aligned national citizenship. Progress as a nation was then connected to the assimilation, the perceptual disappearance of deafness into the national body and its sediment bodily and social habits, so that habits changed to lip-reading and audible speech. We can see how differences regarding

---

<sup>78</sup> For a more detailed account of what in this project I would call the sedimentation of bodily movement, linguistic expression, and change in bodily habituation as change of being in the world, moving from deaf to Deaf, see Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). And Jack Gannon, *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America* (Silver Spring, MD: National Association of the Deaf, 1981).

<sup>79</sup> Baynton, 34. This is the same current which oriented education and immigration to the importance of assimilation of immigrants into the national body, though as above described, mechanisms of alignment also screened out undesirables from crossing national boundaries. Deaf bodies emerging within the nation though demanded different orienting and re-alignment devices, supported by the pre-reflective current of nationalism.

perceiving normalcy may be observed in historical contexts not too far removed from our current time, and even undergo transformations within a lifetime.<sup>80</sup>

One might disagree with me and counter that nationalism and nation as political phenomenon might have little to do with bodily differences and experiences such as deafness. Yet, the issue of a common language—a common, or preferred shared body/mind/world connection—is deeply embedded in the perceptual emergence of a national people. Benedict Anderson, for example, points to the enforcement of a common language through devices such as the printing press and through mechanisms of capitalism (dissemination of printed language through the market); he argues that only a common language was/is able to harness and enforce images of national character, national entities, and national progress.<sup>81</sup>

Emerging from this pre-reflective current of nationalism, then, are meanings of deafness signaling an inability to assimilate into the national body. Bodily perceptual orientations regarding hearing as normal were aligned through educational devices and oralist ideologies (advocating for purely oral education for deaf people). While sign

---

<sup>80</sup> For an example of a different kind of perceptual alignment regarding the emergence of the normal and healthy national body, see Robert Desjarlais, *Shelter Blues: Sanity and Selfhood among the Homeless* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997). Desjarlais discusses the experiences of homeless persons in a facility never completely built, abandoned persons gathered in an abandoned building. Homeless persons suffer abjection from the national body, and Desjarlais describes and analyses the perceptual alignment of homelessness with grotesque bodies, animality, and incomprehensibility, presenting it over against self-representations, intimate first person narratives, and favoring non-visual accounts of the complex cultural, political, economic, sensorial, emotional, physiological, etc., experiences of the homeless persons he came to know.

<sup>81</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Spread and Origin of Nationalism* (London, UK: Verso, 1983), 45-48. Anderson, though, seems to define language mostly as textual system of words/signs and grammar. But I believe an argument could be made that a common language, with language defined as corporeal and social as I have here--habitual movements of body/mind/world, common associations of bodily referents and habits—may also apply to his argument, perhaps even expand it.

language as linguistic expression in deaf communities could not be undone, solely manual education (through sign language and writing) was replaced by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with nearly 80 percent of children taught entirely without sign language, being taught through lip reading and speaking.<sup>82</sup>

Deafness as a marker of a community which does not require oral/aural communication challenges the coherence of a national body which moves and extends socially and culturally through a common language, a common bodily habit. Because language itself is a set of congealed bodily and social practices shaping our way of being in the world (as I have argued above), non-participation in the (national) language system emerges as incoherent with social habits and movements. The meaning emerging is that of misalignment with citizenship and dysfunctionality of bodily sociality. The threat of D/deafness is that it may be unperceivable/invisible: unless a deaf person extends through engagement in language, she does not emerge visually as deaf, engaging in “foreign” language, inheriting a “different” culture, isolated from the “normal” life of the nation.<sup>83</sup> For example, Douglas Baynton shows how deaf persons were described as a collective people, inferior, who were unable to exercise their citizenship unless they were made “people of our language” (in reference to English and in support of suppressing sign language). Deaf people were persons “without a country” needing to become members of

---

<sup>82</sup> Baynton, 34. For a more thorough tracing of the development of deafness as discourse and the material/political significance of sign language, see chapters 2-4 in Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York, NY: Verso, 1995).

<sup>83</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*, 76-83.

a community with leaders and rulers, embodying the threat of foreignness, the offense of using another language.<sup>84</sup>

Language as bodily movement and social habit, in this example swept up in the pre-reflective current of nationalism, aligned deafness by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a physical condition with social meanings of deviance, a way of being in the world which emerged out of place and in need of correction through social habituation, immersion into the sediment cultural habits of spoken English language. The force of pre-reflective currents supporting the emergence of specific meanings regarding bodily habits (such as perceptually extending through sign language) is evident, for example, in late 19<sup>th</sup> century proposals of Deaf communities to found a separate state.<sup>85</sup>

What I want to draw our attention to, once more, is the significance of language as corporeal and social. Tacit bodily knowledges and sediment social habits are implicated in thought and language, but meaning (regarding the bodily aspects of the social, and social aspects of the bodily) remains indeterminate and open to change. Language, because of its corporeal and social dimensions, may support orientations to and alignments of, for example, the national body and the movements and expressions of this national body. Pre-reflective currents of nationalism supported bodily perceptual orientations towards bodily capacities along lines of citizenship, and national common language changed alignments of deafness from immorality to abnormality (changing

---

<sup>84</sup> Baynton, 41-43.

<sup>85</sup> For example, British Deaf communities suggested founding a deaf state in Canada; American communities proposed forming a deaf state in the western part of the continent. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*, 84-85. The kind of movement and land usurpation involved in these ideas would have involved dynamics of nationalistic colonial expansion and intersections with class and race, aspects I cannot fully explore here.

from lack of hearing in reference to access to the gospel to inability to pass as English hearing and speaking citizen). Deaf bodies failed to emerge as properly Christian, but the emergent meaning changed to deaf bodies failing to represent normal nationality. Bodily extensions of Deaf people, supported by currents of nationality, then extended through tacit body knowledges regarding their cultural and historical belonging and communicative bodily expressions (Deafness as culture and sedimented habit) *and* through socially mediated perception of nationality shaping meaning and perceptual habits (deafness as otherness in need of corrective alignment).<sup>86</sup>

*Different Perceptions of Wellness/Illness Connected to “Normalcy”*

When exploring the concept of normalcy in the previous chapter, I illustrated the ways in which perceptual and linguistic habits regarding “normal” may sediment, for example, through medical practices and descriptions. Michel Foucault’s investigation of the medical gaze, the perceptual power of the modern medical eye, shows how seeing, and a particular mode of seeing, comes to be a perceptual mechanism of culture, reinforcing perceptual habits of body/mind dualisms.<sup>87</sup> To find comparative clues as to how different bodily perceptual orientations might emerge from differently habituated ways of perceiving features considered common—though not necessarily obligatory, or “normal,” as we will discover—I turn to explorations of cultural difference via what is

---

<sup>86</sup> For a collection of essays inquiring into differences of hearing (across time, culture) and the different meanings associated with it (e.g., regarding healing or religious devotion), see Veit Erlmann, ed. *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity*, ed. Richard G. Fox, Wenner-Gren International Symposium Series (New York, NY: Berg, 2004).

<sup>87</sup> Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, 54-63, 107-123.

often termed “traditional” (as in, not modern, not scientific or Western, likely inferior in effectiveness) medicine and healing practices.

In his study regarding phenomenological aspects of Korean medicine, Kim Taewoo highlights the non-universality of modern Western medicine, though the sedimentation of the medical gaze in scientific bodily and linguistic habits also sedimented ontological perceptions of human existence (particularly the body as object of medical alteration).<sup>88</sup> Modern medicine is a medicine of modernity, meaning that it emerges as social practice habituated to seeing body and illness emerging in a certain way, objectifying the ill body and distancing the medical expert. The medical practices Kim observes in Korean contexts encompass a centrality of bodily knowing (rather than observation applied to knowledge), a knowing achieved through bodily intentionalities, through experiencing the other’s body in/through the body of the medical practitioner. Experiences infer comprehension *as body* which can not necessarily be transmitted verbally.<sup>89</sup>

For example, while color perception is an important part of diagnosis in Korean medicine, skin hues in facial regions alerting to connected organs and their state of

---

<sup>88</sup> Taewoo Kim, “Medicine without the Medical Gaze: Theory, Practice and Phenomenology in Korean Medicine” (Ph.D.diss., University of New York at Buffalo, 2011). Similarly, Mu Peng highlights embodied knowledge in rural Chinese Master-Apprentice relationships, within which knowledge is transmitted not primarily through text or oral education. Rather, pedagogical tools are body learning and sense honin, which are acquired through detailed bodily imitation. Peng Mu, “Imitating Masters: Apprenticeship and Embodied Knowledge in Rural China,” in *Everyday Life in Asia: Social Perspectives on the Senses*, ed. Devorah Kalekin-Fishman and Kelvin E. Y. Low (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010).

<sup>89</sup> Kim, 3,175-179. Medical training then is compared to the Korean linguistic equivalent of “embodiment,” which in Korean signifies “knowing by bodily gaining.” Learning medicine is done by the body, practicing medicine is a somatic awareness extended towards another, to appreciate the medically meaningful in bodily experience. Kim, 181.



functioning (e.g., Yellow indicating an issue with the spleen and digestive issues), the bodily experience of the Five Colors is more than a visual grasping, more than a fine-tuning of visual perception to detect changes in color. Rather, it is a bodily experience of being in proximity to, for example, Blue, a bodily recognition of more than just seeing color, but other visual significances, auditory sensations, and tactile perceptions. While color as visual perception might indicate a medical objectivist gaze, Kim describes vision here as a proximity sense, closely interrelated and significantly connected to other bodily perceptual capacities. In the same trajectory, Blue or Yellow as conditions, then, are not scientifically described or textualized in order to define a diagnosis. Color as a diagnostic tool in various traditional Korean medicines is a bodily experience to acquire as habit, and these habits, as patterns of movement, perceptually orient the practitioner's body to make use of tacit knowledges in bodily experiencing others. Linguistic references might be used, but do not make up the dominant cultural habit of describing and defining wellness/illness.<sup>90</sup>

The Anlo-Ewe people in West Africa can provide us with another comparative example of perceiving well-being, one that might help us further understand the complex bodily experience and corporeal/social dimensions of language.<sup>91</sup> Kathryn Geurts'

---

<sup>90</sup> Kim, 181-183. Remember here also my elaboration of Merleau-Ponty on color perception in chapter three.

<sup>91</sup> That language classified by outsiders is not always a representative taxonomical map also becomes evident here. "Anlo is essential to this study of sensoriums and experience, and yet it is not an easy word to translate or define. It identifies a dialect of Ewe, which is a West African language spoken by many of the people who live in southern Togo and the southeastern corner of Ghana. But for many Ewe speakers in Ghana, Anlo denotes a specific group of Ewe people who inhabit the coastal area of the Volta Region, around the Keta Lagoon, and whose traditions and dialect have unfairly been taken (by scholars, missionaries, and other representatives of colonial regimes) to represent Ewe culture as a whole." Kathryn Linn Geurts, *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community* (Berkeley, CA:

anthropological study among the Anlo-Ewe revealed that Western linguistic and conceptual classification of sensory perception was clearly an etic taxonomy when observing perception in an Anlo-Ewe context.<sup>92</sup> Touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight revealed themselves clearly as linguistic and conceptual categories developed largely within a Western European scientific tradition. While the Anlo-Ewe people use bodily capacities (looking, listening, touching, tasting) to experience and know the world, these perceptual modes did not sediment in linguistic expressions transferrable to traditional Western categories. Linguistic signs translated into German or English as “sensing” do not refer to Western categories of bodily experiences (e.g. sensing as touching), but rather refer to “thing recognized,” “things that help us to know what is happening (on) to us,” or “how you feel in your body.” Undifferentiated linguistic signs do not infer undifferentiated bodily experiences; Anlo-Ewe “sensing” encompasses various bodily experiences with which one can “feel in the body,” experiences including specific physical sensations (e.g. tingling skin), or sensations considered non-physical, such as heartache, inspiration, and intuition.<sup>93</sup>

Bodily movements, such as walking, are synesthetic and kinesthetic movements, emerging as bodily-emotional extensions indicating morality. “Lugulugu,” for example, a swaying bodily movement, may be a signifier for a person’s character or the manner of

---

University of California Press, 2002), 21. Geurts is also careful to highlight that this common language or reference to a people group by no means represents uniform or homogenous social and cultural perceptions.

<sup>92</sup> Etic and emic are terms used in anthropological studies: Etic refers to the use of categories, distinctions, and concepts derived from the outsider’s point of view, emic refers to the use of categories, rules, and concepts meaningful to people within a particular cultural tradition. Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1983), 56-57.

<sup>93</sup> Geurts, 38-41. Geurts’ study is also an interesting investigation of cultures which do not conceive of body/mind splits in ontological, epistemological, and phenomenological dimensions.

movement a road directs. To move lugulugu-ly is to experience the sensations of lugulugu-ness, to embody lugulugu ways, think lugulugu-ly, and become a lugulugu person, which is then again bodily experienced by others who perceive the lugulugu walk. Lugulugu is not experienced and thus categorizable in separate spheres of language, cognition, sensation, perception, culture, but in a synesthetic mode of knowing. The bodily perceptual orientation of Anlo-Ewe people is that of moving and perceiving and knowing as deeply intertwined bodily-moral-knowing persons.<sup>94</sup>

To repeat again, these cross-cultural examples are not instances of primitive (as in less developed or inferior) habits, superstitious attitudes or mythical beliefs, but complex bodily perceptual orientations towards embodied existence. Another example which is useful in exploring the concept of normalcy via illness/wellness and highlighting the interplay between various perceptual extensions is found in the Massim (indigenous to Papua New Guinea), a complexly structured oral and olfactoral culture. Bodily intentionality is embedded in Massim self-understanding. A person comes to be through exteriorization; identity as such is not who one “is on the inside”, but how—and therefore who—one extends to the outside, how one expands from the surface of the body.<sup>95</sup>

In this bodily intentionality through which identity emerges, not sight or speech, but smell and sound/hearing are ranked the most important transcendent movements.

---

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 74-76.

<sup>95</sup> Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*, 72-73. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2005), 19-21. Modern Western understandings of the constitution of the self, e.g., in Nietzsche, Foucault or Laplanche (as utilized in Butler), articulate how a subject comes into being through an internalization of the constitutive outside—responding to an address, internalizing discursive technologies or being shaped through body power.

Odors penetrate bodies and consciousness, and adornment, clothing, and other technologies of bodily intentionality in Massim culture always incorporate an important odorizing element, and it is the fragrant elements of a ritual or other bodily practice which are understood to hold the most potency. As perceptual extension and epistemological venue, smell and sight are understood by the Massim as interrelated, but it is odor, the olfactory expansion of a person's presence, which determines one's appearance; to have a beautiful smell leads to appearing visually handsome.<sup>96</sup>

Other bodily perceptual orientations involved in the intentionality of a person and her perceptual movements involve primarily sound (though not language/speech). The objects used as medium for bodily extension (e.g. shells) are valued for the acoustic and kinetic effects they produce (as opposed to visual value). As previously mentioned, it is through expansion that the Massim self perceptually emerges, thus it is in the giving away of valued objects that a Massim person matures and is aligned perceptually with social recognition and status. Objects given away bodily extend a person acoustically, and the value attached to the audio qualities is indicative and constitutive of the value of the person who gave them away.<sup>97</sup> The object's value perceptually emerges via its mobility (sound travels as the object travels), and this relates to how persons become intelligible in Massim culture: Bodily perceptual orientation as condition for the Massim

---

<sup>96</sup> Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*, 75-76. Regarding gendered bodily intentionality and perceptual movement, perceptual values manifest in sexual orientations of desire through bodily practices aligned with olfactory orienting lines. The nose, as olfactory site, is an eroticized organ and a site of sexual stimulation, whereas the mouth is an organ of intellect, which explains absence of Western eroticized acts, such as kissing. Social/familial gendered relations are also bodily aligned through the nose, for example, a swollen nose is a sign of blockage between a man and his in-laws. Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*, 120,202.

<sup>97</sup> Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*, 79.

subject manifests in auditory and olfactory extensions in space and time, sounds and odor are superior perceptual movements (as they can travel across distance and/or when vision is obstructed).<sup>98</sup>

To develop normally, or to mature well, is to progress from visual realms to aural realms, to establish oneself as a “name,” rather than a visual image, or face. The extent of mobility of a person’s sounds determines a person’s “existence.” In other words, to be visually perceived is “not to be”; only as a “name,” as a person who is heard, one emerges in a community, in the ears of the beholders. To further elaborate: What Western eyes may perceive as visual body decorations (such as feather ornamentation or skin treatments with coconut oil) are aural devices which augment the power of a person’s speech and sound. The actual speaking (greetings, incantations, spells) is embedded in a language system in which bodily capacities for speech involve bodily habits of *sounding* speech. Onomatopoeic expressions (e.g., “tudududu” for “roll of thunder”), when sounded out, bring about material and perceptual transformations (e.g., an object is transformed into a sound). But where Western interpretations of this phrase explained *tudududu* as metaphorical use of language, an aural perspective can help us understand that it is not in metaphorical meaning, but in acoustic amplification, in aural performance, that language is employed.<sup>99</sup>

Wellness and illness then need to be understood within these bodily perceptual orientations in the world. Bodily perceptual extensions through sounds and smell are not

---

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 78-88. This would go against a structuralist/Saussurian conception of language, in which onomatopoeias merely illustrate the arbitrariness of linguistic signs. But rather than simply a special instance of language, the actual sound, the bodily linguistic production of the sign, is of significance.

only ways to emerge “larger than life”—to intensify a person’s presence and increase social value—they also align perceptions of a person’s social competence and alignment with community values. Inability to hear, bodily or metaphorically, is to be unable to be socialized and align with the oral extensions of family; it is to go mad or insane.<sup>100</sup>

Because for Massim, bodily perception is conceived of as production of effects in others (rather than the reception of incoming stimuli from others), to not hear others is to not be in line with the expansion of family and community. Insanity is linguistically signified with a word also translatable as “deaf,” though hearing does not equate knowing. Again, because social values are aligned with bodily perceptual extensions, the intellect, the seat of the “mind” is located in the throat, the bodily organ from which one speaks. For something to be known, even by oneself, it must be voiced and heard; to think and understand involves speaking and hearing oneself talk. To be incapable of social knowledges then is to be incapable of hearing and/or speaking; but not as Western prejudice regarding a person deaf or mute would have it, inferring an incapability to think from inability to voice thought or hear others speak their thoughts. Rather, thinking is sound-thinking, the intake of noise-force (knowledge) *and* the ability to extend it outward again (because to “keep something inside” is just as anti-social and “insane” as being unable to connect with others’ oral or olfactory extensions).<sup>101</sup>

My last example, more expressly again concerning illness/wellness, comes from Thomas J. Csordas’ study of healing and embodiment, which describes differences in

---

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 116-117.

reasoning regarding illness between Anglo-American cultural perceptions and Navajo alignments of illness. Where Anglo-American concerns regarding cancer are determined by Western scientific medical perceptions oriented towards diagnosis and treatment as removal of specific symptoms and/or causes, Navajo conceptions of illness perceive not linear cause-effect classifications of disease, but rather illnesses as experiences emerging in space and time. Navajo language as expressed bodily perceptual habit displays this cultural perceptual difference: there are no specific names attached to specific and differentiated diagnoses, rather, any type of cancer might be commonly referred to as “sore that does not heal, ” and cancer is not differentiated in Western scientific taxonomical typologies.<sup>102</sup>

Wellness/illness thus must be conceived differently from the medical gaze of modern Western habituations towards separating bodily functions and capacities. Also to be taken into consideration must be experiences of one’s existence in the world beyond individualistic selves, separated from others and the world. Wellness is connected to harmony, balance, and interrelation of all creation; all that is in the world is sentient and interrelated. Further, indigenous cosmologies like the Navajo are spatially oriented, time being a cyclical event centered in place. To perceive the world and human existence with it cyclically and interrelatedly provides a pre-reflective dimension different from Western conceptions of origin, chronology, and linear connections.<sup>103</sup> Thus, the experience and

---

<sup>102</sup> Thomas J. Csordas, *Body / Meaning / Healing* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

<sup>103</sup> Jr. Vine Deloria, ed. *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr., Reader* (Boulder, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1999), 52-4. Jr. Vine Deloria, *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: The Putnam Publishing Group, 2003), 100,103. George E. (Tink) Tinker, *American Indian Liberation : A Theology of Sovereignty* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008), 38-40. George E. (Tink) Tinker, *Spirit and*

emerging meaning of cancer is intimately connected to experiences of (im)balance in a community's world. The experience of cancer is not, as it is in Western habituation, an individual bodily experience which may receive individual medical attention and treatment. Rather, it is an experience embedded in spatial and communal dimensions, and may be received as such (i.e., restoration of balance and harmony may take on a variety of personal, communal, ritual, etc., forms).

Significantly, again, is to maintain that illness is not conceived of as individualized physical experience, but rather a holistic experience, an interrelated event: a bodily sore or wound that does not heal is an experience of open sores and imbalances in life that is communal. For example, lightning might have been mentioned as a "cause" of cancer by Navajo persons participating in cancer research. Yet the question itself is misguided in this indigenous context, as illness must be understood within Navajo bodily perceptual orientations in the world. Lightning in Western cultural conceptions may be a natural force, not connected to personal human experiences. However, Navajo worldview does not make a human/world distinction, but experience all in interrelated ways. Lightning, as neither disconnected nor disaffected natural force, but as part of the life force sustaining all, relates to people in bodily ways. To ask for a perceived cause of cancer and to analyze "lightening" in provided answers, is to linearly analyze what is not causally experienced.<sup>104</sup>

---

*Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 10-13.

<sup>104</sup> Csordas, 194-218. I would like to note that Csordas's own perceptual orientation is evident at times and significantly influences his description of his study. His linguistic choices such as referring to "mythical causes," framing lightening as a natural force rather than part of interrelated life, and his lack of attention to spatial significances in ascribing bodily experiences at times betray his own bodily perceptual



Csordas reports indigenous experiences of lightening as cause of cancer based on his research guided by causal questions. Yet difference in lived experiences are difficult, sometimes even impossible, to capture with research strategies embedded in bodily perceptual orientations with little to no similarities. Within my Western intellectual habituation, my best attempt to describe and conceive of lightening different from my cultural habit is to think of lightening as a bodily encounter and experience, conceive of it as a tactile bodily enveloping and inhalation, a visual contact, and an olfactory experience of the harmonious electrical energy which is connected to the energy that runs through a person's embodied life. To be struck by lightning or be too close to a tree that has been struck by lightning before (remember the spatial orientation over temporal alignment) is to bodily encounter and experience lightening in ways not conceivable with a Western medical or scientific objectifying gaze. Experiencing lightening, as part of the communal life and energy that sustains all, is a dimension of experiencing in the world that does not conceive of experiencing natural events as inherently bad (as a cause-effect questioning regarding cancer might lead us to think) or good. Rather, lightening is experienced along bodily orientations in the world which grasp human life as s interrelated with other sentient life (which is not exclusive to humans).<sup>105</sup>

---

orientations bearing on those he describes: though he seeks to emphasize embodiment and phenomenological dimensions of human existence, he still presents Navajo descriptions of cancer and its causes as mythical, traditional, and therefore less than the tacit, deeply sedimented ways of bodily being that they are.

<sup>105</sup> Another example of what I am trying to convey here is found among the indigenous Ihanzu in Tanzania. Todd Sanders' study of rainmaking, gender, and sense making . Rain rites might appear to an outsider as a cause-effect practice, with the rites carried out to effect a desired outcome. Rather, rain is intimately connected to all areas of life, socio-cultural and practical, and, while rainmaking "brings" rain, rainmaking is not restricted to what makes rain, but it is inherently what "makes sense," what makes knowledge and experience, what makes life. Sanders also makes complex observations regarding gender as a social experience not first and foremost connected to human bodies, but rather, Ihanzu experience the

The importance of understanding differences in the corporeal and social dimensions of language, such as those provided in the examples here, is to understand that these different bodily social habits (experiencing the color of a patient, complex communally oriented experiences of bodily illness, the descriptions of insanity in oral/aural/olfactory cultures) are habits which are not simply intellectual conceptions, but deep-seated ways of being in the world. I move, feel, see, think, etc., through and with and by means of language; I move bodily into the world through linguistic gestures; my extension through language is my motile engagement through which I and the world appear; my “living” of/through language is a cultural act of bringing forth meaning and movement. Language as a bodily habit and bodily extension through embodied cultural habit is incorporated within my body schema, within my tacit knowledge of myself and the world.

To learn a new language is not simply to learn new signifiers, it is to learn a new way of bodily being in the world. George “Tink” Tinker’s investigation of colonizing missionary activities such as American Indian “boarding schools” highlights the importance of not underestimating this interrelation of bodily experience and the role of perception and language. Tinker describes how educational policies forcefully removed American Indian children from their communal homes and gathered them in institutions of re-education, where they were severely punished when caught speaking their native language. The enforcement of the colonizer’s language as common social and political language (remember the exploration of common language in the previous section) then

---

world as gendered (and therefore their own bodies, not the other way around). Todd Sanders, *Beyond Bodies: Rainmaking and Sense Making in Tanzania* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

enforced alignment with the dominant socio-cultural bodily habits and communal values. This alignment brought about loss of bodily perceptual orientations, which again, were more than merely changes in speaking, but enforced and policed changes of deep-seated ways of being in the world, including bodily social habits such as family structures, values, dietary habits, communal organization, tacit knowledges regarding the world and one's place in it, etc. We need to regard this not just as "only" enforced political control, but rather must more aptly label this violently enforced bodily perceptual re-orientation as genocide.<sup>106</sup>

Language, then, is a bodily *and* social experience, one that expresses *and* shapes our bodily perceptual orientation in the world. To learn a different language is to learn of different bodily social habits, of different ways of perceiving and extending into the world. To be forced to give up a native language, or operate dominantly in a colonizing language, is to be forced to change one's being in the world, to be dominated by another group's tacit knowledges which may not resonate with my own. To demand a common language, then, is not only to demand a shared mode of communication: it is to enforce specific meanings, and because meaning emerges perceptually between body and world and is shaped by habit, it demands and enforces specific patterns of bodily movement aligned with the hegemonic perceptual grid; it demands unified, "normal" ways of being

---

<sup>106</sup> George E. (Tink) Tinker, "Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide," (1993): 49-50. Tinker, *American Indian Liberation : A Theology of Sovereignty*, 25-28. I believe the same judgment may be applied (after thorough exploration and contextualization) to other colonial/colonizing dominations, such as the conquest and bodily removal and re-orientation of African bodies, the British conquest and usurpation of lands and peoples in India, or the Spanish conquest of South America, even the global reach of capitalism today.

and perceiving in the world to keep the currents supporting social structures flowing strong.<sup>107</sup>

Connecting to the larger scope of the project, we can see how language is not a separate instance that needs to be connected to bodily experience. Rather, language *is* a bodily experience that perceptually orients us in and to the world. To construct theologies grounded in experience needs to be able to grasp the interrelated bodily sensory dimensions of language so that we can complexly conceive of how language does not simply express meaning and values, but encompasses bodily perceptually experiencing meaning and values.

### **Conclusion**

Exploring various “hows” of bodily perceptual orientation, I took us on swift comparative expeditions to a range of different exemplars found in historically or culturally different contexts. This provided us with diverse ways to complexly conceive of what it means to insist that “I am as body,” that I am in this world as body touching, feeling, seeing, thinking, remembering, desiring, speaking; I am always as body and in bodily reference to my world. I sought to demonstrate the importance of conceiving of

---

<sup>107</sup> See also Steven Newcomb, "Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery," (2008). Newcomb analyzes the imagination of the US Supreme court regarding federal Indian law, relating Christian narratives and their metaphors to the colonizing of indigenous peoples and lands. He demonstrates how Christian narratives, words, and images have an inherently political meaning (established through metaphors and their bodily dimensions) which provided colonization of Indian lands moral and legal legitimacy. Newcomb asserts that the employed metaphors and narratives present a cognitive schema which still operates today not only in the US, but also other places of colonization, where language and human cognition (conceptualization and categorization), are the perfect instrument of empire because of their bodily embeddedness. The consequences thereof, such as starvation, denigration and loss of cultural identity and traditions, loss of land—in short, genocide—always come with a certainty of moral justification found in schemas (bodily-linguistic) such as domestic dependent nation, tribe, etc. Newcomb: 16-18,30-32, 68-71.

bodily perceptual orientation not just complexly, but as deeply embedded, pre-reflexive tacit but also visceral knowledge and situatedness in the world.

Gaining this kind of complex understanding, and taking perceptual differences seriously, raises the stakes when doing theology, not only when *not* beginning with bodily experience as grounds for analysis of a particular human condition, but even/especially *when* doing so. The importance of being aware of my own complex habituations, my own acquired ways of feeling, thinking, and moving in this world cannot be understated. Underestimating the bodily, visceral, deep-seated perceptual orientations which give rise to our experiences, and therefore reach into all our human endeavors, may support tendencies to, for example, dismiss/excuse not just the violent force of hate speech, but also supporting ideologies or thought systems as “just thoughts” that may just as easily be changed as the use of words.

Also at stake in underestimating bodily perceptual orientations in the world is the risk to underestimate difference. When I do not take care to account for how my own individually and socio-culturally acquired bodily perceptual “common sense” is a bodily experience shaped by concrete bodily, social, historical, and cultural forces, my own tacit knowledges may appear pre-cultural or a-historical to me. Contextual perceptual knowledge is then too-easily presupposed to be universal, natural, and therefore applicable to bodily experiences of others.

In my introductory remarks, I commented on relevant Christian theology demanding engagement in cultural analysis. Because of my own Western cultural location, and Western culture’s interlocking structures with Christian theological

imaginings, my own cultural imagination is informed by Christian theological orientations. The theoretical analysis thus far has provided me with a way to understand how what has come to be a matter of the mind and individual personal faith confession since the Protestant Reformation may be a deeply embedded bodily perceptual orientation. In other words, Christian theology is always more than “just” a matter of belief or a discipline devoted to connecting spiritual practices with ever more rational or thoughtful doctrinal formulations. Christian theologies and their continuing legacies need to be understood as embedded in our bodily perceptual orientations. They may be part of the sediment pre-reflective current, supporting perceptual emergences of nationalized or normalized bodies. They may be orienting devices, maintaining alignments of gender or race. Or Christian theologies may be orienting lines which support directionalities of perception, maintaining perceptual intentionalities, movements, and emergences so that we cannot but perceive, say, “one nation under God.”

It is to theology, then, that I turn in the following chapter. More specifically, I will turn to charting a way in which we can employ the concept of bodily perceptual orientation in theological projects. Attending to the ways in which our existence in bodily experiences situates and orients us in the world is the key feature of what I will present as “body theology.”

## CHAPTER FIVE: BODY THEOLOGY

I began this project by stating that to think of our existence in the world as bodily perceptual orientation is to think beyond common tropes of nature/culture and essentialism/constructivism utilized used in feminist and poststructuralist discussions to talk about embodiment. In such explorations, the body is often located at the intersection of nature/culture. In my investigation of our existence in the world as bodily perceptual orientation, I showed that our bodily experiences are located in interrelated dimensions of body-world-culture. Our bodily perceptual experiences, our language, and other bodily movements shape this space and are shaped in this space. Our existence as lived body is neither solely natural or essentially biological nor exclusively cultural or discursively constructed. It is even more than both natural/biological and cultural/discursive. If we begin with bodily experience, our existence is body-ly, nature-ly, and culture-ly, intertwined and interrelated: we learn and create meaning only in bodily experiencing. In bodily perceptual experience, we create, transmit, and express our bodily selves, cultural values, and the world we inhabit.

Body theologies, as presented to us thus far, at times turn out to be inadequate in their conceptual and methodological approaches. Body/mind dualisms may be upheld by positing sensory perception in unreflective or naïve ways and/or by fixing bodily experiences statically to meaning when moving too quickly to establish theological metaphors. My contribution to body theology, rather than presenting a fully

conceptualized theological work, is to present principles which may help us to inquire into bodily experience more complexly. I am putting forward a framework within which to understand bodily experience in order to conceptually and methodologically strengthen those theological projects which seek to be grounded in embodiment. In this chapter, I will present what theological analysis can do when thinking through bodily perceptual orientation.

Body theology, the way I frame it within this project, is a way of doing critical analysis that begins by inquiring into the many ways in which we are oriented in, towards, and by the world and others.<sup>1</sup> To effectively understand how we come to be in this world, we need to understand what constitutes our being in this world, including how certain ways of valorizing the mind and devaluing bodies gain such bodily and socio-cultural force that some lives get violently pushed to the margins, such that some bodies are dismissed as holding no (more) value.

In the previous chapters, I showed how our bodily perceptual experiences *are* how we exist in this world, how our feeling, smelling, touching, seeing, thinking, speaking, remembering, etc., are bodily perceptual experiences which orient us in the world and are oriented by the world. There are mechanisms at play—bodily movements, socio-cultural habituations—which may work in ways so that our bodily perceptual orientations position us within bounds of gendered, raced, normalized, nationalized, classed lines. These alignments are so powerful that we cannot escape their influence, reproduction, and naturalization.

---

<sup>1</sup> I will present principles for this kind of analysis below.



To begin to counter the effects of sexism, racism, nationalism, ableism, classism, etc., is to begin understanding how these ideologies are not simply words or beliefs, and not even just perpetration of visual stereotypes (though these might be prevalent in Western cultural orientations). They take on a bio-power, to use Foucault's term.<sup>2</sup> And this requires conceiving of how the gendering, racing, and normatizing of bodies is made through the full range of the human sensorium, as Paul Gilroy named it.<sup>3</sup> Or to follow Mark Smith, perceptual orientations are central to the way in which dividing lines in the world are created.<sup>4</sup> The lines of division which come to be fundamental, even natural, in our experiences come to be experienced in a bodily perceptual way and through instances of complication, nuance, and subtlety: What we call man/woman, black/white/brown, normal/disabled, citizen/alien are hierarchies which are aligned through our bodily perceptual experiences (through our seeing, tasting, feeling, smelling, thinking, remembering, hearing, etc.). Social concepts are not solely surface impressions (in both senses, as in impressions about surfaces and impressions on/of surfaces), but are cultural categories of deep bodily impact and deep social significances. While social hierarchies and cultural orders may be belied by everyday contingencies, compromises, and complications in the context of our experiences, bodily perception is central to the mutual emergence of body/world/meaning.

---

<sup>2</sup> "Biopower" is Foucault's descriptor for power over bodies, for the set of mechanisms through which bodies and groups of bodies become controlled by and aligned with and through socio-political strategies. See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. In later works, as Foucault elaborates on this, this term becomes more technically framed.

<sup>3</sup> Gilroy, 42.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*, 9.

To abandon these alignments and thereby to counter violent –isms, inquiries into bodily perceptual orientations will allow us to grasp more precisely and complexly the origins and sources of the creation and reproduction of divisive imagery. This inquiry will allow us to begin with framing how bodies and experiences are made and which mechanisms turn our bodily experiences and perceived meanings to socio-cultural images so damaging and powerful that they can wage war on human life. This is true even or especially when we pride ourselves in being unprejudiced, non-discriminating, and reasoned thinkers and actors regarding social matters. By beginning our analysis so, we can begin to experience, to imagine, to taste, and appreciate bodily crossings and subversions of dividing lines which induce harm in our bodily experiences. By beginning to understand how the shaping of our world comes about in and through our bodily perception, we may not “just” experience our visceral reaction to others, but can begin perceiving and experiencing differently, perhaps.

In this final chapter, I will return again to some of the questions I posed in my opening chapter and sketch a framework for body theology as a set of principles which advances explorations into the what and how of bodily perceptual orientation. I will begin by presenting principles of body theology as framework for analysis. Two select theologies which seek to be constructive, are concerned with bodily experience, and make reference to the pitfalls of body/mind dualisms and/or sensory perception will then serve as my test cases for utilizing body theology within the wider field of constructive theology. After showing via these test cases how body theology can expand and strengthen some critical claims and avoid potential manifestations and/or reiterations of

Cartesian dualisms for any theologian concerned with the related issues, I will conclude this chapter by returning to some of my personal questions/interests and taking a body theology approach to begin framing answers to them.

### **Principles of Body Theology**

Bodily perceptual orientations emerge from and are dependent on particularities, contingencies, and contextualities of embodiment. Our specific incarnation in space and time, our cultural context and individual bodily capacities, our being immersed in social givens and our personal development, significantly matter in the way we experience in the world. To insist on these contingencies and fluid ambiguous specifics of embodied life and then to move toward articulating a step-by-step methodology for body theology would be antithetical to the concerns and concepts presented here. Distilling body theology into a systematic method would imply that there is a method which might be free from culturally informed presuppositions and could be universally applicable. But this project has begun by cautioning of such presumptions, and to present a universalized method would be to pay no heed to my own convictions.

However, I believe that this caution does not deny my presenting a certain positioning commitment, and a presenting of principles of analysis for a body theology approach. To weigh in on the significance of sensory perception is to take a specific stand when it comes to analyzing bodily experience; it is to appreciate discursive analysis, but also to pursue a kind of material investigation which might be fleeting and more difficult to grasp. Guiding principles then can inform theological projects that seek to be grounded in experience without fixing experience in textual concepts. To formulate principles

rather than a method allows me to remain flexible (and hopefully humble) enough to travel cross-contextually.

The overarching commitment in body theology is the framework within which I have presented bodily experience in the previous chapters: The basic condition of my existence in the world and toward the world is my bodily perceptual orientation. My bodily experiencing is a perceptual experiencing; how I see, touch, feel, intuit, evaluate, remember, etc., *is* how I come to be and move in the world. Bodily perceptual experiences are also cultural acts, and perceptual differences are not only bodily differences but cultural differences, as culture inscribes how the senses are formed, utilized, and attributed.

Considering my exploration of bodily perceptual orientation in this project, there are some notions that I consider most significant and constructive as principles for body theology:<sup>5</sup>

*Bodily experiences make sense.* To do body theology is to turn to bodily experience not firstly to make sense *of* it, but to turn to it understanding that bodily experiences make sense, make meaning, in the world. To do body theology is to acknowledge that we bodily deal with meaning in the world, and that we also actively create and make meaning as we bodily move with and within our embodied contexts. To turn to bodily experience as a resource is to acknowledge that our bodily experiences always already make sense, in both meanings of the word; namely, there is already a

---

<sup>5</sup> Though I would also like to add that I do not consider this list as complete or exclusive, but I hold these principles loosely enough to be adapted or added to as contexts and experiences may inform specific body theologies.

logic to our bodily experiences, and our bodily experiences create and manifest meaning for us.

*Body theology explores bodily experience considering perceptual dimensions.*

When using bodily experience as resource for theology, we must consider perceptual dimensions. This means that the strength of the theological grounding in experience rests with the attention to sensory perception. Perception is embedded in various dimensions—pre-reflectively in social/cultural habits, in language, in individual bodily movements, in perceptual alignments, orientations, and perceptual devices—and is open to change, to ambiguous and fluid meanings, and to tensions and contradictions. Perception may shape how I know the world, but the world may also shape how I know to perceive.

*Body theology does ambiguity and paradoxes.* To turn to bodily experiences and perceptual dimensions is to acknowledge ambiguity and paradoxes in our experiences. If we are serious about overcoming body/mind dualisms, then we cannot maintain dualisms in body theology, not even traditionally cherished theological dualisms such as good/evil, oppression/redemption, sacred/profane, etc. Since bodily experiences and perception are ambiguous and paradoxical (i.e., meaning is not statically fixed to certain experiences or perceptions, and perception is paradoxically both bodily and social, both passive and creative, both inherent and acquired, etc.), then body theology must remain open to ambiguity and paradoxes, to disorientations, changing currents, new movements. Because body theology conceives of bodily experience as ambiguous and open to change, it cannot derive theological concepts or formulations that are absolute or dualistic. This must not be a theological problem or weakness, but may be the strength of body theology

in that it can attend to the gaps, cracks, fissures, and occlusions in our (theological) perceptual orientations.

*Body theology is epistemologically unsettled.* As a body theologian seeking to acknowledge and maintain the above-mentioned ambiguity, I must refrain from seeking certainty. I might gain skill and knowledge—for example, skill regarding analysis of bodily perceptual dimensions, knowledge regarding the processes of bodily perceptual experiences and interrelated dynamics—but this does not necessarily coincide with complete understanding. As the previous chapter illustrates, I might gain a more complex understanding of bodily perceptual processes involved in different experiences, but I cannot claim to fully understand a different perceptual orientation, a different way of being in the world. To claim such full understanding and fix it within my own knowledge system would be counterproductive to the commitment of body theology which frames our own epistemological perspectives as bodily and socially determined. While I might deepen my understanding, or gain more complex understanding of a specific experience, my understanding is always contingent and momentary, and needs to be flexible enough to engage ambiguities and newly-encountered difference. This also allows body theology a motile constructivity, attending to new meanings emerging via new bodily encounters, different perspectives leading to new interpretations, whilst remaining grounded in lived bodily experience.

### **Body Theology Approaches**

Different theologians might have different goals in mind when employing body theology, be it systematic exploration of theological concepts or practical theological

investigations into specific situational contexts. Deciding that I want to begin with bodily experience, I begin with the experience/situation I perceive to be relevant or which caught my theological attention. As body theologian, considering the above principles, I am now charged to explore this experience for various bodily perceptual dimensions, understanding that my explorations are limited by my own capacities and orientations. I can examine my own understanding by maintaining a critically open posture and checking my own self-knowledge (am I aware of my own bodily perceptual orientations that I bring to the experience and to the analysis of this experience?) while seeking to explain how certain bodily perceptual orientations might come into play in our experiences.

In this section, I will turn to two theologians, Carter Heyward and Marcella Althaus-Reid, scholars who served as exemplars in my critique of phenomenological notions in feminist theologies. Both theologians explicitly reflect on bodily experience and seek to construct liberative theologies, make reference to the pitfalls of body/mind dualisms, and highlight, in one way or another, knowledge via perception.

Bringing body theology principles to Carter Heyward's theological project, I will discuss ways in which body theology can go beyond naïve appeals to sensory perception as epistemological venue. I will strengthen Heyward's appeal to "be in touch with our bodies" by framing it in a complex understanding of bodily perceptual processes. Marcella Althaus-Reid's work will serve as an example of what I have termed body metaphor theology. Exploring and suspending/delaying Althaus-Reid's theological method, I will show how body theology can strengthen theological aims, namely by

dwelling on and exploring experience more thoroughly, thus avoiding to move too quickly from experience to metaphor.

### Touching the Strength of Carter Heyward

Much of Carter Heyward's theological "coming out" work was published almost 35 years ago, though it has lost none of its critical creative challenge to the way theology should be done.<sup>6</sup> The Christian theologian and Episcopal priest may be best known for not only discussing openly her being a lesbian but also drawing on this dimension of her life as an integral source to her theologizing.<sup>7</sup> I very briefly brought up a component of her theological framework in the second chapter, where I highlighted that her appeal to be in touch with our bodily senses inadvertently reinstates a body/mind dualism she seeks to overcome. This conception of perception and framing of the sensual as access to knowledge leads into a critical dead end, though one we might sense our way out of.

This project established body theology as an inquiry into meaning emerging in our bodily experiences. As such, body theology can join Heyward's conceptual and

---

<sup>6</sup> Carter Isabel Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relations* (Lanham, MD: Pilgrim Press, 1982); Carter Isabel Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation* (New York, NY: Pilgrim Press, 1984); Carter Isabel Heyward, *Speaking of Christ: A Lesbian Feminist Voice* (New York, NY: Pilgrim Press, 1989); Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotics as Power and the Love of God*.

<sup>7</sup> Heyward's theological approach was/is compelling and groundbreaking not only in the way she insists that theology must be grounded in the here and now of embodied realities in order to pursue critically and imaginatively the truths of our own lives-in-relation, but also in the way her theological work seeks to be intersectional in regards to race, class, religion, gender, nationality, and sexual desires. She speaks clearly of the interrelated dynamics which bring about oppressive ideologies—that sexism and homophobia must be understood in relation to capitalism, nationalism, and racism, for example. Her epistemological method is to re-value feeling as source of "objective" knowledge, knowledge of real life experiences and embodied realities. The epistemological folly of Enlightenment rationality is that particularity coupled with power leads to presenting as universal, normative, and true what is grounded in specific social locations. Thus we need to be clear about the limits of our knowledge, which is constructed in a social context, not simply out of intellectual honesty (and perhaps, humility), but also because the particularities which limit us are also the ground and source of our truth-claims. Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotics as Power and the Love of God*, 3-13.



methodological commitments: She defines theology as “the capacity to discern God’s presence here and now and to reflect on what this means”<sup>8</sup> and as “critical, creative reflection on the patterns, shape, and movement of the Sacred in our life together.”<sup>9</sup> Body theology echoes her emphasis on human embodiment as inseparable body-mind existence intertwined through mutual relations with others and the world.

Heyward’s conception and use of relationality and mutuality are where I locate a challenge and contribution I bring to Heyward via body theology. Heyward’s answer to the pervasiveness of evil in human life is to frame “God” as human power in mutual relation. The harmful legacies of separating material from spiritual, body from mind, are found today in the concept of individual personhood as autonomous and independent. This denial of interrelatedness is at the heart of structural forces such as compulsory heterosexuality or white male patriarchy. The answer, Heyward argues, is in rediscovering and fostering our mutual relationality, to understand being a person *as* social relationship. Sin and evil are lack of mutuality; liberation and the sacred are found in mutual relations. Mutuality, to Heyward, transforms alienated power into right relations, sharing power in a relationship that each involved may become more fully who she is. Mutuality is a relational movement which shapes us.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotics as Power and the Love of God*, 22.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 56,91,191. Importantly, Heyward’s theological convictions are deeply grounded in her life experiences and social justice activism. She has been an activist for racial justice, beginning as a teenager, and was part of the first group of women to be ordained in the Episcopal Church in 1974. This first ordination event was also an “extraordinary” event, invalidated in an emergency meeting of the House of Bishops. Two years later, women’s ordination into priesthood of the Episcopal Church was approved. After retiring from teaching at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, MA, Heyward now lives in an intentional community and has founded a therapeutic horseback riding center in North Carolina, geared towards children and adults with emotional, mental and physical limitations and disabilities.

Mutuality, according to Heyward, is right relation, and this is the cornerstone of her theological project. Mutual relations are just and loving relations. She is careful not to conflate mutuality with sameness or oneness, and insists on the ambiguity and inherent tensions which come with relation across and within difference.<sup>11</sup> All relations are social and embedded with power, interests, and desires. Yet we are born alienated and into alienation as consequence of unjust power relations; economic oppression, racism, sexism, etc., are patterns of alienation.<sup>12</sup> Heyward then charges that we live as embodied creatures in the world, and mutual relation is a “radical connectedness” not just of humanity but all of reality.<sup>13</sup> Thus, our bodies are affected by the social structures within which we inescapably live, and this is why we know about the world and ourselves through our bodies, yet as bodies participating in complex, tension-filled, ambiguous relations with other bodies.<sup>14</sup>

Experiences of mutuality, which are bodily, sensual, erotic experiences, are the grounds for incarnate knowledge of right relations, knowledge that is a vision of what is

---

<sup>11</sup> To be loving is not to engender a feeling, but to be open to action, a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives. Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation*, 82,187. “God” is power in right relation as well as resource and power of relation, thus for Heyward, human activity *is* divine activity whenever and wherever it is just and loving. Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relations*, 222. Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotics as Power and the Love of God*, 22. Mutuality though goes beyond human relation, as the structures of alienation encompass the alienation of humans from other earthcreatures as well as rocks, plants, water, air, etc. Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation*, xiii-xv. Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotics as Power and the Love of God*, 92-93.

<sup>12</sup> Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotics as Power and the Love of God*, 105. Carter Isabel Heyward, *Staying Power: Reflections on Gender, Justice, and Compassion* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1995), 80.

<sup>13</sup> Carter Isabel Heyward, *Saving Jesus from Those Who Are Right: Rethinking What It Means to Be Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 62.

<sup>14</sup> Tatman, 199.

possible beyond oppression and suffering.<sup>15</sup> She appeals (in an empiricist vein) to sensory perception as fundamental to conception of ideas, because all knowledge is rooted in the sensory capacities of the body.<sup>16</sup> Because structures of alienation have disconnected us from our power to feel, and thus, to know, returning to embodied relationality via sensory and sensual means and “trust[ing] our senses, our capacities to touch, taste, smell, hear, see, and thereby know” is learning via the senses “what is good and what is bad, what is real and what is false [...]. [S]ensuality is a foundation for our authority.”<sup>17</sup> Yet Heyward is also careful not to posit this kind of “body knowledge” as an individually gained knowledge. Because bodies are always bound up in ambiguous, complex relations with other bodies and the world, situated bodily knowledge is necessarily communal.<sup>18</sup>

I cautioned above against a romanticizing or universalizing of “relationality” as intrinsic to human existence.<sup>19</sup> Relationality is not inherently innocent, thus women’s

---

<sup>15</sup> Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotics as Power and the Love of God*, 187. It is also important to note that Heyward understands the “erotic” as “the yearning to be involved.” She leans here on Audre Lorde’s definition of the erotic.

<sup>16</sup> Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation*, 172. Heyward is citing feminist ethicist Beverly Wildung Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love,” in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> Heyward’s own experiences and consciously self-reflexive reflections on them are central to her own theological reflections. Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotics as Power and the Love of God*, 93. Heyward recounts some of her own bodily sensory experiences, e.g., experiencing the call to priesthood and its confirmations, in Carter Isabel Heyward, *A Priest Forever: One Woman’s Controversial Ordination in the Episcopal Church* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1999). Her engagement of her own feelings and personal issues via a women’s consciousness-raising group and psychotherapy are significant grounding experiences for her theological aim at personal contextualization. See also Angela Pears, *Feminist Christian Encounters: The Methods and Strategies of Feminist Informed Christian Theologies* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 71-82.

<sup>18</sup> Tatman, 199.

<sup>19</sup> See chapter 2, footnote 13. My caution is informed by Serene Jones, who argues that relationality can serve as the structure to appropriate or fit in that which is marginal, and she also wonders

experience of relationships can be marked by oppression as well as complicity, be it in deference to cultural customs or survival struggles.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, mutuality, commonly used as signifier for *having the same relationship toward each other, or being directed and received by each toward the other, or as reciprocal relationship*, is not inherently innocent or justice making. I do not take issue with Heyward constructing and using mutuality to describe her theological aim (I also appreciate that her interest is not in abstract notions of mutuality per se, but in “God” as the justice-creating power in mutual relationships).<sup>21</sup> But given my exploration of bodily perceptual orientation in the world as condition for our existence, I believe there are some noteworthy critical challenges to bring to her work.

With body theology, I approach Heyward’s theology presupposing our pre-reflective involvement in the world and with each other, our emergent existence with bodily and socio-culturally specific bodily perceptual orientations. Perception is not a tool, but in line with the principles of body theology, perception *is* how we experience.

---

if valorizing traditional stereotypes of women being more relational can really be liberating. Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, 47.

<sup>20</sup> I do not mean to imply that Heyward is ignorant to systemic structures of oppression and our implications in it, far from it. Her emphasis on relationality should not be mistaken for primarily being concerned with individual one-on-one interpersonal relationships (though her conception does include them in a significant way). Heyward is clear that we are always in relation to people and other living beings, as groups and to groups, via economical, political, and other larger systemic relations. Right relations include concern regarding right relations between communities, nations, etc., and Heyward’s conception of injustice indicates she understands it as multilayered, complex, with sometimes competing dynamics/types of injustice coming to bear in people’s lives. For example, she explores interlocking and interrelated injustices such as racism, sexism, imperialism, classism, militarism, anti-Semitism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism in Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation*.

<sup>21</sup> Theologically, bringing to bear her concern with relationality and mutuality on the concept of God, she defines God as “our power in mutual relation.” God is then a quality of existence, rather than a metaphysical presence outside of and separate from of the world. Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotics as Power and the Love of God*, 3.

The way we experience (feel, think, speak, imagine, talk, touch) in the world emerges from a social habitual base, from the way we emerge as existing in the world, already experiencing (feeling, thinking, speaking, imagining, talking, touching) a certain way, along pre-established lines of orientation which align our perceptions and bodily habits. In other words, sensory perception is not an unutilized or undervalued set of (epistemological or ontological) structures which may help us enter mutual relations, but perception is already grounding, already structuring our existence.<sup>22</sup>

Our bodily experience is grounded in a mutual constitution of our existence and emergence in the world. We are already bound up in a mutual, pre-reflective relationship with others and the world; our bodily perceptions, movements, and expressions are immersed and grounded in the bodily social sediment which we are born into. To then diagnose sin and/or evil in the world as alienation from each other and from our bodily feelings is to disregard that this very alienation Heyward is writing about *comes about through* our mutual embeddedness in the world and with each other.

Heeding another body theology principle, namely acknowledging that our bodily experiences contain ambiguity and paradoxes, requires a conceptualization of relationality which holds mutuality and alienation not in a dualistic either/or fashion. Rather, mutuality and alienation are embedded with each other, intertwined in experiences of both/and: relations can encompass mutuality and alienation; mutuality and alienation both come about in relation.

---

<sup>22</sup> Therefore, when referring to perception as a tool to be utilized, Heyward naturalizes what is perceived (as I have demonstrated in chapter two).

Bringing body theology to bear on Heyward's work, I can assert that the patterns of alienation (racism, sexism, nationalism, etc.) we are born into are patterns of bodily perceptual alignments. I experience alienation under oppressive structures not only because I have been alienated from my bodily feeling, but because my socio-cultural context aligns me with others in a mutual constitution through orientation devices of individual, autonomous, mind-over-matter ideologies. My emergence in the world, the emergence of the world, and the emergence of others with me in the world is already constituted by being directed and received by each toward each other. We are already immersed in a pre-reflective reciprocal relationship: that of being perceptually oriented toward each other and by each other.

Heyward asserts that we are alienated by structures of oppression which prevent a familiarity and trust in—and necessity to return to—our sensory/sensual capacities. Yet body theology reveals that/how it is precisely our bodily sensory, sensual capacities which may produce those alienations from each other. Structures of oppression, systemic injustices, are cultural sensory perceptual expressions, bodily movements and orientations which come to be habituated and maintain alignments of alienation. So rather than the answer to oppressive –isms, mutuality and relationality take part in the significant process of how we come to bodily experience alienation. We are already perceptually directed toward and received by each other in specific ways, for example in gendered and racialized habituations, and this aligns us with (and maintains through us) experiences of alienation from each other.

This body theology perspective significantly bears on Heyward's theo-ethical aim. She charges that to be in touch with our feelings, to claim our bodily perceptions as access to truth, makes the world intelligible to us and can alert us to danger, injustice, or violation of bodily and emotional integrity. Bodily senses, for example, allow me to feel safe or threatened as I walk "alone at night through a neighborhood that is strange to me," so that my immediate sensory apprehension alerts me to possible danger in difference.<sup>23</sup> Yet these perceptual apprehensions, our bodily feelings in certain situations, are already shaped in a pre-reflective current. The meaning of 'danger' or 'threat' emerges from a mutual constitution of myself and my environment along bodily perceptual orientation lines (of say, whiteness, class, heteronormativity), meanings which are not fixed or settled "body knowledges," but contingent and fluid significances emerging in motile engagements within bodily relations.

Heyward writes of erotic justice as creating boundaries *with* each other, learning *with* each other how to cross them, strengthen them, or loosen them,<sup>24</sup> yet when we take our existence as bodily perceptual orientation in the world into account, we can see how that is already happening pre-reflectively, bodily, socially. To aim for just relations through bodily expressions, feelings, sensual movements, requires us to be able to account for how our bodily feelings come about. Reframing mutuality as that in which we are already embedded (not alienated from) does not negate an ethical trajectory. Rather, it can highlight the ambiguity, indeterminacy, and tensions inherent in relations

---

<sup>23</sup> Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotics as Power and the Love of God*, 113.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

Heyward highlights. It allows us to account for the bodily feelings, the sensual apprehensions of the world, which demonstrate social relations embedded with power and desires, and even “truth” about what a situation, a context, or a relation “means.”

Without accounting for our bodily perceptual orientations, for the ways in which my feelings, my desires to touch, my imaginations expressed in speech come about, we are tempted to equate our feeling/perception of ‘danger’ or ‘evil’ with the embodied presence of it. I certainly agree with Heyward that the bodily sense of feeling threatened in the presence of an abusive, violent person is a perception of evil and sin. Sharing feminist commitments, I am sure we have common perceptual orientations which allow us to perceive the orientation lines of patriarchal sexism and heteronormativity and the effects they have on aligning bodily movements. Yet the examples I provided in chapter three and four showed that ‘danger’ or ‘evil’ as perceptually emerging meaning is also too easily attached to difference in a way that reinforces oppressive structures. To be in touch with one’s bodily feelings may just as easily lead to my apprehension of truth about a black body encountered on the street signaling ‘evil.’ Furthermore, tapping into our feelings/sensory perceptions does not necessarily lead to a world perceived in line with a feminist consciousness. Put differently, I may be bodily aligned in ways so that experiences of oppression or abuse are part of my habituation and bodily movement in the world. My bodily perceptual orientations then situate me in a way that trusting or valuing my sensory perceptions does not necessarily lead me to liberative truths about my experience. I might not even perceptually experience in ways which might bring about meaning regarding relationality in the ways Heyward envisions it, i.e., my bodily



experiences of violence *are* what makes sense in my life and what creates meaning in a situation.

We do not need to dismiss attention to our bodily experiences, but we need to be able to complexly grasp why certain apprehensions or knowledges about others and the world come to be natural truth, even when they reinforce stereotypes and oppressive behaviors. It is *because* we are indivisible body-mind-selves that, for example, heteronormativity has such a hold on our embodied lives, not because we lost touch with our bodies. To aim for justice, for just and right relations, for mutuality which does not lead to emergence of oppression, is to be in touch with how our bodily experiences *are* us, for better or worse.

Theology as enterprise in Heyward is always, critically and fundamentally, a “communal or collective struggle to comprehend ourselves in a world in which relation is broken violently.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it grows out of lived experiences and the needs felt in different, particularly embodied communities.<sup>26</sup> To do body theology in a Heywardian frame can allow us to do relational, communally-grounded theology that begins with the pre-reflective dimensions emerging in our bodily movements together. Tapping into our experience is then more than being in touch with our feelings (even as we might strive to overcome ambiguous or conflicting feelings towards each other or others through embodied social justice actions). Grounding Heyward’s theology in experience can be crucially expanded by understanding how our bodily perception is what supports certain

---

<sup>25</sup> Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relations*, 68.

<sup>26</sup> Heyward not only draws on personal experiences as I footnoted above. Her writings always acknowledge and account for (and describe her accountability to) the communities in which she resides and engages.

kinds of community feelings over others (including those supporting alienation and separation); it is to understand how all bodily experience, all bodily sensing, is bound up in pre-reflective relationality.

Rather than something we have simply lost touch with, sensory perception is how we got to be in our current embodied situation in the first place. Bodily experiences can be a valuable tool in thinking about ethical implications, because it is in our bodily experiences that the currents which “float the boat” of our lives can be traced. Tracing bodily perceptual orientations to the best of our abilities can be a tool in demonstrating the intersections Heyward is careful to highlight. As I have shown, it can allow for complex investigations into how, for example, nationalism is aligned through racial alignments, or how class alignments are supported by currents of gendered perceptual orientation.

Broadening my attention on Heyward from her concepts of relationality and mutuality to her larger theological project, there are ways in which body theology can significantly strengthen and support the task of a relational theologian. Heyward’s theology is worked out within a systematic approach, formulating coherent theological concepts regarding God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the church community. Since God is defined by her as power in mutual relation, and the shape of God is justice, all human activity can be divine activity (the Spirit of God moving on earth). God, rather than being a personal figure, but the ground of being, is seen in human behavior such as compassionate action. All human acts of mutual relating are “goddling,” allowing God the

sacred sensual power which infuses our bodies to reach out to others. The theologian's task is to discern God's presence in the here and now and reflect on the meaning of it.

The Heywardian theologian cannot rely on the senses to tell truth in the way in which Heyward suggests, but can still appeal to sensory perception as significantly embedded in our bodily experiences. Bodily experiences then may still be the realm in which "goddling"/genuine justice-love relations across difference are possible, even crucial and necessary. However, sensory perception is not access to this realm, but is embedded in it. Rather than appealing to the senses to guide us toward mutuality, appealing to sensory perception needs to be done in a complex and nuanced way. Because sometimes, justice-love relations require that we deviate from the ways our sensory perceptions are aligned. It requires we change directions in our perceptual facing and bodily move into relations our senses might tell us to turn away from or close ourselves off from. Rather than relying on feelings to guide us, we might need to acquire new bodily movements so that our feelings can "catch up" with the truth about just relations which can emerge when we face that which "feels" different. This can only strengthen Heyward's claim that right relations can be hard and difficult, and her belief that we ought to aim to foster human acts of love and making justice in everyday situations. While her appeal to the senses might get in the way of supporting just relations in a nuanced way, a body theology approach can help Heyward's aim for visceral, bodily, sensual "goddling" toward just relations; perhaps in new, different, even queer orientations toward each other.

## Aligning with Indecency and Marcella Althaus-Reid

Marcella Althaus-Reid approaches the doing of theology in radical ways by “contextually queering” Christian theology, particularly liberation theologies, through recontextualizing, “a permanent exercise of serious doubting in theology.”<sup>27</sup> She charges Christianity with being complicit in the colonization and domination of Latin America, not the least through imposing a heterosexual rule of decency which underpins oppressive economic, social, and sexual systems of exploitation.<sup>28</sup> She highlights how theological discourses have domesticated bodies, excluding challenges from different perspectives, particularly those perspectives which seek to hold together the intersections of sexual identity with racial and political constructions.<sup>29</sup> I already discussed, albeit briefly, how Althaus-Reid’s approach to utilizing experience is close to an intellectualist position, which leads to theologizing as interpretive endeavor, as Althaus-Reid quickly moves from description of experience to mining it as metaphor for a theological construction.<sup>30</sup>

“Indecency” and “queering” become significant concepts at work in Althaus-Reid’s theological project. Emphasizing the immanence of God in all bodily experiences, she particularly focuses on uncovering that which has been denied as site of divine revelation by the disciplining discourse of heterosexual, patriarchal colonialism. Because her theological concerns began and were significantly shaped in the streets of Buenos Aires, Argentina, she offers theological analyses through experiences of Latin American

---

<sup>27</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-20.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>30</sup> I will elaborate on this critique and possible body theology solutions further below.

women, from theologians like her to the lemon vendors on the street.<sup>31</sup> These experiences, she claims, have been “decented” to exclude the sexual experiences of the poor, thus presenting a decent image of the poor as the focal point of liberation theologies, effectively fetishizing and oppressing the poor, especially poor women, yet again.<sup>32</sup>

Althaus-Reid is committed to beginning with and speaking back particular experiences, but requires that bodily experiences need to be approached with “sexual honesty.”<sup>33</sup> The queering hermeneutical circle of indecent theology begins with experience, but does not pre-define or censor what counts as experience. Because the sexual experiences and desires of the poor and marginalized have been systematically excluded, Althaus-Reid makes those her explicit starting and focal point.<sup>34</sup>

When she critically deconstructs complex layers of oppression, her conceptualization bears resemblances to the way in which I have framed perceptual

---

<sup>31</sup> Althaus-Reid was born in Rosario, Argentina, knowing about life in poverty first hand. She earned her first degree at ISEDET, the center for the study of liberation theology in Latin America. She then worked in social and community projects in marginalized and deprived areas of Buenos Aires. Her work was inspired by Paolo Freire. She was invited to establish similar projects in Dundee and Perth (Scotland), earned a PhD at the University of St. Andrews, and was the first female lecturer appointed at the University of Edinburgh.

<sup>32</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, 22-26,34-35. Liberation theologies, Althaus-Reid charges, have idealized a model of the poor, ignorant but faithful Christian mother,” but not a poor woman who also has sexual experiences, sexual desires and preferences. While decency for men has been posited as honesty and trustworthiness, for women it involved gendered expectations and regulations regarding sexuality and sexual behavior. What is expected of women, and what is considered proper for them, masks a multitude of oppressions regarding gender, sex, race, and economical arrangements.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Althaus-Reid’s scholarship, activism, and personal involvement are testimony to the concern and personal commitment she held for marginalized communities and their suffering from structural injustices. For example, she was committed to justice for transgender persons, and was involved in this community personally but also advocated tirelessly for recognition and acceptance of transgender persons in the social realm, as well as for legal recognition and protection.

orientations and the supportive pre-reflective currents of bodily experience. She describes the orders of (sexual) decency, of what can enter church settings, theological constructions, and theological patterns, as the underlying and supportive orders of oppression.<sup>35</sup> She charges that (and here I am applying the conceptual language of body theology to her work) the decenting of theology aligns perceptual orientations in such ways that the enterprise of theology emerges as theological engagements with a given directionality (say, concern for the poor, social justice), along certain orienting lines (the poor, the oppressed, the exploited). Yet the “sexual ideology performed in a socializing pattern” perceptually disappears behind certain naturalized Christian notions of decency.<sup>36</sup> Or, put differently through a body theology frame again, pre-reflective currents of sexual ideologies (sediment habits of heterosexist patriarchal Christianity) give rise to perceptual emergences of proper liberation theologies and alignments of proper theological subjects.

When Althaus-Reid then turns to bodily experiences, she seeks to queer theology by making it “indecent,” i.e., attend to what has been habitually excluded. For example, our bodily experiences of sexuality do include experiences of exploitation, but also lust; they might incorporate heterosexual tendencies, but also queerness. When making sense of human experiences, sexuality in all its various expressions needs to be available as a resource for theology. Althaus-Reid seeks to present experiences rendered too taboo for public theologizing as instances of experiencing the divine. The hermeneutical circle of

---

<sup>35</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, 25-26.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

indecent theology works well for a body theology approach because she understands her hermeneutics to be more an event than a method. The hermeneutical event that starts with experience and the naming of it uses sexuality as a way of thinking to unmask ideological constraints, and understands reflective analysis to demand action in regards to liberation from political, sexual, and religious oppressions.<sup>37</sup>

What makes Althaus-Reid's work compelling for my framing of body theology is that she is not simply charging us to be "in touch with our sexuality" (as in similar calls referring to our senses). Rather, she challenges us to go further in our attending to the sexual in our experiences,<sup>38</sup> and understand it more extensively as (what I have called) the pre-reflective current and tacit knowledge informing political and economic constructions, shaping discourses on divinely ordained ideologies and alienations of embodied lives/experiences via alignments of decency codes.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, her refusal to apply her indecenting method to developing a closed narrative of liberative systematic theology, i.e., a solid structure for a/one revised Christian story that is liberative in its indecency, makes her theological approach appealing to the body theology commitment I put forth; like me, she is less interested in systematically formulated content than in

---

<sup>37</sup> Marcella M. Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 2. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, 126.

<sup>38</sup> For example, she challenges feminist theologies for focus on sex beyond connections to gender, but not on "sex as 'having sex'", which includes "sex as lust." Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, 87.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

theology as critical reflection that is always contextual, localized, and embodied. Her theology aims to remain flexible and able to travel to various indecent experiences.<sup>40</sup>

To think sexually when doing theology in Althaus-Reid is to queer theology by grounding reflections in particular bodies, and more specifically, in their sexual practices. In the relationships of marginalized bodies, especially their sexual practices, we can find experiences to queer theological imagery, i.e., which unveil God from and in those places typically excluded.<sup>41</sup> In her frequently invoked and cited example of the lemon vendors on the street of Argentina, Althaus-Reid directs our attention to the important economical, political, and theological structures and oppressions she seeks to deconstruct by invoking the underwear-free women selling goods on the streets.<sup>42</sup> When she charges that the everyday lives of people provide us “with a starting point for a process of doing

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 101-102. Pears, *Feminist Christian Encounters: The Methods and Strategies of Feminist Informed Christian Theologies*, 150.

<sup>41</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*.

<sup>42</sup> After leading with quotes describing women without underwear in public life and condemning them as immoral, indecent, or comically dismissing them, Althaus-Reid comments, “Should a woman keep her pants on in the streets or not? Shall she remove them, say, at the moment of going to church, for a more intimate reminder of her sexuality in relation to God? What difference does it make if that woman is a lemon vendor and sells you lemons in the streets without using underwear? Moreover, what difference would it make if she sits down to write theology without underwear? The Argentinian woman theologian and the lemon vendors may have some things in common and others not. In common, they have centuries of patriarchal oppression, in the Latin American mixture of clericalism, militarism and the authoritarianism of decency, that is, the sexual organization of the public and private spaces of society.” Ibid., 1. She then describes a street scene of the lemon vendors, weaving together imagery of their presence in the street with histories of conquest and oppression. She continues, “The everyday lives of people always provide us with a starting point for a process of doing contextual theology without exclusions, in this case without the exclusion of sexuality struggling in the midst of misery. [...] A living metaphor for God, sexuality and the struggle in the streets of Buenos Aires comes from the images of lemon vendors. A materialist-based theology finds in them a starting point from which ideology, theology and sexuality can be rewritten from the margins of society, the church and systematic theologies.” Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, 4.



contextual theology without exclusions,” she wants us to include “sexuality struggling in the midst of misery.”<sup>43</sup>

Yet her move from experience to employment of it as metaphor or site of textual inquiry takes place rather quickly. When Althaus-Reid posits the sexual and political practices of the marginalized as point of departure for theology, she turns rather quickly to particular experiences as “living metaphor for God,” employing the “*images of lemon vendors*,”<sup>44</sup> seeking to “sexually deconstruct Christ” in order to allow for re-significations. She positively appropriates words, such as “God, the Faggot; God, the Drag Queen; God, the Lesbian;” exploring and unpacking seemingly shocking juxtapositions of the sexual and the theological in leather salvation, “Bi/Christ,” “French-kissing God,” investigating in cultural terms that “God is a Sodomite.” She describes “God’s voyeuristic vocation,” and “God the Whore” who empties herself in a brothel.<sup>45</sup>

Althaus-Reid urges us to consider these bodily sites metaphorically and symbolically as the epistemological site for doing theology.<sup>46</sup> The indecent experiences of the poor become the experiences that Mariology or Christology are made of. So when she employs the sexual experiences of the marginalized, she explores, for example, the Bi/Christ as the hard-to-pin-down sexual body, misunderstood on both sides of dividing lines and providing openings to borders and categories. This Bi/Christ operates outside of

---

<sup>43</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, 4.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 95. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, 89. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, 114. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, 125. Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 86. Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 39. Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 95. Respectively.

<sup>46</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, 3-4.

heteronormative and heteropatriarchal binaries and liberates the poor *and* the rich, those on the sexual and economic margins *and* those in the center.<sup>47</sup> Althaus-Reid has been lauded for the radical, subversive, and liberatory theological potential in her indecent images of human and divine relationships. Yet she also has been challenged for the inherent limitations that her utilization of poststructuralist and queer methodologies brings to her doing of theology, for example, her failure to spell out what a Bi/Christ really means, or what substantial difference lies in using these bodily groundings.<sup>48</sup>

I diagnose this failure as resulting from the phenomenological position she falls into. As I pointed out in chapter two, Althaus-Reid connects perception to recognition of meaning, recognition that is situated in particular embodiments. Perception is alternatively considered as bodily function which can be accessed to gather information; other times it is a socially-shaped recognition and interpretation of what is sensorially perceived. While she does not make any explicit appeals to perceptual capacities, her utilization of experience appears to be informed by a common phenomenological method in religious studies which understands perception as the capacity for objective observation and for “truthful” description of sensory information of a lived experience/phenomenon.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 114-118.

<sup>48</sup> Bohache, 223.

<sup>49</sup> Phenomenological approaches in the study of religion view religion as experiences with different components to be studied. Religious phenomena can be studied as consistently as possible with the orientation of the practitioner. This approach owes its origin and conceptual development to a large extent to scholars like Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, William Brede Kristensen and Gerardus Van der Leeuw. These phenomenologists of religion commonly build on and appropriate Husserl’s influence on the phenomenological movement. Husserl recognized that prior beliefs and interpretations come to influence one’s thinking. So his phenomenological method recognizes the role of the subjective observer in apprehending the world. It asserts that knowledge begins from within, with the subject moving outside

Body theology can begin in this space in which Althaus-Reid is limited by her phenomenological stance, slowing down the move to metaphorical use of radical indecent imagery found in bodily experiences. Maintaining the focus of exploration in bodily experiences themselves aids in articulating significant differences found in marginal bodily sexual experiences and is also useful in spelling out the meanings which might emerge from a bisexual body, or from selling wares without underwear.

When Althaus-Reid invites us to visit her city, Buenos Aires, and to take walks in the barrios, she invites us to take in the sights of humans, animals, houses, trees; to take in the smells of garbage and flowers, food and humans, coffee and sex; to tune into the sounds of political songs and theological discussions. She then invites us to think about what we thought when seeing her streets, because “[i]mpressions in foreign lands are so deceptive.”<sup>50</sup> She then presents this image as metaphor for the fragmentation of subjectivity, the multiple consciousness effected by violently imposed Christian and European narratives. The lemon vendors provide Althaus-Reid with the imagery of bodily experience, and Althaus-Reid insists that “[t]hose lemon vendors can tell you a few things about postmodernism.”<sup>51</sup> Though as Althaus-Reid continues, it appears that it is the *image* more than the actual lemon vendors speaking, it is what the lemon vendors

---

itself into an objective description of the world. But to do so, one must bracket attitudes and presuppositions, suspend judgment. This allows us to describe phenomena as they appear, and to attain understanding of their structures and patterns. James Cox, *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 25-30. For a compilation of select essays on the phenomenology of religion by various religious or phenomenological scholars (such as Schleiermacher, Feuerbach, van der Leeuw, and others) see Joseph Dabney Bettis, ed. *Phenomenology of Religion: Eight Modern Descriptions of the Essence of Religion* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1969).

<sup>50</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, 3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

may invoke in the interpreting theologian rather than their experiences themselves, that does the telling in Althaus-Reid's work. Thus, the intellectual agency of decoding and interpreting this imagery is clearly aligned with Althaus-Reid, while the lemon vendors fade into the background as material, rather than as agents of theology.<sup>52</sup>

Yet how might I follow this invitation to do theology from the sexual experiences of the marginalized, without falling for what Althaus-Reid called (and criticized) "theological voyeurism"?<sup>53</sup> Body theology intervenes at this junction, inviting me to feel and sense a bit longer, to pay attention to sensual cues and the sensory limits I am traveling with. Possibly, having been schooled by postcolonial feminists, I might already be aware that I am meeting her lemon vendors *not* in perceptual innocence. And I might be cued into my own visualist biases, paying attention to how I look and position myself in relation to the lemon vendors, and what my visual judgments of or in the encounter are. Thrown into perceptual unknowns, I might experience offense, surprise, disorientation. Body theology principles challenge me to look for the sense in bodily experiences (e.g., the lemon vendors bodily movements already make sense and create meaning, before and without my acts of interpretation). And I am challenged to refrain

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 3-4. A similar reservations is expressed by Emilie Townes when she challenges Althaus-Reid's descriptions of the lemon vendors in a fashion which casts the reader in a voyeuristic position, deliberately perhaps, but voyeuristic nevertheless. Townes is troubled by the way in which Althaus-Reid's invocations maintain the object status of the lemon vendors throughout her work, as she falls short of engaging for them and with them their materiality, nakedness, sex, race, class, etc. "The too-flat descriptions of the indigenous lemon vendors does not help me understand the tie this region has to the United States, Great Britain, France or the Netherlands, or the horror of 1492 and the death it brought through violence and disease to three-quarters of the indigenous population within a hundred years." Emilie M. Townes, "Marcella Althaus-Reid's *Indecent Theology*: A Response," in *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots: Essays in Honour of Marcella Althaus-Reid*, ed. Lisa Isherwood and Mark D. Jordan (London, UK: SCM Press, 2010), 64.

<sup>53</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, 26.

from using body theology as framework of certainty in interpretation, but rather remain unsettled and attend to meaning emerging in bodily (and interpretative) encounters.

Sexuality and its embodied manifestations have often been posited as antagonist to theological enterprises. When Althaus-Reid seeks to establish the sexual as integral to critical theological analysis of economical, political, cultural, colonial structures, she might be invoking the emerging smell of lemons blending with genital scents. But she immediately connects smells to sex, invoking a metaphorical connection between sexuality and economics, locating theological messages at this intersection in the street of Buenos Aires. Yet this might be a rushed connection to make. Lacking bodily perceptual immersions in this context myself, bringing body theology principles to Althaus-Reid can nevertheless provide a way to more fully ground her theology in the experiences she invokes.

For example, exploring bodily experiences in terms of perceptual dimension, what meanings could be detected emerging when paying attention to the smells on the street? Is it the smell of sex or the smell of poverty blending with the lemons? Is it a perceptual movement which claims space? How does smell align bodily movements, and what might be pre-reflective currents, and what might be perceptual emergences, or alignments of bodily orientations, supported by them? What emerging meanings might be perceived and expressed by the lemon vendors? While the lemon vendors might lack the jargon of cultural criticism (and even body theology), what *do* they speak, in other words, what are their linguistic expressions, their movements of sound, smell, touch, taste, intuition or knowledge? What are the sensory relations within which religious, sexual, economic, and

political practices are performed? What is the full sensorium through which these performances take place, and what emerges from it? What is the significance of sensory hierarchies and orders, how do the senses (e.g. the smell/ing of lemon vendors) interact with and engage in the political, the economical, etc.?

Exploring more fully the sense in bodily experience, I am urged to consider the significances of different sensory perceptions and their interactions. How do particular women create their own sexual, economic, political, personal spaces through their bodily movements, how do they bodily-habitually engage in life? What are the aspects of culture and power that are difficult to unravel by simply gazing at the lemon vendor? What kinds of agency and resistances are perceptually embodied as a bodily subject selling lemons without underwear? To learn of this, and be implicated by my own immersions in sensory dominations, I need to be able to take up theology from the epistemological site that is Althus-Reidian bodies filled/filling space with senses, rather than be immediately thrown into the theological imagery presented. Moving too quickly from observed experience to metaphor may reinstall a dualism when the intellectual activity of interpretation and metaphorical representation of experience as theological critique takes up almost immediate focus.

Ambiguity and paradoxes may emerge in the perceptual dimensions on the streets of Buenos Aires. Smells may evoke memory, place, and agency, as anyone who has experienced nostalgia at the smell of whatever you consider comfort food can attest to. Smells might signify inclusion and/or they can signify distance and cultural difference. As beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, so does the scent of home lay in the nose of the

one smelling it. In the case of our hypothetical visit to the imagined lemon vendors in Buenos Aires, perceived olfactory differences often turn to oppression when class and cultural differences are turned into “filth” and “stench,” which are associated with uncleanness or immorality. So Althaus-Reid is right when she charges that the private and the public, the sexual and the economic are mixed. But there might be compelling ways in which this interrelation can be explored and articulated, ways in which I might be implicated beyond my positioning as theological voyeur.

The refusal to comply with the olfactory sensibilities of the decent theological tourist (me) or upper class sensory ideologies might be the sensory disruption of hegemonic spaces. Aromas, sights, and textures are not autonomous from their political and economic milieu. A bodily contestation of olfactory aesthetics can disrupt colonial spaces, and the lemon vendors may create a place in which their bodies, their olfactory emissions, rule; they may create a scented place in which they cope with their embodied reality and displacements, in which they make their bodies and their places a home.

Attention to bodily perceptual orientations and exploration of sensory dimensions might not significantly alter the theological output of Althaus-Reid’s work, but it would support and strengthen her resourcing of experience, especially when she seeks to maintain the bodily/sexual aspects therein. Body theology in this case would be able to provide a methodological contribution to indecent theology by lingering with/in bodily experiences. Body theology not only provides indecent theology with questions to raise regarding experience, but with ways to draw the material connections, and show the connections that (are) matter, between the experience drawn from and historical, political,

economical, etc., dimensions. Because sexual decency is enforced through experience, through bodily perceptual experience, indecent theology can only gain from in-depth inquiries into perceptual orientations. Even as outsider, I might be able to inquire into a bodily situation exactly by implicating myself, by asking questions which might reveal my own bodily perceptual limits and limited orientations.

Attending to bodily experiences of others or of my own in search of metaphors, even with the explicit and passionate concerns held by Althaus-Reid, needs to delay the departure into the symbolic until the layered and multifaceted perceptual experiences and movements are felt rather than abstracted. To ground theology in lived experiences is seeking to be fully present to them and attending to the ways in which I might be drawn into experiences to which I do and do not belong. Put differently, I am bodily encountering the other, and my own bodily perceptual orientations and alignments habituate me to experience in certain ways and pay attention to certain components. Yet there are also ways in which some dimensions or components of this experience I want to draw from are perceptually hidden, or habitually not perceived, by me. This is the ambiguity and the paradox of bodily experience which requires that I remain epistemologically unsettled when exploring experience.

Althaus-Reid's indecent theology and Heyward's relational theology have been my test cases to show how body theology can expand and strengthen some of the theologies which seek to be grounded in bodily experience in different ways. I will now turn again to bodies and experiences familiar and personal to me. With the principles of



body theology framing my inquiries, I will go after the questions which initiated this project and bodily experiences of and in my family's home.

### **Orientation of Family Bodies**

I am re-entering my experiences in and with my family after having travelled through theoretical and theological spaces to explore how our bodies and experiences situate us in the world. To conclude this project, I will return to familiar experiences and explore them through body theology. With body theology as a commitment guided by principles (rather than a specific theological method or system), I will show what body theology can do analytically and theologically by offering glimpses into body theology at work in different existing theological models.

By re-visiting shared experiences with my grandmother and mother, and setting out with body theology and attention to bodily perceptual orientation, I acknowledge our bodily movements, social habituations, and perceptual repertoires as loci for meaning to emerge. For example, my mother's cooking in the garage and her inhabiting the marginal spaces of our home is a place where everyday experiences give rise to meanings shaped by bodily/cultural differences running through and across this household.

The starting point for a critical inquiry into the shared experiences at my childhood home is an appreciation for these cultural differences as bodily encounter, and an understanding that this inhabited space is one of the dimensions through which we can see how our bodily experiences "are us." What (feminist) analysis of the visual aspects and/or textual meanings embodied in the marginality of my mother's position in the home have enabled me to do thus far is to inquire into the inscription of "immigrant,"

“daughter-in-law,” “foreigner,” and/or “mother” on my mother’s body. But taking bodily perception seriously, now that I conceive of the senses not as intrinsic, natural-biological properties of the body, I can inquire into the ways in which our perceptions and perceptual movements are not “innocent,” but the situated practices of our lives together with various meanings emerging.

### Making Home in New Spaces

*It was the middle of World War II. My grandmother fled the invading Russian army, leaving her home in West Prussia with three toddlers but without her husband (who was detained and later died in a Siberian camp). Displaced for three years in a refugee camp in Denmark, Oma was resettled after the war ended. She was brought to a small rural Mennonite community in southern Germany, where residents were obligated to take in fellow Mennonite refugees. Dropped off in the middle of the village and lined up for residents to come and chose “their” Flüchtling, as single mother with three small children, Oma was the last one “picked.” She was not the kind of help the farmers were hoping to acquire. For ten years, Oma tried to move out of the arranged accommodations and looked for a place of her own to rent for her small family, but was denied for various reasons (children too little, too big, no husband, etc.). When the state offered grants for families seeking to establish a new farmstead, she jumped on the chance and started a poultry farm with 20 chickens. After some years, the chicken house turned into a shed and the farm was no more, but Oma’s family had a home. My uncle and my father designed and built the house, but it was Oma’s dream and efforts that allowed a home to emerge.*

*Oma was determined to stay in this house, her home, for as long as she lived. In her will, she gave the house to my father, her favorite son and the last of her children to get married. This will legally cemented her right to stay in the house until her death. When Oma slowly came to need various kinds of care, my father Gernot was designated her power of attorney and her caretaker. His siblings who lived close by offered much advice, yet very little bodily care.*

*My mother was the foreign woman who married Oma's favorite son and moved into the house Oma fought to provide her children with after living as refugees in one room for years. My grandmother was the matriarch, and my mother tried her best to learn how to be a good German wife and daughter-in-law. But severe homesickness and the need for familiar cuisine led my mother to cooking Thai cuisine at home, an act that offended my grandmother's sense of proper nurture and her basic sense of proper smell. My mother was increasingly seen as the unruly, unthankful, renegade daughter-in-law who, rather than nursing Oma to "help out her poor husband," went off to work twelve hour shifts of physical labor tending to vineyards.*

*Today, if you pass our home during non-meal times, all you see is a house and a two-car garage with two adjoining garden huts. Yet during meal time, the garage opens and reveals a gas stove my father built, a fridge, and an array of tables with dishes and German and Thai kitchen tools. One of the garden huts is an outdoor dining room, with a table, more kitchen ware, and memorabilia from trips to Thailand. There we gather around a table, food brought out from the garage, and hear my mother calling us to "Sit down and eat, eat, eat, before it gets cold!"*

\*\*\*

This narrative, a compilation of stories shared with me and recollections/depictions of my own experiences, is, of course, not “all that there is to it.” To do body theology with these experiences, framing them through bodily perceptual orientation, I can get a grasp of bodily experiences and their perceptual dimensions whilst also maintaining a constructive flexibility. By that I suggest: meaning emerges in experience, and as we have seen, experience is perceptual; and my telling and thinking about past experiences is an experience itself, thus always open to new meanings emerging; constructive body theology then resists fixing a narrative, but rather “moves with” experience. Considering my family’s bodily perceptual movements as extensions of their body-selves into the world in real, tangible ways, body theology takes as resource our experiences at home as motile engagements with the world that orient us towards ways of achieving objectives and meaning, as projections of meaning, and as patterns that shape our way of being in the world.

The physical house, our family home, came to be an extension of my grandmother’s body. The house as home was the settling of her bodily habits and desires into her environment (the ways in which bodies extend through and construct culture); the house was incorporated into the way she moved and existed in her world. The presence of my mother, as non-Mennonite, non-Christian, non-German, and my mother’s alien ways of moving (through language, cooking, bodily relating, etc.) were intrusions into my grandmother’s physical space, into her home-body. Tension of sounds and smells were bodily perceptual tensions and invasions. My mother, aligned with her own socio-

cultural habits of honoring elders, especially mothers and grandmothers, sought to make bodily sense of her new space, her new home, by becoming part of this bodily space in the bodily ways she tacitly knew.

My grandmother's prohibition against cooking certain Thai dishes for the whole family was then, in some ways, a way to maintain bodily sense at home, to maintain certain meanings emerging, certain bodily habits of nurture. But in other ways it was also a way of dominating family practices and asserting control over my mother's decision making. To my mother, it also emerged as bodily perceptual re-orientation of her experiences, as sensory re-education/re-habitation, as restriction of bodily perceptual movements which impinged on habituated and tacit knowledges about herself and meanings familiar to my mother. If my mother chose to align with the family of my father, she had to align—among other things—with a certain food culture of tastes, smells, and presentations in order to be able to emerge as fit mother and nurturer.<sup>54</sup>

The struggle over who and what dictated bodily movements, and with it, ways of being in the world that was our home, required that certain bodily and social habits needed to be changed, and certain sensory desires came to be out of reach. The two women inhabited a space in ways which in their bodily movements and habituated tacit

---

<sup>54</sup> For a variety of investigations into taste and food cultures, inquiring into difference and meaning, see the volumes Carolyn Korsmeyer, ed. *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, ed. David Howes, *Sensory Formations* (New York: Berg, 2005). Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik, eds., *Food and Culture: A Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008). Noteworthy to the trajectory of this project are particularly the chapters on gender and consumption, and food and identity politics, e.g., Lisa Heldke, "Let's Cook Thai: Recipes for Colonialism," in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008). For a thorough study of food, taste, and their interrelations and connections with cultural performances such as kinship, mothering and nurturance in the specific context of Greater Mexican culture, see Ramona Lee Pérez, "Tasting Culture: Food, Family and Flavor in Greater Mexico" (Ph.D.diss., New York University, 2009). Pérez traces complexly and insightfully the relationship between cognition and bodily habits and again their involvement in kinship relations.

knowledges called attention to the multicultural and multiperceptual tensions woven into their relationship: regarding what is meaningful, what conforms to family values, what emerges as meaningful and communicative bodily perceptual movements, what emerges as family body perceptually aligned with “home.”

My mother’s cooking within and despite certain rules and restrictions is not just a development of differential consciousness,<sup>55</sup> but *is* the recognition and identification of technologies of power which subscribed her place and subjectivity.<sup>56</sup> In my mother’s culture, elders are honored and family values are aligned with the mother who is everything: children are indebted morally and practically to the mother, a bodily perceptual alignment which informs Thai socio-cultural life, private and public.<sup>57</sup> When talking about her garage kitchen, mom often lets me know that she did move cooking outside not because she was angry or because she wanted to be separate. Her main

---

<sup>55</sup> Differential consciousness is Chela Sandoval’s term for a key strategy employed by dominated peoples to survive demeaning and disempowering structures and ideologies. It is the skill to recognize and identify technologies of power as consensual illusions, and also to move differently through these technologies of domination, generating alternative beliefs and tactics of resistance. Chela Sandoval, "Dissident Globalizations, Emancipatory Methods, Social-Erotics," in *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 25-27. This is akin to the “hidden transcripts” articulated by James C. Scott, transcripts developed by oppressed groups to undermine public discourses of hegemonic power structures. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>56</sup> I appreciate Carole Counihan's description of the development of differential consciousness in Mexicana women of the San Luis Valley in southern Colorado to help me develop my analysis. Yet Counihan seems to make a distinction (or at least an inattentive separation) between food practices and consciousness, food work and liberating beliefs, a distinction I cannot uphold given my own framing of body/consciousness. Carole Counihan, "Mexicana's Food Voice and Differential Consciousness in the San Luis Valley of Colorado," in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>57</sup> From conversations with my mother. See also Niels Mulder, *Inside Thai Society: Religion, Everyday Life, Change* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2000), 58-73.

reason, she continues to tell me, are because she has respect for Oma and wanted peace in the family:

“You can’t change a situation by fighting or being greedy and wanting everything for your own. You bring about peace in the family by adjusting, not by forcing others to change for you. Changing what you do with your body is how you change the world around you. That’s how you bring about peace. You start with yourself. You show respect.”<sup>58</sup>

Yet my mother’s desire for bodily perceptual familiarity—the feeling of being home and with family through the taste, smell, and touch of food and process of preparation and presentation—is also connected to a recognition and identification of oppressive power dynamics extended through my grandmother. Mom would never call it that, or even refer to it negatively. Her linguistic signifying of this situation still embodies respect: “She didn’t like it very much;” “She said Gernot would like the Königsberger Klopse for dinner.” So she spatially and temporarily moved her food habits to the margins of the kitchen first, keeping a hot plate in a kitchen corner. She often begged my father to set up a separate kitchen in a different room of the house, but when this request was not fulfilled, she moved her kitchen to the margins of the home, into the garage. From the margins, she extends olfactorily and inhabits space and bodies. She survives demeaning and disempowering structures and nationalistic-racist ideologies by moving resistantly in the home, saturating herself and her space with marvelous aromas.

---

<sup>58</sup> Telephone conversation with my mother. Denver, Colorado and Eichenhof, Germany. April 12, 2013. Translation mine.

The garage kitchen is a spectacle and a subversion:<sup>59</sup> It is a spectacle in that my family and our familial social relations are mediated by the visual imagery of the way in which the home and the kitchen(s) are arranged and presented, but visible only during certain times and to certain observers or partakers. And it is subversion in that this marginal inhabitation critiques and resists my mother's position in the family. She navigates my grandmother's intrusive and abusive movements (treating her as the maid, questioning her ways of being a wife and mother) in bodily perceptual ways. She is unwilling to give up certain bodily habits (such as cooking and eating in ways she chooses), just because my father, even after she pleaded with him to move out of the home, or to make her a kitchen of her own, is unwilling/unable to accommodate her desire for meaningful bodily movements, for a way of being in the world and in her home that was meaningful to her.

A discursive or visual analysis cannot relate the embodied dimensions involved in the emergence of multiple and indeterminate meanings here. An analysis through concepts of power, identity, and struggle for respect and dignity cannot grasp the full sensorium which makes up bodily experiences in my family: neither the pre-reflective current and habituated orientations and habits supporting this family, nor the ambiguity and tensions emerging.

The bodily perceptual orientations of the rural German Mennonite village still align my mother with otherness, her food practices now emerging even more as alien and

---

<sup>59</sup> I borrow these terms from the analysis presented in Lisa Law, "Home Cooking: Filipino Women and Geographies of the Senses in Hong Kong," in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2005).



associated with strange habits. My mother's olfactory and culinary extensions are not autonomous from the socio-cultural, familial, and moral mechanisms and currents. She is wrapped up in perceptual orientations, "This is not how normal people do it, but I don't care," and perceptual alignments, "You go and get your degree, so you can get a good job and you don't have to live like I live." Yet she also expresses that her difference is as much personal choice as it is tacit knowledge out of/about bodily difference. "I can do what I want out here. You wouldn't be able to do any of this; you are not used to these kinds of things. And I want you to have a better life," she says as she fluidly moves around her garage kitchen space and invites me to sit down and watch her. Because there is no body without consciousness, and no consciousness without body, and because the way we move, see, smell, eat, speak, cook, feel *is* our consciousness of our world, my mother's bodily experiences and perceptual movements are her differential consciousness, her differential bodily perceptual orientation resisting consensus with oppressing socio-cultural schemata.

In bodily perceptual movement—such as cooking and consuming certain foods prepared a certain way—the space of home and the bodies making up our family are mutually constituted. Only in the experience of bodily habits (even as they change) can our bodily movements be meaningfully grasped, and I as body moving into and within this space am implicated in the meanings and the tacit knowledges emerging perceptually. Even after my grandmother began requiring more intensive care than my father could provide and moved into a nursing home, my mother refused to use the inside kitchen again, or any other room previously occupied by my grandmother. She would

often refer to not wanting to appear as the greedy daughter-in-law, but even more she would talk about the smells dominating certain rooms of the house, smells she did not want to dwell in.

My grandmother still extended in bodily perceptual (olfactory) ways in/through house. Her way of being in the world, and perceptual manners meaningful to my mother, still extended and moved and made meaning in the home. Though my grandmother could not verbally abuse or control my mother anymore, and her body did not dwell in the house anymore, her bodily perceptual reach still extended into the home in powerful ways, aligning my mother in ways so that she could only perceptually emerge on the margins of the home. Today, over three years after my grandmother's passing, with rooms now renovated and smells expelled, my mother utilizes her garage kitchen, cooking Thai dishes outside, baking German cheesecakes inside. "It's too tight in there sometimes. I need air."

Body theology demands that I recognize bodily experiences as making sense: My mother inhabits certain spaces. She is still inhabiting marginal spaces and only slowly moving into others. She now cooks in two kitchens and has different habits of eating in three different rooms. This is not a coincidence, nor indecision. Her bodily movements and perceptual extensions infer and imply sense, make conceptual order in her world, and make her world meaningful. And her bodily experiences are her sense-making in the world, her sensing and feeling herself in the world and as part of her world through various sensory movements and extensions. Her body theology is a taking hold of her home through extensions of smell, through adjustment and acquisition of bodily habits

such as eating in a way that feels meaningful to her. She bodily reaches out and extends her garage kitchen as the smell of fried garlic and fish sauce wafts across the patio and into the living spaces of our home. In the space of home, bodily (re)orientations and movements align the meanings emerging regarding home, body, world and emerging meaning through perceptual means.

Body theology allows me to gain a more complex understanding of these experiences. My mother's emergence was/is perceptually aligned in the community with her foreign religious habits, her lack of conforming to "Christian" or "German" values. The above-mentioned strong loyalties towards mothers in Thai culture led my mother to try and take care of Grandmother, but Grandmom made clear she did not want my mother to care for her in ways that left her feeling less than a matriarch. So my mother, failing and then refusing to conform to the role of primary caretaker of my grandmother, crosses perceptual lines of the community she lives in. Her bodily movements are not perceived as liberating herself from verbal and emotional abuse experienced by my grandmother, so she does not perceptually emerge as for example, victim-turned-survivor of emotional violence, but rather perceptually emerges aligned with national and religious foreignness and moral otherness.

There are different sediment cultural and social habits, pre-reflective currents supporting the emerging meanings of my family's bodily movements: Currents of nationalism and sediment habits of isolation of a non-mainstream religious community supported attitudes towards my grandmother and her children that ranged from hostile to indifferent, despite the theological commitments to hospitality and inclusion valued in

Mennonite communities and preached in the village church. My mother emerges and moves into the family space as immigrant through marriage, which threatens the already hard-won perceptual alignment of the family with the village community.

But the very bodily, emotional, social, and spiritual marginalization of my mother is supported by the similar pre-reflective currents which aligned my grandmother as refugee and then re-aligned her with national and religious sameness. Nationalism, religion, and rural community culture shape the ways in which our family bodies emerge, which bodily movements gain greater currency in shaping what our bodies “can.” My grandmother’s desire for home and a space of her own—induced by experiences of war, homelessness, poverty, and widowhood—brings about bodily perceptual movements through which she engages her world in a way meaningful to her. But these movements, these perceptual extensions in the world regarding home and family, supported by pre-reflective currents or nationalism and religion, also support and establish perceptual habits and devices which allow for tacit knowledge about my mother, her foreignness, her unruliness, her strange bodily habits which do not make sense in the home my grandmother inhabits. “Thai people cook outside,” my mother says. Struggling to emerge bodily perceptually in ways that make home meaningful to her, my mother takes up and tries on different bodily movements, attempting to orient herself in this new space. Yet what might be meaningful to her might not allow her to perceptually emerge in ways in which home, or other desires, are available to her.

There are ambiguities emerging in the garage kitchen and the bodily movements within it. The bodily perceptual alignments arranging our family bodies and the ways we

perceptually face each other and move toward each other give rise to my mother as a marginal body, a daughter-in-law who moves in many foreign ways and who refuses to comply with certain social habits. Yet my mother's bodily perceptual movements also give rise to habits which orient her in her space, which bring forth and project meanings for her invoking, for example, home and agency. The knowledges inherent in her perceptual acts are knowledges gained through specific perceptual orientations and movements. And from the margins of the family home, she knows how to raise/habituate her daughters in ways to maximize their perceptual passing as Germans and Mennonites, and she knows how to bodily move in ways so that even given the pre-reflective social and familial currents, she can inhabit space and extend in space in a way that makes her way of being meaningfully "home" to her.

This body theology approach to my family home and our family bodies allows me to get a more complex grasp on the meanings emerging in and through bodily experiences. This grasp is contingent on what I can perceive from within my own orientations to perception and on what I can perceive when crossing or being queered to my perceptual habits. I continue to experience space and time with my parents, and through the glimpses of and into difference I can deepen my understanding of my family's history or my mother's culture. The experiences I recalled and revisited here for this project are, of course, my own bodily perceptions, what I have grasped as meaningful and significant in, from, and through what I have seen, heard, smelled, touched, felt and thought with my family. And meanings emerging may shift and change, as I remember, analyze, and imagine the family situations I have described here. My own perceptions

must remain open to new experiences (remembering, analyzing, imagining being bodily perceptual experiences as well), new reflections and interpretations, different orientations and re-alignments, they must remain as motile as our bodily existence.

My understanding is partial and must remain unsettled. My grasp on the habitual schemata, the tacit knowledges concerning bodily habits that are meaningful and communicative in my family space is tentative and continuously open. I continue to experience *with others*, thus I must remain open to the experiences, perceptions, challenges and complexification others might bring to me, and new meaning arising in our interrelation. This is a positional, yet motile, openness that is not without tension, gaps, or fissures. For example as my mother listens to the descriptions of her kitchen I used in this dissertation and we seek to find common, meaningful understanding in German, we both continue translating—me doing English/German, her doing Thai/German cultural-linguistic-perceptual movements—as we speak about our experiences and experience each other.

I might “miss” certain knowledges about what is meaningful, about which bodily movements may bring about the meanings and desired values to be perceived. I might not come to know or understand everything my mother knows or understands. Some meanings cannot emerge perceptually within my “other” perceptual hierarchy, in other words, there might be meaning extending for and perceived by mother, but not for me, Meanings lost in translation as my bodily perceptual orientations do not tune me into her habituated meaning-making processes; words we share in common may not represent experiences in their sensorial significance. Yet this openness and tentativeness can be a

strength of body theology, granted we are willing to embrace this epistemological transitoriness.

### Body Theologies at Home

To do body theology is to talk about our bodily perceptual orientations, our body-sense in and of the world, connected to specific contexts, locations, and experiences. Body theology can be done while pursuing other overarching theological goals, for example, within a systematic approach or a contextual/sexual theology. Or it can be done as constructive body theology “on its own,” focusing on the specific ways in which bodily experiences make sense and create meaning, without connecting it to specific theistic concepts or commonly associated religious artifacts such as scripture or rituals. In other words, because body theology is more a set of principles rather than a step-by-step method for theological application, it can accompany a theology to assist in more complex resourcing of experience, or it can provide principles from which to construct a specific body theology grounded in particular experiences.

My family experiences as resource can “do” things theologically. Just like experience is not fixed to inherent meanings or significances, so is the connection between experience and theology. Below I will offer glimpses and experiments of what body theology looks like constructively. I will provide theological takes of how the aforementioned theological models of Heyward and Althaus-Reid might take shape when done with body theology, and experiment constructively with a body theology of my own making.

### *Mutuality at Home*

By putting body theology to work in Heyward's theology of mutual relation, I can attend to my own experiences by exploring my family's emergence in the world. The alienation or alignments with marginality emerging in my family relations are multiple and complex but can be grasped through a body theology approach. The mutual embeddedness of my family in various pre-reflective currents gives rise to perceptual emergences, so that my mother's emergence on the margins of the family home in the garage kitchen can be connected to interpersonal relations *and* national, religious, cultural, racial, gendered, and economical dynamics, pre-reflective and immediate.

To inquire into the perceptual dimensions of our existence allows us to understand complexly how bodily feelings or apprehension of meaning emerge from the ways in which we and our environment are aligned and shaped. The specific meanings of home emerging, the specific desires for home, and the specific ways in which we face, access, and can move towards this desire are constituted and made bodily and perceptually available through the ways in which we bodily perceptually exist in our specific context.

To live as a family through the erotic justice Heyward conceptualizes as "God," we must aim for just relations through bodily expressions, feelings, and movements by taking into take into account the complexity of how our family bodies emerged together. The mutuality in which my family is embedded is in the interrelated family dynamics, and in the interrelations of culture, history, and community context. Erotic justice then goes beyond bodily relations that might rearrange space in a way that visually places my mother at the center of the home again. To move toward right relations is to move toward



justice with our full sensorium, our touch, smell, hearing, seeing, and thereby our knowing, not abstract truth about my mother's agency, full humanity and dignity, but tasting, and smelling and touching and seeing her way of being in the world.

Yet these movements toward right relations remain ambiguous movements, because the meaning emerging between our bodies (as we eat in the garage or turn a dining room into a bedroom for my grandmother to make easier her increased need for care) may shift, and may continue certain alienating perceptual alignments as they disrupt others. In other words, bodily moving to disrupt perceptual orientations of and within our relational space may align my mother more closely with desired meanings and experiences of mutuality; and currents of nationalism and Christian supremacy align her possibly more strongly as a foreign and alienated body as she now more freely and more regularly moves in her own different cultural and religious habits.

Body theology embraces the uncertainty and unknowing emerging in the bodily existence of my grandmother in her last years. Because she always exists as body-consciousness, even when she might not be consciously self-aware, her bodily movements still display habits and thus she still engages in meaning making, still has a way of being in the world.<sup>60</sup> Since bodily experience *is* how we exist, and bodily experience makes sense, Grandmother might show no "intellectual grasp" on her environment anymore after thirteen years with Alzheimer's disease, but as body-self she still holds agency. We still extend perceptually towards and with each other; she still

---

<sup>60</sup> I am grateful to David N. Scott for bringing to my attention the significance of differentiating between consciousness and self-consciousness. See also Raymond Gibbs' pointing toward a possibility of consciousness not necessitating self-consciousness, though his focus in the chapter referenced is on exploring emotion and consciousness as interrelated through embodiment. Jr. Raymond W. Gibbs, *Embodiment and Cognitive Science* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 239-274.

holds power over our movements around the house. Her bodily presence still affects how mine obtains meaning. She is still making sense to me and with me because she participates in the world we inhabit together.

Body theology principles allow me take a close look at the way bodies are aligned in space, how bodies follow certain lines of perception and movement, tracing how mutuality and relationality may be emerging. Now the ambiguities and paradoxes emerging might align my Grandmother as “just a body”, aligning her with values in which her life doesn’t make much sense to us anymore. The pre-reflective current, our mutual embeddedness in life orients us toward her already perceiving her and her dementia fearfully and doubtfully. Our social habituation idealizes the mind and all the control over life we *think* it affords us, so she cannot possibly be fully human if she “lost her mind.” To live in just relations might entail living with the ambiguities emerging between our bodies, acknowledging that my bodily movements extend hopelessness, disdain, and patronizing attitudes. But always also right there, not breaking in from the outside, but as godding among us, as part of the current we move in together, is also hope, love, care; laboring dances of mutuality because my being is still bound up with hers and so her body still makes sense with mine.

### *Indecency at Home*

Putting the above explored bodily experiences in conversation with Althaus-Reid’s indecent theology, I am urged to attend to the full sensorium of sexual experiences. How do the bodily experiences I decently described above connect to sexuality, and then again interrelate to the cultural, national, racial, political, economical;

in other words, how do we think through sexual experiences within the complex matrices of social power? I can begin by wondering about the bodily perceptual orientations regarding sexual and marital decency my grandmother and my mother sought to teach me growing up. My grandmother could only perceptually emerge as a decent widowed refugee by being aligned with cultural habits which made only her own children and relations available for familial desires. Even though she was widowed at a young age, she never remarried, nor became emotionally or romantically involved with another man. Decent sexual relations were marital relations, which she not only aligned with heteronormative nuclear families, but also Mennonite and German alignments. Her children crossed those perceptual alignments, the first marrying a Protestant, the second a widowed Catholic, and the third, my father, a Thai Buddhist.

My mother, moving into a space of new and different pre-reflective currents, needed to emerge as sexually decent. German-Thai marriages are not uncommon in Germany, though these couples perceptually emerge as questionably decent at best, the meanings emerging often aligning the (commonly) younger Thai woman as sexual object of an economically superior and older German man. Perceived decency may be achieved through heteronormative alignments. My mother and father take care to emerge differently, to be perceptually aligned as a couple that emerges with a romantic love story, not a common or habituated social bodily perception of a German-Thai couple. These pre-reflective currents shaped their emergence as a couple, their bodily movements seeking re-alignments and seeking the shape of meaningful emergences between them and the world.

My parents movements and alignments with(in) decency then also shaped their perception of me as I crossed lines of decency and emerged as a lesbian body. My parents' concerns regarding my bodily movements, be it coming out or be it engaging in sexual relations, were/are significantly aligned with the perceived meaning emerging as I bodily move as lesbian. To them, these meanings are significantly shaped through economical alignments (will our daughter be able to have a career without fear of discrimination?), because of the way in which their own relationship and sexual alignments were supported by pre-reflective currents of racism, nationalism, and Christian supremacy affecting their family and home economically, for example, through my mother's career options or job discrimination based on her perceptual emergence as foreigner and sexually indecent woman.

An immigrant Thai-Christ might be found in the sexual body of a woman who dreams of freedom from poverty and finds romance in a German husband, yet who remains alien and queer in the many bodily perceptual orientations she finds herself in. There might be indecent redemption, found in maintaining peace in home spaces through physically distancing, yet intermingling and penetrating perceptually in space. There might be queer atonement, where experienced difference limits our actions, yet we act nevertheless and may even contribute to our own oppression, and yet we continue to live and struggle to protect and respect what is different. This kind of redemption and atonement of the immigrant Thai-Christ might be indecent, because it does not exclude tragedy. She crosses lines of decency, and her agency is found in subversive and persistent perceptual movements, ambiguous meanings emerging so that her daughter,

too, can dream of a romance dis-orienting to social habituations. She does not redeem into decent liberation, but into ever new crisscrossing, queering, indecent indeterminate eschatologies.

*Constructing Home with Body Theology*

I grew up in a home where my mother and grandmother encouraged and facilitated my maturing in German and Christian culture. Yet in my own body theology, guided by principles that maintain that bodily experiences make sense, and that body theology does ambiguity and paradoxes, I want to extend respect and appreciation for my mother's cultural, religious, and perceptual difference. Thus my theological inclinations here seek to be more comparative and non-theistic rather than systematic or contextually metaphorical. In other words, I am inclined to think critically and constructively about "home" rather than "God" or "Christ," since for my mother, Christian symbols are not necessarily how she makes sense of her experience. I am also convinced that I can explore what is commonly conceived of with God-symbols with other concepts, as to speak of "God" might be limited and limiting in this interreligious and intercultural context, to my own constructive imagination as well as the readers. Below I will inquire into "home" theologically, turning to the bodily experiences described above as a resource. Doing so, I will experiment with a body theology of home, attending to the bodily perceptual ways in which home is aligned and meaningfully emerges.

The ways in which "home" perceptually emerged for Grandmom was spatial/bodily/perceptual habits regarding her bodily movements, her extensions through gardening, cooking, caring for her children and grandchildren. I grew up watching and

enjoying my grandmother's touch, the ways in which she walked the perimeters of her property tracing the fence with her hands, held open her arms on Saturday mornings when I jumped into her bed for an hour of storytelling, how she tucked me in and sang me lullabies before I went to sleep at night. She dreamed of a home and filled it with the Prussian meals of her own childhood, with songs sung and socks knitted in ways meaningful to her.

This home in which my mother struggled to find home for herself was so embedded and interrelated with my grandmother's perceptual movements that the cooking of food or the playing of music became contested perceptual movements. The tastes and fragrances meaning home to my mother were forbidden in the bodily home my grandmother extended. From the margins, the scents of my mother's home penetrate the boundaries and walls of the house my grandmother built, yet it is not until spaces—the walls, the furniture, home objects—are realigned with new smells that my mother extends her home to other spaces within the walls of the house. My mother's singing to loudly played Thai folk music while she is ironing laundry, to the annoyance of other family members, is bodily extension, gendered and cultural perceptual movements claiming and inhabiting space, making home through specific ways of facing and engaging the world.

These bodily perceptual movements and orientations are aligned through socio-cultural pre-reflective currents, currents of German nationalism, Christian supremacy, racialized gender alignments, Thai-Buddhist family habituations, Prussian sense of order and decency, heteronormative alignments of economical bodies. So when my family bodily perceptually theologizes—makes meaning of—home, we are oriented to home as

belonging, cultural and social competency and passing, freedom and agency within familial space that is created and aligned through a full bodily sensorium. To be dis-oriented to home is to become dis-oriented to the way my home looks to me, dis-orienting myself to the ways I am aligning the image of home through my own bodily movements and representations. To dis-orient home in a liberative sense is to re-habituate myself to perceive home in ways I am not habituated to: to appreciate a home that looks strange for the familial smells, the touches of home my mother now traces when she leaves her book of prayers on the kitchen table, the sound of home when I ask her what she prayed and she just smiles and tells me in Thai because there is no other way to say it. And what I understand is this emerging as home, ambiguously, tentatively, but always through body-sense.

This body theology of/at home maintains that my family's bodily experiences make sense, not despite, but *in* their ambiguity and unsettledness. My grandmother's home, her bodily perceptual agency, even as she no longer inhabits the house and her cognitive capacities are severely impaired, is a home shaped with her bodily movements. Her dignity and agency emerge in the space that is home, and even after her passing, the mutual movements supporting the emergence of home are still shaping bodily movements in the home after her death. Yet the home emerging, in the ambiguous meaning created through bodily movements, also restricted my mother's bodily movements in significant ways, so that her body-sense of home was violently re-shaped. Even without fully "capturing" or without fully understanding/translating what my mother's experiences are like, I can acknowledge that her bodily experience makes sense,

that she embodies and extends her agency and resistance in ways that do not require a feminist consciousness. My mother's subaltern body-sense extends and moves in the space that continuously becomes home, the meaning of which shifts as our bodies continue to move and experience with each other.

This sketching of a body theology of home can keep closely together not just body/mind, or experience/thought, but also submission/resistance, dignity/abjection, home/alienation, and other experiences emerging in our bodily movements. My mother's bodily movements are never just resignation/suffering or resistance/liberation, but always both/and. She submits bodily by establishing her kitchen in a garage, but she also perceptually extends in ways no physical or visual boundaries can restrict.

My bodily experiences of home and my family make sense: There are ambiguous meanings emerging for me as I revisit my home—the German-Thai daughter with Mennonite allegiances, married to another woman, turned feminist theologian in the space of the US academy—I return to a home which now often appears strange to me, having made a new home and established new bodily perceptual movements in a space with different perceptual dimensions. My bodily experiences are paradoxical: I return to my family home as insider and outsider, *aligned with* my family's perceptual orientations *and queer* to them. My returning—physically, in conversation, in imagination, in recollecting—is present as well as presented to me, and queers me ambiguously. For example, I am queer to my mother's cultural and religious difference, queer through my new “American” habits, queer as the lesbian in a straight family, but also decent in my economic and familial habits, my taking up of familial alignments as daughter. My bodily



experiences maintain an unsettled body theology: I gained a more complex understanding of what meanings emerge as we gather for lunch in a garage. Yet I am very aware that this more complex grasp, this deeper understanding, might shift and change—slightly or drastically—with each motile engagement that lies ahead.

### **Conclusion**

I do not have to write *on* or *about* bodies but without doubt will always write *through* bodies, my own and those with whom I am mutually emerging and becoming. So then, what would an adjective “body” do, facing disembodied though divinized masculinities of the theological Word? Our bodily experiences are what immerse us in “the stuff” of who we are and what this life is made of, and we move as bodies in various perceptual dimensions. If bodily experience is difficult to express or narrate, it is because it is always on the edge of, never reducible to or arrested within, what is speakable.<sup>61</sup> But theologizing, if taken beyond thought and speech to perceptual movements, is not impossible.

Theologies which seek to be grounded in experience as a critical source for reflection, which want to robustly engage particularities of embodiment and construct complex arguments about the role of bodily particulars such as gender, race, sexual orientation, ability, or nationality, must attend to the way we exist in the world through our bodily perceptual orientations. Attending to experience as bodily perceptual existence, acknowledging the ways in which our experiences make sense, considering

---

<sup>61</sup> I am paraphrasing here Catherine Keller’s question regarding “feminist” theology. Catherine Keller, “The Apophysis of Gender: Fourfold Unsayings of Feminist Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no.4 (2008): 908.

ambiguities and paradoxes of experience, and remaining open to fluid and contingent knowledge, is to do theology that has and makes “body-sense.”

Understanding the extent of how our bodily perceptual orientations may also be intrinsically connected to experiences of violence, be it socio-cultural conquest or individual victimization, we can now add body theology as critical mass when weighing in on how to move away/across from stereotypical imagery or sound bites. We may cross habituated alignments, but always must do so bodily, to change the domination of “lesser” beings, such as bodies with a sex other than male, races aligned different than white, environments emerging other than industrial, socio-cultural ways of experiencing other than linear-rationally.

We and the world emerge together through sense-making bodies. The significance of our place in the world emerges for us through sensing bodies. Our sensing is more than just structures of thought or embodied, but biological or mechanical, processes. Our sensing experiences are our perceptions, feelings, experiences, expressions, motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles, and rhythms.<sup>62</sup> We are existing in the world in/as/through sensing bodies; in and through our bodies and bodily senses we come to perceive the world and are perceived by it. Theology can and must gain body-sense if it seeks to be grounded in experience.

\*\*\*

*It is 2009, and I sit outside with my mother, enjoying some gaeng gai and German cheesecake. After talking about developing her own recipe for German cheesecake over*

---

<sup>62</sup> I am again appropriating and adapting Long’s definition of religion. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 7.

*six months of baking, she tells me about the first time I left Germany to go abroad for a year. "Your dad couldn't sleep well that first night. He was tossing and turning. I finally got up and got him your pillow that was still on your bed and put it next to him. It still smelled like you. He fell asleep then." She then tells me, "Go inside to your grandmother. Say goodbye. Who knows how long she will still be around? But maybe, for a long time still." I go inside, already dreading the sight of my grandmother. She is lying in her bed. I think she might be looking at me, but I am not quite sure. I cannot bring myself to touch her hand, but I try to conjure up memories of her holding mine. I cannot quite remember. I try to say goodbye, but realize that I have grieved her passing some years ago already. There is a body in front of me that used to hold me, whose warmth and comfort I sought when I was just a small child. I am crying a bit, but I think those are tears of guilt and confusion. I am trying to pray for her to die before too long, before bitterness consumes my mother more than it already has. I am not sure when this kind of God emerged for me, a God I can ask to deliver the death of a grandmother. But I get a sense that this kind of God emerged as meaningful in our experiences as family. I take this strange sense, this dis-orientation to my family, to my sense of self, to my theological conceptions, with me as I board the plane to leave home and return home to my spouse and my theological journey on foreign soil.*

## CODA: SENSING FUTURITIES

Body theology as I reframed it here contributes to and enhances the grounding of theology in experience by inviting complex investigations into the perceptual dimensions of bodily experience. It anchors theological construction in experience and fosters complex investigations that account for particularity and difference while also relating how commonalities and communally cohesive experiences may come about. Regarding experience, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception contributed concepts, such as intentionality, to explore the bodily processes orienting our existence in the world. To be bodily perceptually oriented in the world implies to experience others and the world habitually in specific ways, and these ways of experiencing (in) the world are fundamentally bodily as well as culturally specific, in other words, there are individual and cultural differences to account for in terms of accounting for experience.

But why the turn to theology? The personal, familial, social, political experiences I recount also occupy sacred, divine, spiritual, religious dimensions. The latter then are part of the full sensorium of human experience, be it as specific experiences of the divine, or as explanatory/analytical category for experiencing concepts such as race, ability or gender.<sup>1</sup> But ultimately, to frame this project and its outcomes specifically as theology is

---

<sup>1</sup> See for example, J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008). Jennings, The Christian Imagination Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010). Creamer. Brian Brock and John Swinton, eds., *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI:

not solely a scholarly self-situating, though I do engage this interdisciplinary work explicitly as a theologian. I am also seeking to establish a dialogical bridge where I perceive a methodological one way flux, thus I am insisting that theologians should not just be critical consumers of insights gained from other disciplines, but develop interdisciplinary projects decidedly theological in creative collaboration. Lastly, and importantly, theology allows me to inquire into human experiences and questions of meaning and value more creatively and holistically. Put differently, theological frameworks allow me to inquire into meanings experienced without having to take an objective or scientific stance regarding religious/metaphysical phenomena. Theology may go beyond conceiving of religious phenomena as inherent to our bodily existence in the world. As theologian, I can go beyond accounting for experiences of the supernatural as inherently connected to our meaning making. Even with acknowledging and accounting for potential gaps in understanding due to different perceptual orientations to religious experience, as a theologian I am able to go beyond descriptions and accounts towards constructions of and appeals to the supernatural.<sup>2</sup>

To do body theology is to tell of our bodily experiences in a way so we may see the world and meanings experienced in it in a different way, be it more complexly, or be

---

Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012). Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007). Paula M. Cooley, *Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Jonneke Bekkenkamp, ed. *Begin with the Body: Corporeality Religion and Gender* (Leuven, The Netherlands: Peeters, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> For example, my interests and concerns in this project are akin to Vásquez's materialist theory of religion. We do differ, however, not just in our situating ourselves as theologian or religious studies scholar, respectively, but significantly in what these disciplines allow us to do constructively. While Vásquez may be able to account for the supernatural in his reintroduction of embodiment to theories of religion, I may also be able to appeal to it. Manuel A. Vásquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011).

it by taking on new perspectives. To do theology, in this case, to do body theology, is to think via bodily perceptual orientations of bodies and their intimate connections to manifestations of life in all its various shades, tastes, and tunes, be it the bitterness of oppression or the dance of abundance.

Resourcing the full sensorium of experience and engaging body theology, however, need not be limited to projects that are theological in nature. Because the principles for body theology I presented urge us to attend to the particular ways of hearing, seeing, thinking, imagining, smelling, moving, etc., in short, the particular ways of experiencing bodily in the world, various areas for further application come to my mind, some immediate and directly connected to this project, some reaching further into deeper interdisciplinary conversations to be had.

For example, areas only hinted at in this project are connections between theological anthropological implications and ethical considerations, which may be made with body theology principles in mind. Coming from my reflections on the last years in the life of my Grandmother, her mental and physical decline due to age and Alzheimer's disease, body theology will allow me to consider agency and ethical questions complexly. If, as I argue throughout, we need to forego notions of body/mind dualisms and understand our existence in the world as embodied consciousness, as conscious bodies, this understanding will have to bear on our consideration of bodily experiences such as dementia. Subjectivity and agency are theoretical terms to think through, but with

concrete consequences for embodied life, medical and moral approaches and intersections of the two.<sup>3</sup>

Another example of bringing body theology to theological concepts might be to construct a theological eschatology grounded through body theology, an eschatology which is based in the bodily experiences of change and endings, endings beyond end of life concepts but grounded in the endings and transformations experienced throughout life, reversible and final, sudden and gradual, expected and surprising. Theological constructions of atonement and redemption, grounded in experience via body theology, might yield imaginative theological work, considering atonement beyond metaphysical realities and queering justice through embodied acts.

Those interested in exploring other theoretical connections, such as theories of space, theories of architecture, or environmental studies, may find in body theology connections useful to their explorations. How we experience spaces—related to the social, political, cultural, and religious—is intrinsically connected to our bodily perceptual orientations, our individual bodily capacities as well as our socially trained

---

<sup>3</sup> For example, Marcia W. Mount Shoop engaged embodiment and ambiguities of lived experiences in her theological investigation of rape, pregnancy, and motherhood, presenting ecclesiology and Christology within a decidedly embodied framework. See Marcia W. Mount Shoop, *Let the Bones Dance: Embodiment and the Body of Christ* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 2010). This is a different theological project than those who take on embodiment and subjectivity within a more decidedly philosophical theological framework, as for example David H. Nikkel has done. While we share certain philosophical convictions, his theological aim is toward re-root postmodern theologies in embodied life so that for example concepts of God may be formulated within embodied pantheistic models. David H. Nikkel, *Radical Embodiment*, ed. K.C. Hanson, Charles M. Collier, and D. Christopher Spinks, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010). For an ethics of care building on Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodied habits, see Maurice Hamington, *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Feminist Ethics* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004). A moral philosophy based in phenomenological inquiry is worked out by James R. Mensch, *Ethics and Selfhood: Alterity and the Phenomenology of Obligation* (Albany, Y: State University of New York Press, 2003). See also Bryan S. Turner, *Vulnerability and Human Rights*, ed. Thomas Cushman, Essays on Human Rights (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

and sensorially transmitted values regarding movement, and symbolic as well as embodied alignments of bodies in space.<sup>4</sup> To insist on inherent body/mind/world/culture interrelations is also to reorient ourselves to the human/animal/other divide, and investigate the ways in which anthropocentric conceptions of experience may be overcome.

This last trajectory is critical when continuing cross-cultural body theology inquiries. A comparative body theology, as I would like to pursue it at some point, would be able to embrace constructive comparisons of differently religious theologies, but significantly base it on experience as they might connect to theological themes.<sup>5</sup> Such religio-cultural comparisons need to be able to conceive of experience as not exclusively a human feature, rather, comparative work needs to be able to conceptualize orientations in which all that is in the world is sentient, and therefore, may experience in some way. Body theology can contribute to the framework of such comparative work, already

---

<sup>4</sup> For a philosophical exploration of body as place/space in relation with a larger place/space and bodily spatial experiences and conceptualizations thereof, see Morris, *The Sense of Space*. For a collection of provocative and insightful essays on conceptual and corporeal spaces, investigated from various angles and intersections (including Native American studies, architecture, women's studies, feminist theory, geography, postcolonial theory, moral theory, history, cultural studies, and more), see Susan Hardy Aiken and others, eds., *Making Worlds: Gender, Metaphor, Materiality* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1998). For a Christian pastoral-theological engagement with human experience and the built environment, particularly urban spaces, see Eric O. Jacobsen, *The Space Between: A Christian Engagement with the Built Environment*, ed. William A. Dyrness and Robert K. Johnson, *Cultural Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012). For an anthropological study regarding personhood and space and embodied tensions in light of Western individualism experienced in Melanesian communities, see Sabine C. Hess, *Person and Place: Ideas, Ideals and the Practice of Sociality on Vanua Lava, Vanuta*, ed. Jürg Wassmann and Katharina Stockhaus, *Person, Space and Memory in the Contemporary Pacific* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> See for example Michelle Voss-Roberts, whose comparative theology analyses metaphors grounded in bodily experience. Michelle Voss-Roberts, *Dualities: A Theology of Difference* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010). For an example of comparative moral philosophy, see Erin McCarthy, *Ethics Embodied* (New York: Lexington Books, 2010).



presuming a body/world interrelation, while also remaining flexible enough to attend to specific shapes this interrelation is conceived of in other contexts.

In the end, however, I find myself significantly oriented in the world as a theologian, a feminist, postcolonial, queer, moral, Mennonite, body theologian, and therefore, a theologian through and on whose body different allegiances, alliances, transgressions, and desires crisscross, merge, and induce motile tensions and bodily/intellectual turnings. Theologically and personally, I want to see body theology contributing to the good life of all living beings, however goodness is sensed. To investigate into meaning of experiences and orientations of life towards each other may take theoretical-philosophical avenues, as I have done so in this project. But ultimately and significantly, the concerns that lead up to this project and which continue to stir in me as I move on from it, are connected to the sense of responsibility/response-ability to those other(ed) persons I am connected to, either by family, by choice, and/or by global implication. To investigate and to struggle, complexly and thoroughly, with the ways in which “I” came about—as product of cultures, privileges and absence thereof, personal choices, mentored growth, perceptual orientations, educational formation, etc.—to me is significant in order to construct body theologies for and on behalf of others who may find this specific project inaccessible, in word and/or space.

I am thinking of women like my mother, for whom education and sophisticated German and English language was/is out of reach, for whom books, computers, journals, and the internet are not part of her daily habits, a woman who worked hard to make all those things accessible to her daughter, yet who struggles to make her life meaningful

and worth living without them, and who is proud of my academic successes but rightfully suspicious of academic projects (this one included). If body theology cannot matter in the embodied lives of especially those whose experiences have been excluded from decent theologies, then it would be indeed a futile exercise.

My hope for the future of constructive body theologies is that they can remain grounded in (and insistent on) the various and diverse kinds of good life desired to be lived. I wish for body theology to be diverse in its interdisciplinary investigations, sophisticatedly theoretical and poetically comprehensible, and always humble enough in its sophistication and poetics to acknowledge that inevitably, body theology will get it wrong, will fail to liberate, will contribute to alienation, will ignore what is significant to particular experiences. And body theology will be okay with it, will continue to investigate and imagine life and meaning as experienced. Because –isms such as racism, ableism, sexism, nationalism, etc., are in fact embodied, visceral perceptual experiences, habituated in laws, regulations, behaviors, and beliefs, they may change and shift. Yet this does not deny us attempts to make the experiences of –isms do theoretical work for us as analytic categories, granted that we allow for those categories to work for us in the ambiguity and fluidity that they do their work with in our embodied lives.

“The body is our general medium for having a world.”<sup>6</sup> *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*

“In that sense we must remember that the starting point of our theologies are bodies, but the rebellious bodies: [...] the body ‘as is’ before theology starts to draw demonic and divine inscriptions in it.”<sup>7</sup> *Marcella Althaus-Reid*

---

<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 146.

“That which does not bear directly upon human life and move toward the creation of justice in society is not worth our bother.”<sup>8</sup> *Carter Heyward*

“Go tell them my story, tell them how I cook here.”<sup>9</sup> *Unchalee Peckruhn*

---

<sup>7</sup> Marcella M. Althaus-Reid, "'Pussy, Queen of Pirates': Acker, Isherwood and the Debate on the Body in Feminist Theology.," *Feminist Theology* 12, no. 2 (2004): 158.

<sup>8</sup> Heyward, *Speaking of Christ: A Lesbian Feminist Voice*, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Personal conversation. Eichenhof, Germany. July 1, 2010.

## REFERENCES

- Addams, Jane. *Twenty Years at Hull House: With Autobiographical Notes*. New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1911.
- Ahmed, Sara. "Racialized Bodies." In *Real Bodies: A Sociological Introduction*, edited by Mary Evans and Ellie Lee, 46-63. New York, NY: Palgrave, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Aiken, Susan Hardy, Ann Brigham, Sallie A. Marston, and Penny Waterstone, eds. *Making Worlds: Gender, Metaphor, Materiality*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1998.
- Alcoff, Linda Martín. *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Alcoff, Linda, and Elizabeth Potter, eds. *Feminist Epistemologies*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow*. New York, NY: The New Press, 2012.
- Althaus-Reid, Marcella M. *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Queer God*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "'Pussy, Queen of Pirates': Acker, Isherwood and the Debate on the Body in Feminist Theology." *Feminist Theology* 12, no. 2 (2004): 157-167.
- Althaus-Reid, Marcella M., and Lisa Isherwood, eds. *Controversies in Body Theology*. London: SCM Press, 2008.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Spread and Origin of Nationalism*. London, UK: Verso, 1983.
- Avrahami, Yael. *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible*. New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 2012.

- Bal, Mieke. "Postmodern Theology as Cultural Analysis." In *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, edited by Graham Ward, 3-23. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.
- Banerjee, Mita. "The Hipness of Mediation: A Hyphenated German Existence." In *This Bridge We Call Home*, edited by Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating, 117-125. New York, NY: Routledge, 2002.
- Barnes, Colin. "A Brief History of Discrimination and Disabled People." In *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis, 20-32. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.
- Baxter, Elizabeth. "Cutting Edge: Witnessing Rites of Passage in a Therapeutic Community." In *Controversies in Body Theology*, edited by Marcella M. Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, 48-69. London, UK: SCM Press, 2008.
- Baynton, Douglas. "'A Silent Exile on This Earth': The Metaphorical Construction of Deafness in the Nineteenth Century." In *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis, 33-51. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H.M. Parshley. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1953.
- Bekkenkamp, Jonneke, ed. *Begin with the Body: Corporeality Religion and Gender*. Leuven, The Netherlands: Peeters, 1998.
- Betcher, Sharon V. *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.
- Bettis, Joseph Dabney, ed. *Phenomenology of Religion: Eight Modern Descriptions of the Essence of Religion*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1969.
- Birke, Lynda. "Bodies and Biology." In *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, 42-49. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Bloom, Paul. "Roots of Word Learning." In *Language Acquisition and Conceptual Development*, edited by Melissa Bowerman and Stephen C. Levinson, 159-181. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Bohache, Thomas. *Christology from the Margins*. London, UK: SCM Press, 2008.
- Brock, Brian, and John Swinton, eds. *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012.

- Brock, Rita Nakashima, Jung Ha Kim, Kwok Pui-Lan, and Seung Ai Yang. "Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology." (2007).
- Bryden, Inga. "Cut'n'slash': Remodelling the 'Freakish' Female Form." In *Controversies in Body Theology*, edited by Marcella M. Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, 29-47. London, UK: SCM Press, 2008.
- Butler, Judith. "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception." In *Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, edited by Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits Of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2005.
- Carman, Taylor. "Between Empiricism and Intellectualism." In *Merleau Ponty: Key Concepts*, edited by Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds. Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Merleau-Ponty* Routledge Philosophers, Edited by Brian Leiter. New York, NY: Routledge, 2008.
- Carman, Taylor, and Mark B. N. Hansen. "Introduction." In *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, edited by Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen, 1-25. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Carrington, Christopher. *No Place Like Home: Relationships and Family Life among Lesbians and Gay Men*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1999.
- Carter, J. Kameron. *Race: A Theological Account*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Cerborne, David R. "Perception." In *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, edited by Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds, 121-131. Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008.

- Churchill, Ward. "Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of American Indians." (1998).
- Classen, Constance. *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *The Book of Touch*. Oxford, NY: Berg, 2005.
- Classen, Constance, David Howes, and Anthony Synott. *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Comaroff, Jean. "The Diseased Heart of Africa: Medicine, Colonialism, and the Black Body." In *Knowledge, Power, and Practice: The Anthropology of Medicine and Everyday Life*, edited by Shirley Lindenbaum and Margaret Lock, 305-329. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993.
- Cooley, Paula M. "The Word Became Flesh: Woman's Body, Language, and Value." In *Embodied Love: Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values*, edited by Paula M. Cooley, Sharon A. Farmer and Mary Ellen Ross, 17-33. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Bad Women: The Limits of Theory and Theology." In *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, edited by Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney, 137-153. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.
- Corbin, Alain. *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.
- Counihan, Carole. "Mexicana's Food Voice and Differential Consciousness in the San Luis Valley of Colorado." In *Food and Culture: A Reader*, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik. New York, NY: Routledge, 2008.
- Counihan, Carole, and Penny van Esterik, eds. *Food and Culture: A Reader*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2008.
- Cox, James. *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*. New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010.

- Creamer, Deborah Beth. *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Crossley, Nick. "Body-Subject/Body-Power: Agency, Inscription and Control in Foucault and Merleau-Ponty." *Body & Society* 2, no. 2 (1996): 99-116.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Social Body: Habit, Identity and Desire*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc, 2001.
- Csordas, Thomas J. *Body / Meaning / Healing*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Daly, Mary. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.
- Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. New York, NY: Verso, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Nude Venuses, Medusa's Body, and Phantom Limbs: Disability and Visuality." In *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, edited by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, 51-70. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions*. New York: New York University Press, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Constructing Normalcy." In *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis, 3-19. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.
- de Saussure, Ferdinand, Albert Sechehaye Charles Bally, and Albert Riedlinger. *Course in General Linguistics*. Translated by Wade Baskin. LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1986.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- Desjarlais, Robert. *Shelter Blues: Sanity and Selfhood among the Homeless*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sensory Biographies: Lives and Deaths among Nepal's Yolmo Buddhists*. Berkeley, CO: University of California Press, 2003.



- Dillingham, William Paul. *Reports of the Immigration Commission: Statements and Recommendations Submitted by Societies and Organizations Interested in the Subject of Immigration*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1911.
- Eiesland, Nancy L. *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994.
- Erlmann, Veit, ed. *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity*. Edited by Richard G. Fox, Wenner-Gren International Symposium Series. New York, NY: Berg, 2004.
- Fabella, Virginia, and Mercy Amba Oduyeye, eds. *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1962.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1968.
- Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet. Critical Issues in Feminist Theology*. New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. London, UK: Tavistock Publications, 1973.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. 2, reprint, illustrated ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- Fulkerson, Mary McClintock. *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994.
- Gannon, Jack. *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America*. Silver Spring, MD: National Association of the Deaf, 1981.
- Gardner, Martha Mabie. *The Qualities of a Citizen: Women, Immigration, and Citizenship, 1870-1965*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.

- Garland Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1983.
- Geurts, Kathryn Linn. *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.
- Gilman, Sander L. "Touch, Sexuality and Disease." In *Medicine and the Five Senses*, edited by W.F. Bynum and Roy Porter, 198-224. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Jews and Smoking." In *Smoke: A Global History of Smoking*, edited by Sanders L. Gilman and Zhou Xun, 278-285. London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2004.
- Gilroy, Paul. *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Gossen, Gary H. *Telling Maya Tales: Tzotzil Identities in Modern Mexico*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1999.
- Grant, Madison. *The Passing of the Great Race: Or, the Racial Basis of European History*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Hamington, Maurice. *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Feminist Ethics*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- Haney Lopez, Ian F. "White by Law." In *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge (2nd Edition)*, 626-634. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000.
- Harrison, Beverly Wildung. "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love." In *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, edited by Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, 214-225. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989.

- Harvey, Elizabeth D., ed. *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.
- Harvey, Jennifer. *Whiteness and Morality: Pursuing Racial Justice through Reparations and Sovereignty*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Heinämaa, Sara. *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003.
- Heldke, Lisa. "Let's Cook Thai: Recipes for Colonialism." In *Food and Culture: A Reader*, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik, 327-341. New York, NY: Routledge, 2008.
- Hess, Sabine C. *Person and Place: Ideas, Ideals and the Practice of Sociality on Vanua Lava, Vanuta* Person, Space and Memory in the Contemporary Pacific, Edited by Jürg Wassmann and Katharina Stockhaus. New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2009.
- Heyward, Carter Isabel. *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relations*. Lanham, MD: Pilgrim Press, 1982.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation*. New York, NY: Pilgrim Press, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Speaking of Christ: A Lesbian Feminist Voice*. New York, NY: Pilgrim Press, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Touching Our Strength: The Erotics as Power and the Love of God*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Staying Power: Reflections on Gender, Justice, and Compassion*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Priest Forever: One Woman's Controversial Ordination in the Episcopal Church*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Saving Jesus from Those Who Are Right: Rethinking What It Means to Be Christian*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999.
- Hogan, Linda. *From Women's Experience to Feminist Theology*. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995.
- Howes, David. "Olfaction and Transition." In *The Varieties of Sensory Experience*, edited by David Howes, 128-147. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1991.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003.
- Hume, David, and L.A. Selby-Bigge. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*. 3rd ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. Translated by Dorion Cairns. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Logical Investigations*. Translated by J.N. Finley. Vol. 2. 2 vols. New ed. New York, NY: Routledge, 2001. Reprint, 1921.
- Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Isasi-Díaz, Ada María. *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Orbis Books, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *En La Lucha = in the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*. 10th anniversary ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.
- Isherwood, Lisa. "Will You Slim for Him or Bake Cakes for the Queen of Heaven?" In *Controversies in Body Theology*, edited by Marcella M. Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, 174-206. London, UK: SCM Press, 2008.
- Isherwood, Lisa, and Elizabeth Stuart. *Introducing Body Theology*. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998.
- Iwakma, Miho. "The Body as Embodiment: An Investigation of the Body by Merleau-Ponty." In *Disability/Postmodernity*, edited by Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare, 76-87. New York, NY: Continuum, 2002.
- Jacobsen, Eric O. *The Space Between: A Christian Engagement with the Built Environment* Cultural Exegesis, Edited by William A. Dyrness and RobertK. Johnson. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012.
- Jakobs, Monika. "Auf Der Suche Nach Dem Verlorenen Paradies? Zur Hermeneutik Von Ursprüngen in Der Feministischen Theologie." *Sources and Resources of Feminist Theologies* (1997): 126-139.

- James, Jennifer C. "Gwendolyn Brooks, World War II, and the Politics of Rehabilitation." In *Feminist Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Kim Q. Hall, 136-158. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011.
- Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993.
- Jennings, Willie James. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010.
- Joh, Wonhee Anne. "Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology." (2006).
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Violence and Asian American Experience: From Abjection to Jeong." *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology* (2007): 145-162.
- Johnson, Mark. *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Jones, Serene. "Women's Experience between a Rock and a Hard Place: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Theologies in North America." *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms* (1997): 33-53.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* Guides to Theological Inquiry, Edited by Kathryn Tanner and Paul Lakeland. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.
- Jones, Serene, and Paul Lakeland, eds. *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005.
- Joy, Melanie. *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows: An Introduction to Carnism*. San Francisco, CA: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2010.
- Kalekin-Fishman, Devorah. "Sounds That Unite, Sounds That Divide: Pervasive Rituals in Middle Eastern Society." In *Everyday Life in Asia: Social Perspectives on the Senses*, edited by Devorah Kalekin-Fishman and Kelvin E.Y. Low, 19-39. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Marcus Weigelt. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2008.
- Kaufman, Gordon D. *An Essay on Theological Method*. Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975.

- Kaufman, Gordon D. *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1981.
- Keller, Catherine. "The Apophasis of Gender: Fourfold Unsayings of Feminist Theology." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no.4 (2008): 905-933.
- Kerr, Anne, and Tom Shakespeare. *Genetic Politics: From Eugenics to Genome*. Cheltenham, UK: New Clarion Press, 2002.
- Kim, Taewoo. "Medicine without the Medical Gaze: Theory, Practice and Phenomenology in Korean Medicine." Ph.D.diss., University of New York at Buffalo, 2011.
- King, Ursula. *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994.
- Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*. Edited by David Howes, Sensory Formations. New York: Berg, 2005.
- Kruks, Sonia. *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001.
- Kwok, Pui-Lan. *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* The Bible and Liberation Series, Edited by Norman K. Gottwald and Richard A. Horsley. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980. Reprint, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.
- Lane, Harlan. "Construction of Deafness." In *The Disability Studies Reader*, 77-93. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.

- Langer, Monika M. *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception: A Guide and Commentary*. London, UK: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1989.
- Law, Lisa. "Home Cooking: Filipino Women and Geographies of the Senses in Hong Kong." In *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, edited by David Howes. Oxford, UK: Berg, 2005.
- Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- Long, Charles H. *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*. Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*. Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 1996.
- Mann, Barbara A. *The Gantowisas: Iroquoian Women*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2000.
- Marratto, Scott L. *The Intercorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on Subjectivity Contemporary French Thought*, Edited by David Pettigrew and Francois Raffoul. Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2012.
- Marshall, Helen. "Our Bodies, Our Selves: Why We Should Add Old Fashioned Empirical Phenomenology to the New Theories of the Body." In *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, 64-75. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Martin, Emily. "The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles." In *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, 179-189. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital*. Translated by Samuel Moore. Vol. 1. New York, NY: International Publishers, 1970.
- Masquelier, Adeline, ed. *Dirt, Undress, and Difference: Critical Perspectives on the Body's Surface*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005.
- McCarthy, Erin. *Ethics Embodied*. New York: Lexington Books, 2010.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, Inc., 1995.

- McFague, Sallie. *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1962.
- Mensch, James R. *Ethics and Selfhood: Alterity and the Phenomenology of Obligation*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin French. New York: Routledge, 1962.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Structure of Behavior*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1963.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Prose of the World*. Translated by John O'Neill. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973.
- Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000.
- Mitchell, Dolores. "Women and Nineteenth-Century Images of Smoking." In *Smoke: A Global History of Smoking*, edited by Sander L. Gilman and Zhou Xun, 294-303. London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2004.
- Moltmann-Wendel, Elisabeth. *I Am My Body: A Theology of Embodiment*. New York: Continuum, 1995.
- Monaghan, Lee F. "Corporeal Indeterminacy: The Value of Embodied, Interpretative Sociology." In *Body/Embodiment: Symbolic Interaction and the Sociology of the Body*, edited by Dennis Waskul and Phillip Vannini, 125-140. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006.



- Morris, David. *The Sense of Space* Suny Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy, Edited by Dennis J. Schmidt. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Body." In *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, edited by Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds, 110-120. Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008.
- Mu, Peng. "Imitating Masters: Apprenticeship and Embodied Knowledge in Rural China." In *Everyday Life in Asia: Social Perspectives on the Senses*, edited by Devorah Kalekin-Fishman and Kelvin E.Y. Low, 115-136. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010.
- Mulder, Niels. *Inside Thai Society: Religion, Everyday Life, Change*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2000.
- Nelson, James B. *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Body Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1992.
- Newcomb, Steven. "Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery." (2008).
- Newell, Christopher. "On the Importance of Suffering: The Paradoxes of Disability." In *The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L'arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences*, edited by Hans S. Reinders, 169-179. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010.
- Nikkel, David H. *Radical Embodiment* Princeton Theological Monograph Series, Edited by K.C. Hanson, Charles M. Collier and D. Christopher Spinks. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010.
- Olkowski, Dorothea. "Introduction." In *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World*, edited by Dorothea Olkowski and James Morley. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formations in the United States*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1994.
- Padden, Carol, and Tom Humphries. *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

- \_\_\_\_\_. "Deaf People: A Different Center." In *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis, 393-402. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.
- Panagia, Davide. *The Political Life of Sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009.
- Pandya, Vishvajit. *Above the Forest: A Study of Andamanese Ethnoanemology, Cosmology, and the Power of Ritual*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *In the Forest: Visual and Material Worlds of Andamanese History (1858-2006)*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009.
- Passenier, Anke. "Der Lustgarten Des Leibes Und Die Freiheit Der Seele: Wege Der Mittelalterlichen Frauenspiritualität." *Sources and Resources of Feminist Theologies* (1997): 192-216.
- Pastoreau, Michel. *Blue: The History of a Color*. Translated by Markus I. Cruse. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Patel, Tina G., and David Tyrer. *Race, Crime and Resistance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2011.
- Paul II, John. *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*. Translated by Michael Waldstein. Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2006.
- Pears, Angela. *Feminist Christian Encounters: The Methods and Strategies of Feminist Informed Christian Theologies*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004.
- Pears, Angie. *Doing Contextual Theology*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.
- Peckruhn, Heike. "Bodies as Orientation in/to the World – Bodies in Queer Phenomenology and Religious Studies." In *American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting*. Chicago, IL, 2012.
- Pérez, Ramona Lee. "Tasting Culture: Food, Family and Flavor in Greater Mexico." Ph.D.diss., New York University, 2009.
- Pink, Sarah. "The Future of Sensory Anthropology/the Anthropology of the Senses." *Social Anthropology* 18, no. 3 (2010): 331-333.
- Pinn, Anthony B. *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012.

- Polyani, Michael. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1964.
- Priest, Stephen. *Merleau-Ponty The Arguments of the Philosophers*, Edited by Ted Honderich. New York, NY: Routledge, 1998.
- Punt, Jeremy. "Paul, Body Theology, and Morality: Parameters for a Discussion." *Neotestamentica* 39, no. 2 (2005): 359-388.
- Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr. *Embodiment and Cognitive Science*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Reinders, Hans S. "Human Vulnerability: A Conversation at L'arche." In *The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L'arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences*, edited by Hans S. Reinders, 3-15. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010.
- Rivera, Mayra Rivera. "Corporeal Visions and Apparitions: The Narrative Strategies of an Indecent Theologian." In *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots: Essays in Honour of Marcella Althaus-Reid*, edited by Lisa Isherwood and Mark D. Jordan, 79-94. London, UK: SCM Press, 2010.
- Rodaway, Paul. *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense and Place*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1994.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1983.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
- Salamon, Gayle. *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Sanders, Todd. *Beyond Bodies: Rainmaking and Sense Making in Tanzania*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2008.
- Sandoval, Chela. "Dissident Globalizations, Emancipatory Methods, Social-Erotics." In *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, 20-32. New York: New York University Press, 2002.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985.

- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- Schulting, Dennis. *Kant's Deduction and Apperception: Explaining the Categories*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990.
- Sherry, Mark. "(Post)Colonizing Disability." In *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis, 94-106. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.
- Shildrick, Margrit, and Janet Price. "Vital Signs: Texts, Bodies and Biomedicine." In *Vital Signs: Feminist Reconfigurations of the Bio/Logical Body*, edited by Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price, 1-17. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Openings on the Body: A Critical Introduction." In *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick. New York, NY: Routledge, 1999.
- Shoop, Marcia W. Mount. *Let the Bones Dance: Embodiment and the Body of Christ*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 2010.
- Silverman, Hugh J. "Merleau-Ponty and the Interrogation of Language." In *Merleau-Ponty: Perception, Structure, Language*, edited by John Sallis, 122-141. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1981.
- Singer, Linda. "Merleau-Ponty on the Concept of Style." In *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, edited by Galen Johnson and Michael Smith, 233-244. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993.
- Smith, Mark M. *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007.
- Spicker, Stuart F., ed. *The Philosophy of the Body: Rejections of Cartesian Dualism*. Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books, 1970.
- Spiegelberg, Herbert. *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*. Vol. 5. 6 vols. 3rd ed. Boston, MA: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982.

- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, 66-111. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Stafford, Barbara Maria. *Body Criticism: Imagining the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991.
- Strong, Josiah. *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*. reprint ed.: Bibliobazaar, 2010.
- Stuart, Elizabeth. "Experience and Tradition: Just Good Friends." In *Sources and Resources of Feminist Theologies*, edited by Elisabeth Hartlieb and Charlotte Methuen, 49-71. Mainz, Germany: Matthias-Gruenewald Verlag, 1997.
- Sullivan, Shannon. "Domination and Dialogue in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*." *Hypatia: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 20, no.4 (1997): 1-19.
- Synnott, Anthony. "Puzzling over the Senses: From Plato to Marx." In *The Variety of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, edited by David Howes, 61-76. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1991.
- Tanesini, Alessandra. *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999.
- Tatman, Lucy. *Knowledge That Matters: A Feminist Theological Paradigm and Epistemology*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001.
- Tinker, George E. (Tink). "Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide." (1993).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *American Indian Liberation : A Theology of Sovereignty*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008.
- Todes, Samuel. *Body and World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001.
- Townes, Emilie M. "Marcella Althaus-Reid's *Indecent Theology*: A Response." In *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots: Essays in Honour of Marcella Althaus-Reid*, edited by Lisa Isherwood and Mark D. Jordan, 61-67. London, UK: SCM Press, 2010.

- Townes, Emily M. *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006.
- Turner, Bryan S. *Vulnerability and Human Rights*. Essays on Human Rights, Edited by Thomas Cushman. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006.
- Vásquez, Manuel A. *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Vine Deloria, Jr. *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*. 3rd ed. New York, NY: The Putnam Publishing Group, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr., Reader*. Boulder, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1999.
- Vinge, Louise. *The Five Senses: Studies in a Literary Tradition*. Lund, Sweden: LiberLäromedel, 1975.
- Vogel, Arthur A. *Body Theology: God's Presence in Man's World*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1973.
- Voss-Roberts, Michelle. *Dualities: A Theology of Difference*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.
- Wade, Nicholas J. *A Natural History of Vision*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998.
- Watkin, Christopher. *Phenomenology or Deconstruction? The Question of Ontology in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur and Jean-Luc Nancy*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.
- Jeremy Weate, "Fanon, Merleau-Ponty and the Difference of Phenomenology," in *Race*, edited by Robert Bernasconi, 169-183. Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2001.
- Weiss, Gail. *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporality*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Welter, Barbara. *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1976.
- Williams, Delores S. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993.
- Williams, Simon J., and Gillian Bendelow. *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1998.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E . M. Anscombe. 3rd ed. New York, NY: Macmillan, 1958.

Yeğenoğlu, Meyda. *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Yong, Amos. *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007.

Young, Iris Marion. *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

\_\_\_\_\_. *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" And Other Essays* Studies in Feminist Philosophy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.