

10-1-2015

Review of *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race* by Emily Lee

Michael J. Monahan

Marquette University, michael.monahan@marquette.edu

## *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*

Emily Lee, ed. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press. 2014). 300 pages. \$90.00 hardcover, \$25.95 paperback. ISBN: 978-1-4384-5016-2.

Michael Monahan

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY, [MICHAEL.MONAHAN@MARQUETTE.EDU](mailto:MICHAEL.MONAHAN@MARQUETTE.EDU)

In *Living Alterities*, Emily Lee has assembled an engaging and stimulating collection of essays written by leading philosophers of race working within, or at least sympathetic to, the phenomenological tradition. The particular thematic focus, as the subtitle makes clear, is on the significance of embodiment for our theorization of race and racism. As Lee points out in her introduction, there is a tendency to understand race as *all in the mind* in philosophical discussions of the topic—the body is there at best only passively, as that upon which race is imposed by misguided or malicious minds. Lee turns to phenomenology here precisely because it is a tradition characterized by its approach to and emphasis on embodiment. The essays overall thus take seriously the way in which subjectivity is always embodied in such a way that consciousness is shaped constitutively by that embodiment. In the case of a deeply racialized world, this means that race is not simply a *product* of consciousness but is importantly *prior* to consciousness. As Lee puts the point, the aim of the volume is to theorize “how the meanings circumscribing embodiment construct the experiences the subject encounters and consequently how the subject develops certain emotions, knowledge, ethical/moral postures, and sense of being-in-the-world” (7). This means that race “does not lie as a superficial cover over the primary later of common humanity” (7), and suggests that it is important to explore the possibility of “positive, identity-affirming reasons to recognize distinguishable bodily differences” (6). The eleven essays in this volume work together to explore this general theme, and the volume overall offers an important and refreshing intervention into the ongoing philosophical theorization of race and racism.

Charles Mills offers the first contribution to this collection of essays with his “Materializing Race.” Mills has never worked, nor claimed to work, in the phenomenological tradition, and this essay is no exception. Nevertheless, his text sets the stage nicely for what is to come and provides a kind of “soft landing,” so to speak, for readers interested in race and embodiment but less familiar with phenomenology. Beginning from the Marxist appeal to class as a sociopolitical *material*, Mills raises the question of whether race can be understood to have a similar materiality. Drawing from feminist efforts to draw upon relations of reproduction as the material basis for gender, Mills argues that “from the modern period onward (when race comes into existence), race is indeed material in that it is because of race that one is entitled to or debarred from the ‘normal’ treatment extended to white humans” (34). While class and gender, unlike race, have a basis in our fundamental *need* for production and reproduction to

survive that give them a strong mind-independence, race is nevertheless independent of our will insofar as once racial categories have been created, they take on a life of their own that forms an inescapable material basis for human *praxis* within that racialized context characterized by the normalization of the white body. Mills’s essay ultimately both serves as an accessible and well-argued introduction to the theme of this volume, as well as building upon and elaborating themes from his own significant body of work in the philosophy of race.

In contrast to Mills, George Yancy’s work has always been deeply informed by the phenomenological tradition (especially the work of Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Fanon), and has thus been squarely focused on issues of embodiment with regard to race. Yancy’s contribution to this volume is primarily a summary and recapitulation of some of the major themes from his prior work, including his emphasis on the ways in which racialized bodies are *constituted* as such through the intentional acts (*gazes*) of agents whose own agency is itself conditioned by their own racialized bodies. Within a racist social context (an anti-black world), this means that white bodies and thus white perspectives are normalized, valorized, and affirmed, while non-white bodies and perspectives are pathologized, marginalized, and denigrated. Yancy revisits vignettes familiar to those who have studied his work, including his examples of the elevator ride and the *click* of car doors locking, and creates what is a succinct and rich survey of this prior work. While this is valuable, he concludes the chapter by offering a new, though brief, discussion of *crisis* in relation to racialized embodiment, especially as it pertains to whiteness. If racism aims to *normalize* racist hierarchies and white-supremacist modes of being (embodiment), then perhaps one aspect of resistance to this process is to generate conditions of *discomfort* and *crisis*. “For the most part,” Yancy points out, “white people are not in crisis vis-à-vis their whiteness; they are under constant therapeutic reprieve, assured that there is nothing problematic about whiteness, about their *white selves*” (62). As a consequence, crises of discomfort that problematize whiteness can be viewed as a positive prescription for anti-racism. Yancy’s essay is a valuable introduction to his work for those who are not already familiar with it, as well as presenting a new development of his thought for those who have experience with his prior work.

Donna-Dale Marcano turns to a meta-philosophical reflection on the place (or lack thereof) of black women within the discipline (both as an institution/profession and as a body of thought) in the third chapter. Drawing from feminist philosophy’s argument for the male-ness of philosophy, Marcano builds an intersectional analysis that makes a clear case for ongoing systematic erasure of black women from the discipline. As she puts the point, “I contend that the interlocking and multiple oppressions faced by Black women in American history acts to inhibit the inclusion of their intellectual work as philosophical and philosophically relevant because they are Black and women” (68). While making a very compelling case for this claim, Marcano is careful to argue that the appropriate response is not simply to *ignore* race and gender in our philosophical practices, as if blackness and femaleness were simply superficial

coverings of an essentially genderless and raceless philosopher. Rather, she urges a deep diversification of the discipline that should be manifest not only in terms of the texts we cite and teach in our courses but also in terms of the *actual bodies* that constitute our ranks. Marcano's contribution is ideal for use in philosophy courses, offering as it does a brief but compelling summary of the state of the discipline and argument for radical intervention.

The fourth essay in this volume, Namita Goswami's "Among Family Women," returns to the debates within postcolonial feminism surrounding *Sati*, but with an important and innovative discussion of the relation between culture and the body. Goswami begins with the claim, common within postcolonial feminist discourses but all too uncommon outside of them, that there is a pronounced "'first world' privilege" in much feminist theory, such that "'Western' women emerge as the true subjects of feminism while 'third world' women are relegated to perpetual object-status" (80). The people of the so-called third world thus remain cast in the role of *nature* to Western *culture*. From this relatively familiar starting point, Goswami notes that there is a deep irony operating here that connects in an interesting way with embodiment. The way in which so-called third-world women are relegated to the role of object/nature is in part through the exercise of certain cultural practices and traditions (such as *sati*) that become overdetermined as *barbaric*. At the same time, the nature/culture divide rests on an emphasis on the human body as the organic *embodiment* of our "exceptionalism" vis-à-vis the natural world. Thus, some cultural practices are disassociated from the "natural" world and properly *human*, while others are understood as inextricably bound up with and expressions of the natural world, and Goswami draws two important implications from this. First, one way in which these different cultural practices are distinguished is not through the content of the practices themselves but rather through the kinds of bodies that undertake them, and second, this underlying irony of an embodied disassociation from the natural points to the need to radically critique the very distinction between the natural and the cultural that underlies so much of the (post)colonial relation. Goswami's essay offers a compelling exploration of these implications.

David Kim's contribution is a thoughtful and challenging exploration of specificity of Asian American relations to whiteness. Arguing first that the common "model minority" and assimilationist tropes "conceal and mystify" and ongoing subordination of Asian Americans, Kim focuses on the way in which this subordination shapes the agency of Asian Americans, especially insofar as it generates shame and other emotions connected with negative self-evaluation. It is this focus on emotions that brings Kim to the topic of embodiment, for he stresses the idea that "emotion is a feeling *through* the body *to* what matters in the world," and as such, they "are world-constituting in addition to being world-disclosing" (115). Drawing from empirical studies that focus in particular on Asian American identification with whiteness and efforts to affirm distance from those "fresh off the boat," Kim's essay is not only an important analysis racialized embodiment in the U.S. context but an implicit argument for the importance of

attending to the *specificities* of particular racialized groups (and bodies) as opposed to the one-size-fits-all tradition of the black/white binary.

Drawing on the phenomenological work of Merleau-Ponty and Bergson (among others), Alia Al-Saji offers an account of what she refers to as the "intransigent and closed logic" of racializing vision and the ways and means of its interruption (133). If vision is not a mere passive reception of the visible but rather involves "constitutive operations" that differentially render visible and invisible (and emphasize or marginalize) according to a complex network of sedimentation habituation (138), and racialization is a crucial aspect of that habitual network, then racialized perception "circumscribes and configures what is seen, so that the realm of visual objectivity is narrower than the historicity and social structure on which it relies" (139). Because these modes of seeing (and not-seeing) are a matter of embodied habits, they have an importantly *affective* dimension to such an extent that "affect and perception form two sides of the same phenomenon, linking that which is seen as racialized to its immediately felt effects on the racializing body" (140). Al-Saji's important move here is to draw our attention to the ways in which encounters that disrupt racialized visual habits, moments characterized by "hesitation," can be a crucial component of efforts to disrupt those habits. She carefully differentiates between the all-too-common moments of hesitation on the part of the oppressed generated by those racialized habits that inhibit agency and action on the one hand, and the less common moments of "responsive hesitation" that "[loosen] the net of internalized determinism and stereotype" (154). She persuasively argues that sustained generation of such moments of hesitation is an important (and perhaps necessary) aspect of any successful effort to disrupt racialized perception (and thus racism).

Mariana Ortega takes up the work of María Lugones to explore the phenomenology of "home" in relation to ambiguous, even multiplicitous, notions of *self* in the seventh chapter. As an exercise of what she refers to as "self-mapping" (173), Ortega begins with the problematic relationship to "belonging" engendered by the notion of *home*, especially insofar as the concepts of home and belonging are inherently bound up with conditions of identity. The phenomenology of home—the experience of a place or even an experience as familiar, comfortable, and significantly *mine*, is in large part a matter of standing in a real or imagined relation to those who are *like* me in a particular sense, and an exclusion of those who are not. Histories of colonialism, exile, oppression, sexism, and racism (among others), however, generate conditions wherein this experience of home and the self is complicated and modified such that it is ambiguous, multiplicitous, and even contradictory. Rather than see this as inherently problematic, Ortega takes up the challenge of abandoning the project of an integrated and unitary self (and thus an unambiguous sense of belonging) and finding a way to affirm, or at least live with, that ambiguity and contradiction. To advance this project, she introduces "hometactics," which are "everyday practices in which we literally 'make do' with what we have, [and] do not form a robust sense of belonging or familiarity" (185). Ortega's

essay points provocatively toward an open-ended process of constant negotiation and renegotiation of home(s) and the relations that constitute belonging.

The eighth chapter is Edward Casey's theorization of the concepts of borders and boundaries as they relate an actual *border*—that between the United States and Mexico (*la Frontera*). Beginning with a general account of edges, Casey quickly focuses in on a contrast between *boundary* and *border*. While both borders and boundaries "act to demarcate a given place or region," a border "is a clearly and crisply delineated entity, and is established by conventional agreements such as treaties or laws," while a boundary, in contrast, "is rarely demarcated with any precision, varying in contour and extent depending on environmental or historical circumstances" (192). Furthermore, while boundaries are porous and lacking in "exact positioning," borders are impermeable and exist in a precise and exact location. To be clear, the distinction is largely heuristic, for Casey (rightly, in my view), does not think any actual border exists as he has described it. Indeed, borders, he tells us, "are ideal and eidetic" (199), brought into (pseudo) existence by human convention, the aim of which is first and foremost a distinction between *us* on this side, and *them* beyond the border. Casey observes, however, that "borders are always already in the process of becoming boundaries" (202), such that every effort to fix an impermeable and stable border begins immediately to slip beyond our grasp, becoming porous and ambiguous. Armed with this set of theoretical developments, Casey turns to *la Frontera*, the border between the United States and Mexico. The conclusion of his essay is a careful elucidation of the way in which the *border* as an ideal aims to police racialized bodies in a way that preserves a mythologized *purity* on either side, and that the reality of *la Frontera* as a boundary reveals the way in which the racialized bodies on both sides act to dispel that myth.

In her essay, "Pride and Prejudice: Ambiguous Racial, Religious, and Ethnic Identities of Jewish Bodies," Gail Weiss takes on the work of Sander Gilman, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Frantz Fanon on anti-Semitism and Jewish identity. In particular, she offers a critical engagement with their claim that Jewish identity is ultimately a matter of the ways in which society at large (and anti-Semitic societies in particular) perceives and portrays Jewish bodies. Both Gilman and Sartre are concerned, in particular, with the ways in which Jews internalize anti-Semitic attitudes and negative stereotypes, and Weiss is especially interested in the way in which this internalization is *embodied* into what she refers to as the "intercorporeal dimensions of Jewish experience" (214). This is an important feature, she argues, but to grant the (hostile) other the ability to define one's identity undermines the agency of the oppressed. Furthermore, it disavows what Weiss considers the inherent ambiguity of identities; ambiguities that "can and should be seen as productive possibilities, expanding the range of potential ways one can access, engage, and ultimately transform Jewish experience" (218). Weiss's contribution is provocative and points toward promising avenues of further theoretical development.

In the penultimate essay, Emily Lee turns to white embodiment and, specifically, the question of *responsibility* in relation to the privileges bestowed by that white embodiment. Lee begins with Merleau-Ponty's account of the way in which bodily movement "generates phenomenological space and time" (233) to help provide an account of freedom as a responsibility for the entirety of one's situation, including significantly aspects of one's situation that one may simply have inherited. That is, because the body "possesses an immediate intertwining with the world" (237) that is conditioned by "motivational relations (242)" in which a given subject's actions are bound up within a temporal and physical horizon that both conditions and is conditioned by those actions, it becomes necessary, if we are to account for freedom and responsibility, to become response-able to that situational horizon. As Lee puts the point, "All human beings can reason, but, from a series of past decisions [not always their own past decisions], they develop into subjects who utilize their reason in varying complex ways" (244). This means that racialized subjectivity, including white subjectivity, is an integral part of a given agent's sense of self for which one must take responsibility if one is to realize one's autonomy as an agent. Though she only offers this point as a concluding suggestion, Lee makes it clear that such "taking responsibility" cannot be a strictly epistemic or intellectual undertaking, but must itself be embodied, and include "developing and accumulating different and new body movements" (248).

Linda Alcoff's essay on "The Future of Whiteness" is a challenging conclusion to this text with broad implications for the phenomenology of race. The framing question arises because of the way in which dominant discourses on race, both inside and outside of philosophy, tend to see whiteness as a kind of ontological lynchpin for racism, such that any commitment to antiracism must entail a commitment to the elimination of whiteness as such. This general line of argument holds that a just future must be one in which there is no such thing as the white race. Confronting this question at the end of this volume is an important moment, for it highlights the way in which the usual approach to race and racism cannot be maintained within the phenomenological tradition. Phenomenology foregrounds embodied consciousness and the reflexive interplay between that embodied/historically situated subjectivity and the larger social/material world, while rejecting an abstract, featureless (liberal) subject. Consequently, it must call into question the assumption that racialized subjects, including white subjects, must shed their racial specificity, and ask whether there are "any useful first-person insights that might provide a re-visioning of possibilities toward a changed national landscape that would include whites as *whites*" (262). Just as Weiss's essay takes up the way in which Jewish identity is not reducible to the view that anti-Semites have of Jews, Alcoff is here arguing that white identity is not reducible to white supremacy. Whiteness must, she holds, revise itself substantially, but this is different from calling for its elimination or abolition. Alcoff's phenomenological project here is an important one and an excellent way to conclude this volume.

The essays assembled in this text comprise a significant contribution both to phenomenology and to the philosophical study of race and racism. Lee has brought together an impressive array of scholars offering a diverse set of approaches and topics, but yet they are all clearly united under the thematic umbrella of a shared commitment to thinking through racialized embodiment. A particular strength of this text as an anthology, and of great credit to Lee as editor, is the way in which the essays collected here not only stand up as individual pieces but hang together so very well as a whole. The book should thus be of interest to scholars and students of phenomenology and to theorists of race and racism sympathetic to phenomenological approaches to the topic. It is a timely and important collection of scholarship.