

Introduction

Ta-Nehisi Coates ends his unflinching account of living as a black man in the United States with the weather. He recounts driving through Philadelphia.

Through the windshield I saw the mark of [. . .] ghettos—the abundance of beauty shops, churches, liquor stores, and crumbling houses. [. . .] Through the windshield I saw the rain coming down in sheets.¹

At first, this rain—which appears as the subject of the final sentence of *Between the World and Me*—seems like a “natural” phenomenon, unlike the phenomena of race and racism that Coates navigates, a social production materialized, in part, in and as this urban space. The rain appears to have nothing to do with the American, historical coconstitution of race and space. So why conclude with the weather?

My reading of this passage captures *Earthly Encounters*’ central arguments. This book seeks to understand how gender and race, or gendered racialization and racialized genders, inform and are informed by sensations of the more-than-human world, such as the rain. My analysis of sensation allows for an understanding of gendered, racialized subjectivity *as it exists on this planet*, a more-than-human world that is material, mediated, and by shaped by politics, as well as by more-than-human forces. The book also elaborates on the concept of “geopower,” the force relations both between humans, and between humans, nonhumans, and more-than-humans, that transform the surface of the earth. It shows how this concept is relevant for rethinking gendered and racialized subjectivity on this planet, including in the context of the Anthropocene.²

I borrow the phrase “more-than-human world” from Nancy Tuana, who uses it to index a world that is “neither ‘fabricated’ in the sense of created out of human cultural practices, nor [. . .] independent of human interactions of a multitudes of forms, including cultural.”³ The concept “more-than-human” is powerful because it allows for an externality without hiding the entanglement of nature, culture, and power. This entanglement is clear in Coates’s description of the rain. The rain is “more-than-human,” because human practices have not created it. However, at the same time, the rain is not independent of such practices, either. First, the burning

of fossil fuels has increased global temperatures, which has melted ice caps, leading to an increase of moisture in the air and a more volatile weather system. Climate scientists agree that violent storms will become more frequent in many places in the world; there will be more sheets of rain.⁴

Coates is clear about this connection between climate change and the rain. He recounts sitting in his car thinking about climate change, thinking about how the “Dreamers,” those who believe themselves to be white, have plundered not only “the bodies of humans but the body of the Earth itself.”⁵ He builds a continuity between the violation of black bodies and the pillage of the earth.⁶ His reading of the Anthropocene joins the many others who argue that the transformation of the earth is not separable from structural inequality. “Uneven distribution,” as Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg argue, “is a condition for the very existence of modern, fossil fuel technology.”⁷ In this context, the rain that comes at the end of *Between the World and Me* cannot be understood as a “natural” phenomena independent of human practice. It can instead be read—at least in part—as the materialization of modern fossil-fuel capitalism, which is itself integrally linked to histories of racial inequality and racism. To be very clear: this is not to deny that the rain is often experienced as something exterior from or other than these social, economic, political relations. It is also not to reduce the rain to the creation of (some) human beings. This is why the concept of the “more-than-human” is powerful: it allows for an externality while highlighting the entanglement of nature-culture-power.

But the rain is more-than-human in a second important way, as well: it is not actual rain that appears in the writing, but rather a description of the rain; this rain is a linguistic event. Some might want to read this description as a metonymy for tears or as a form of imagery representing sadness. The weather matches or expresses Coates’s mood. Indeed, it would not be surprising had this scene described Coates crying. While he is sitting in his car, the text explains, he is thinking about an acquaintance of his, a black man, who was shot dead by the police. Coates explains that he himself became “hard” to survive on the streets of Baltimore and in the family of his youth. Because this toughness gives form to his body, he cannot easily dispense with it. Thus, one might argue that at the end of the memoir, the *I* who tells the story comes to match the *I* who has lived through that same story: Coates displaces the sadness. In this performance of racialized masculinity, Coates does not cry. Instead, he describes the rain.

However, to understand racialized and gendered subjectivity in a more-than-human world requires that we not simply interpret descriptions of that world as, primarily, metaphor. This is certainly not to say that such descriptions do, indeed, function as metaphor. It is also not to forget that these descriptions appear in

language and thus are linguistic. My purpose here is not to “redeem” language’s referentiality, to insist, in the words of Lawrence Buell, on texts’ “outer mimetic function.”⁸ Such an approach has been important in the history of ecocriticism, which, moving away from deconstruction and poststructuralism, has sought to understand how literature actually describes the world, pointing our attention to it, awakening us to something natural beyond human conceptualization and production. Following this line of thinking, many ecocritics have upheld nonfiction and realism.⁹ This approach, however, is limited, especially since the identification of what counts as real or realistic tends to naturalize and prioritize postenlightenment, secular perspectives.¹⁰ Language does not capture the real so much as, potentially, produces a sense of reality. This sense is political, cultural, and social. The job of a critic is to understand how that sense of reality is produced, to analyze its ideological underpinnings, and to consider its effects.¹¹

Yet an ideological, interpretive approach is not sufficient either, because it tends to reduce the analysis of the more-than-human world to the analysis of cultural politics, and thus treats the more-than-human solely in the realm of human representation. My approach to language, literature, and the aesthetic is therefore different. While I do consider the cultural politics of representation, I also draw attention to the sensory underpinnings of language. That is, I do not understand language as separate from the sensory. The two are intertwined (which also means that they are not reducible to one another). By considering the sensory underpinnings of language, I am able to recognize that language is not a transparent medium while, at the same time, considering human, embodied beings in a more-than-human world.¹²

An example can help to make this approach clear. How is it that the rain in *Between the World and Me* can function as a metaphor of sadness? Which sensory experiences and contexts subtend the figure of speech such that it is meaningful? What is it about the rain, and the experience of the rain, that allows it to stand in for sadness or tears in this context? It is not merely literary convention that connects the rain to the tears. It is, rather, that both are wet. It is that, in certain circumstances, both can feel like a form of defeat, can feel uncomfortable. It is, finally, that one experience can be lived through the other.

This approach is especially powerful in reading other passages of *Between the World and Me*. Directly addressing his son, Coates writes, “You have been cast into a race in which the wind is always at your face and the hounds are always at your heels.”¹³ This wind and these hounds are metaphors for the hardship and violence of racism.¹⁴ But these metaphors make sense because something in the lived experience of racism is similar to the lived experience of the wind and the attacking

dogs. Even more, these experiences share a continuity, such that the experience of one comes to be lived through or is even productive of the other. This is not a difficult argument to accept when thinking about the hounds, for instance. During the American civil rights movement or the movement for black liberation, police departments employed dogs to attack and breakup demonstrators.¹⁵ The hounds in Coates's text evoke this history. In other words, the rain is more-than-human in that it is perceived from the perspective of a living being, and history effects that perception.

Overall, the rain is more-than-human in at least three ways: first, since we no longer have access to a climate that has not been shaped by modern fossil-fuel, racial capitalism, the rain cannot but be read as an effect, in part, of climate change. Next, the rain appears in language and can be read metaphorically, yet this does not mean that it is "only" linguistic. Even as metaphor, the rain points to an embodied experience in the more-than-human world. Finally, that embodied experience is situated. A living being's perception of the world depends on his or her social and cultural position, a position on earth that is not static and not necessarily singular, but is nonetheless informed by embodied, historical memory, habit, and affective associations.¹⁶ James B. Haile III, in a reading of Coates, argues that "the issue is not so much what exists *for* consciousness but the ways in which consciousness is influenced by embodiment and the historicity of embodiment."¹⁷ I would put it a bit differently: what exists for consciousness is important—in fact, what exists for consciousness shapes embodiment—but the historicity of embodiment likewise comes to affect future perception. The rain is more-than-human in that it is sensed through that history. Building on this analysis, *Earthly Encounters* interprets a series of specific sensations: feeling cold, the touch of the wind, the sense of being immersed under water, and the feeling of containment. These sensations index a more-than-human world, one constituted by the thermal energy of particles, by currents of water, and by the earth's axial tilt. And yet sensations are lived by particular people in particular places. They emerge in social and political contexts that cannot be abstracted from them. My analyses are located in the twentieth century. I write about feeling cold in Canada, of the warm embrace of the wind in rural Botswana, of the sense of being immersed in the North Atlantic Ocean, and of the feeling of containment in Algiers. While I focus on *descriptions* of sensations and *descriptions* of the more-than-human world often (though not always) in aesthetic form, I consider the sensory underpinnings of these descriptions to identify traces of the more-than-human, traces of earthly encounters within linguistic representation itself. Across this analysis, my aim is to build a fuller account of the lived experience of racialized gender as it exists on this planet, earth.

My approach features some important points of overlap with Gayatri Spivak's more recent writing about what she calls "planetarity"; however, I also depart from Spivak's vision, as well. Beginning with her 1999 "Imperative to Re-imagine the Planet," Spivak has published a series of essays that calls for the elaboration of a form of "planet-thought."¹⁸ At its most basic, this form of thought begins with the recognition that we live "on, specifically, a planet."¹⁹ This "planet" is not to be confused with the "globe." The globe has been mapped: it is an "abstract ball covered in latitudes and longitudes, cut by virtual lines, once the equator and the tropics and so on, now drawn by the requirements of Geographical Informational Systems."²⁰ The globe, in other words, is known. It is inseparable from the modern and postmodern system of knowing that has been placed on it, forms of knowing entangled with globalization, imperialism, and colonization. Indeed, the globe, in Spivak's reading, is inherently connected to globalization with its "imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere."²¹ It is found "on our computers. It is the logo of the World Bank."²² Thus, this "globe" is knowable, striated yet smooth in its connection to global capitalism, and, Spivak argues, uninhabited: "No one lives there."²³ This image of the globe figures the human (or at least particular humans) in control, as agents of charge, even sovereign because it does not imagine us as living in this space but rather as knowing it and managing it.

In contrast, planetarity, Spivak insists, "cannot deny globalization," but it provides an alternative vision to this globe.²⁴ We "inhabit" the planet, "indeed are it."²⁵ We are part of the planet on which we live, and while we "inhabit it," "we inhabit it, on loan."²⁶ The planet is not ours. In fact, we are "planetary accidents."²⁷ We are derived of the planet and from the planet. We are part of the planet rather than agents above it. And yet the planet did not constitute us knowingly. We remain but accidents. The planet, however, ought not to be thought simply in opposition to the global. Spivak insists that it provides no "neat contrast with the globe."²⁸ This is because planetarity in Spivak's view consists in a radical form of alterity: "Its alterity," she writes, "is mysterious and discontinuous—an experience of the impossible."²⁹ The planet is "not our dialectical negation," which is to say it is not the other through which we come to define ourselves. The planet is also not "a self-consolidating other as the self's mere negation."³⁰ It is neither simply our negation (in part, because we are derived of and from it), nor is it self-consolidating. The planet remains indefinite in Spivak's writing. It is not formed; it is neither "continuous with us," nor is it "specifically discontinuous."³¹ One way to understand this argument is to recognize that to grant the planet a specific, definite form would be to position it as an object that is known by us. However, by "planetarity," Spivak seeks to decenter the human, to posit an outside from

which we derive. Thus, to consider the planet as mysterious, as a radical form of alterity is, in effect, to honor this decentering.

While my approach to earthly encounters is likewise skeptical of global imaginaries and is likewise insistent that we are part of and derive from this planet, my turn to sensation offers a different approach than Spivak's. Because of planetarity's radical alterity, Spivak does not "offer a formulaic access to planetarity. No one can," she insists.³² In contrast, without claiming that sensation offers a formulaic point of access, the book considers sensation as a point of encounter with elements of the planet. For instance, in the sensation of feeling cold, in the touch of the wind, and in pull of a wave, we are affected by that which is beyond us, even though we inhabit and depend on it. Planetarity might not be known, but it affects us daily. The analysis of various sensations offers one lens through which this becomes clear.

Why Sensation?

This book's analysis of sensation and the more-than-human addresses a central problem in contemporary critical (and especially feminist) theory.³³ On the one hand, the past ten years has seen a wave of scholarship arguing for ontological, new materialist, nonrepresentational, object-orientated approaches in the humanities and interpretative social sciences, approaches that claim to move beyond post-structuralism's focus on signification, representation, and discourse.³⁴ Although this scholarship is clearly diverse, it is characterized by repeated influential and compelling refrains: agency need not be figured primarily as human;³⁵ materiality is open to becoming and effective of change;³⁶ relations captured in the analysis of affect rather than signification better attend to our imbrication in the material world and allow for an understanding of movement.³⁷ And yet, on the other hand, questions about signification, representation, and discourse have not simply disappeared. Accounts of materiality are themselves representations, and this new scholarship is itself a discursive formation that legitimizes some accounts of materiality over others. What are the politics of the ontologies that this new scholarship posits? Who is the implicit subject who comes to know materiality in the way described in this literature? How can we understand this ontological turn in light of prior, rich analyses of "situated knowledges," to use Donna Haraway's phrase?³⁸ And finally, matter might always be something more, but it is also appropriated and transformed into property, territory, and the nation-state. How might new materialisms engage with *these* material politics (which is to say, what is the relationship between so-called new materialisms and old materialisms)?

Much of the literature in new materialism frames the revelation that matter is open to transformation and in a state of perpetual becoming as somehow liberating. This makes sense in the context of feminist debates concerning the distinction between nature and culture, sex and gender. Rather than understand “sex” (and, with it, “nature” or “the body”) as deterministic and closed, new materialisms offer a way to understand gender as materialized or embodied and yet also transformative and transforming. In other words, this scholarship provides a model for thinking through the sex/gender binary in a way that neither reduces gender to signification nor treats sex, nature, matter, and the body as inert, meaningless, or essential.³⁹

However, when thinking in the context of climate change, the becoming of materiality is not inherently liberating. In turn, new materialisms might be helpful for thinking about how racial logics become embodied, or how racism is materialized—yet this thought is not inherently liberating in the way that it is in a (nonintersectional) version of feminism. In fact, one might point out that such an understanding of materiality or the body was key to eugenics and concerns about degeneration.⁴⁰ Finally, the question about how materiality is represented is especially critical in the context of settler colonialism where the stories we give of materiality, land, and the earth have real effects on the ways territory is formed and materiality is appropriated.⁴¹ Faced with these arguments, it might be tempting to return to representational analysis, considering the politics both of whose representations count and of what counts as a representation. However, such an approach is insufficient as well. A focus on representation often precludes an analysis of the more-than-human world, reducing that world to its conceptualization by humans.⁴²

Thus, in response to, on the one hand, approaches that analyze primarily the *representations* of things and places, objects and bodies, and, on the other hand, ontological approaches that insist on creating new understandings of matter as “an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference,”⁴³ *Earthly Encounters* begins in-between, in the analysis of the sensible.⁴⁴ “Sensations,” as Amber Jamilla Musser puts it, “reside at the border of reality and consciousness.”⁴⁵ The study of sensation allows for a middle ground between new materialism and idealism.

My approach builds on scholars such as Mel Chen, Banu Subramaniam, Deboleena Roy, Angela Willey, and Neel Ahuja, who have reworked new materialist scholarship to consider how social, political, and economic relations give form to bodies, contributing to the materialization of social difference and inequality.⁴⁶ Roy and Subramaniam, for instance, argue that “there can be no decontextualized generic body or matter, be it human or nonhuman, organic or inorganic.”⁴⁷ In

an analysis of the Bhopal disaster and the contemporary practices of surrogacy in India, they trace how “global inequities mounted by global circuits of capital, or practices of reproductive tourism . . . become manifested in the materiality of sex, gender, sexuality, and the body.”⁴⁸ This important scholarship highlights the traffic between meaning and matter; it contributes to a reworking of feminist, queer, post-colonial, and critical race studies in a more-than-human world, one that engages science, while recognizing its entanglement in colonialism, imperialism, and patriarchy. I am inspired by this research, but ultimately, my approach is different. I seek to highlight the encounters through which the material world, which I frame here as “more-than-human,” is perceived in the first place by focusing on sensation.

Phenomenology of Perception

Feminist phenomenology and the phenomenology of race, especially as influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, inform my approach to the sensory.⁴⁹ My contention is that first-person, phenomenological approaches have been too quickly dismissed.⁵⁰ More precisely: these approaches are useful in the attempt to attend to the more-than-human.

There are many ideas in Merleau-Ponty’s writing in particular that are helpful in the context of new materialisms. The first—and most central—is Merleau-Ponty’s argument for what he calls “the primacy of perception.” Merleau-Ponty explores how science and reason, even human self-understanding and ethics, are grounded in perceptual experience. His goal in *Phenomenology of Perception* is to “return to the world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world.”⁵¹ In other words, instead of starting with things in themselves or with the more-than-human as given and forceful, and instead of starting with science or ethics, his work brings attention to the perceptual experience through which the world comes into being for a person. “All my knowledge of the world,” Merleau-Ponty highlights, “even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world.”⁵² Science is built on “the world as directly experienced,” and Merleau-Ponty claims that “if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny . . . we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression.”⁵³ To be clear, Merleau-Ponty is not against science. His goal, though, is to describe the sensible world—the world as it presents itself to us rather than the world as it is—-independent of us. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is an attempt to get at experience from the perspective of the lived. “Experience” here is not imagined as something in the past tense, something that happened and is being recalled. Rather, the aim

is to describe experience as it is being lived, in the first person. This starting point is useful in the context of new materialisms because it begins with the location or point of view from which the more-than-human world is sensed.

From the outset, however, it is crucial to recognize that Merleau-Ponty is critical of the term *sensation*, advocating for the analysis of “perception” instead. This is because he argues that when we think about “sensation,” we imagine an external world impinging on us, resulting in a sensation. This model, Merleau-Ponty contends, is retroactively produced when we think about perception after the fact.⁵⁴ Perception, in contrast, as it is experienced in real time, does not posit an external world that is separate from us. Rather, it entails a sense of immersion in the world. In addition, unlike the notion of sensation, perception, Merleau-Ponty argues, is laden with meaning that is culturally and historically informed. “The *person who* perceives,” he explains, “has a historical density, he takes up a perceptual tradition.”⁵⁵ In contrast to Merleau-Ponty, I use the terms *sensation* and *perception* throughout this book. In fact, we can argue that *Phenomenology of Perception* does not advocate turning away from the concept of sensation so much as reimagining it. This is, notably, Simone de Beauvoir’s reading. In her review of Merleau-Ponty’s text, she writes, for instance, that “sensation is neither a quality nor the consciousness of a quality; it is a vital communication with the world.”⁵⁶ Here, then, while understanding the limits of how sensation has been conceived, Beauvoir holds onto the term. I follow suit, using Merleau-Ponty analyses of perception to reimagine sensation because “sensation,” unlike “perception” more clearly invokes embodiment.

This clarification introduces the second crucial idea that is important in the context of new materialisms. Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of perception insists that the world is more than ourselves, more than our representations of it.⁵⁷ Perception is not a collection of my own thoughts, he writes. “The world is not what I think.”⁵⁸ Instead, the world is “what I live through.”⁵⁹ To describe perception is to consider how “I am open to the world. . . . I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it.”⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty gives the example of perceiving the sky: “As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not *set over against* it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue. [. . .] I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery.”⁶¹ In this example, I do not constitute the blue of the sky. Instead, I am summoned by it, open to it, and it becomes determinate in me as I give into it. The sensible beckons the sensor and the sensor responds, opening to the sensed.

David Abram evocatively develops this aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. He explains how Merleau-Ponty describes “the sensible world . . . as

active, animate, and, in some curious manner, alive.”⁶² That which we perceive calls out to our bodies, and our bodies respond to this call. There exists “a reciprocal interplay between the perceiver and the perceived.”⁶³ Dualistic divisions between subject and object, active and passive, animate and inanimate fall away. When attending to the sensory, Abram argues that one only finds “relative distinctions between diverse forms of animateness.”⁶⁴ He continues, “[T]he things and elements that surround us” are not “inert objects but [...] expressive subjects, entities, powers, potencies.”⁶⁵

This too is useful in the contexts of new materialist, feminist thought, which is invested both in interrupting the objectification of people and things and in reaching beyond discursive analysis, beyond the analysis of how things are conceived. To bring attention to the sensible is to consider a point of contact with that which is beyond ourselves and to reject the transformation of the world into inert, passive objects.

This approach also departs from prominent poststructuralist approaches to exteriority, which often consider the exterior to be a constitutive other, formed in the production of an interior. In this topology, if there is an “outside,” this “outside” is framed as always already within. Take, for instance, Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In this essay, Spivak calls for deconstruction, its “sustained and developing work on the *mechanics* of the constitution of the Other” and its attempt to render “*delirious* that interior voice that is the voice of the other in us.”⁶⁶ Within this framework, otherness is positioned as within; it is an “interior voice.” Similarly, in Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter*, there exists no absolute outside to discourse: the nondiscursive is posited within discourse as that which stands before it. She insists that there is no “absolute ‘outside,’ an ontological thereness that exceeds or counters the boundaries of discourse”; instead, the outside “can only be thought—when it can—in relation to that discourse, at and as its most tenuous borders.”⁶⁷ Here an epistemological limit becomes an ontological argument. In the field of geography, we find similar statements. Geographers have long been critical of the idea that nature is somehow “external” to culture. David Harvey argues that “nature exists in an ‘internal’ relation with society,” and Bruce Braun argues similarly: nature is not external but rather is produced through struggles of power/knowledge. “Nature’s *externality*,” he writes, “is merely an effect produced through the discursive and material practices of everyday life.”⁶⁸

However, there are both ethical and political reasons that rejecting notions of externality is not sufficient. It is not quite Fredric Jameson’s diagnosis of the “prison house of language” that concerns me.⁶⁹ Neither is it, exactly, the argument that such a framework makes it difficult to speak of the material world, including

the body—an assertion that was key to the development of new materialisms.⁷⁰ It is, rather, that this topology limits ethical and political questions from the start. If otherness is always already inside, if the ethico-political move is to find otherness within (as Spivak has described it), if nature is never outside but produced as such from within, then an engagement with that which is not already internalized, with that which is not an effect of an internalization, is never staged. The issue here is partially one of human conceit: as long as interiority or the inside is figured as consciousness or discourse, and as long as these entities (rightly or wrongly) have been tied to the human, the topology that figures the outside as an effect of the inside or as always already inside forecloses thought about how humans engage with that which is veritably outside us, more than us. This frames the world as one of our own creations and suggests that we never engage with that which we have not constructed.⁷¹

Even more, reading what are now classics in poststructuralist feminist, queer, and postcolonial theory, I am struck by the faith placed in finding otherness within.⁷² The belief often seems to be that unearthing how the self, identity, or even the national body are dependent on that which they exclude, and hence constructed in relation to a constitutive outside, is an ethical, important step toward justice. Such faith in uncovering is hard to maintain—and not simply because it depends on what Eve Sedgwick has diagnosed as paranoid reading, which insists that exposure or uncovering is a good in itself.⁷³ Rather, I am unsure what follows from the revelation that the other is in effect within, or the outside is in effect a constitutive exteriority, especially with respect to the more-than-human world, and especially, as well, in this age of climate change. The goal was to deconstruct colonialism and patriarchy to show how they are dependent on that which they devalue or foreclose. However, humans, for instance, can be violent toward themselves. To recognize an other within might only lead to more of such self-directed violence. Further, echoing Jameson in a different register, I question whether this familiar move of finding the other within can be understood as an entrapment, internment, or even colonization of otherness. I do not use the term *colonization* figuratively. I am rather thinking of the rich scholarship in indigenous studies that calls into question the framework of inclusion. Positing indigenous nations as a racialized minority within the U.S. (for instance), and seeking to find justice for this “minority” erases indigenous nationhood from the outset, placing the indigenous within.⁷⁴

In other words, to figure an “other” as, in effect, within or as a constitutive exteriority might unhinge the self, imagined as self-same. It might also unhinge the belief in a pure, untouched nature that ought to ground social organization;

it might unhinge models of national purity. But it does not provide a framework for thinking about encounters with that which is different. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* describes how in perception, we are opened up to that which is not ourselves. By focusing on human sensation of the more-than-human world, phenomenology starts from the outside without insisting that this outside can be known for itself, which is to say, while recognizing that sensation takes place on the border between the interior and the exterior.

That said, while Merleau-Ponty figures perception as externally directed, he argues that it is nonetheless meaningful and historically contextual. Borrowing from Gestalt psychology, Merleau-Ponty highlights how something is only ever perceived within a context, and therefore as a distinction between a figure and a background is drawn. This distinction is, in part, formed as a result of partaking in a particular "perceptual tradition." This does not imply that our perceptions are what we project onto the world. Instead, perception is constituted, as Gabrielle Bennet Jackson aptly summarizes, by the "demand placed by an object on the body and the body's reply to the object's demand."⁷⁵ In other words, Merleau-Ponty asks us to reimagine sensation as a form of entanglement between the inside and the outside, a meeting or conjunction that does not reduce one into the other. He neither imagines sensation as the simple impingement of the world onto ourselves nor as our projection onto the world. The world is something we live through, and a significant part of that living involves sensing, which comprises a dynamic encounter between the world as it calls out to us and our bodies as we respond to it.

Finally, perception, in Merleau-Ponty's writing, is clearly embodied. That is to say, perception is always located from a particular, incorporated point of view, the point of view of a lived body. It is bound up both with our sense of space and potential mobility. Merleau-Ponty famously replaces phenomenology's focus on the intentionality of consciousness (which is the recognition that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something) with an intentionality of the body or motor intentionality. The lived body, he argues, "appears to me as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task."⁷⁶ My perception of the world—and especially of spatiality—is tied to this sense of being able to move through, in, and with the world. Merleau-Ponty takes the example of the "sensation" of red. He considers how viewing the color becomes associated with a bodily response: "When we say that red increases the compass of our reactions, we are not to be understood as having in mind two distinct facts, a sensation of redness and motor reactions—we must be understood as meaning that red, by its texture as followed and adhered to by our gaze, is already the amplification of our motor beings."⁷⁷ In other words, he argues that perceptions "present themselves with a motor physiognomy, and

are enveloped in a living significance.”⁷⁸ In addition, since Merleau-Ponty treats the body not as an inert object but rather as lived, this body also becomes situated in time. This implies, as Jorella Andrews argues, that perception “remains irreducibly open to the ‘unfolding of experience.’”⁷⁹ The lived body as point of view is located, but not fixed. It is not an object but a responsive gearing to the world.

This is the final, insightful starting point that I draw from *Phenomenology of Perception*. Sensations are entangled with how we move and act in (and with) the world. They are embodied and “the body” is not fixed. Overall, Merleau-Ponty is helpful in that he provides a model for analysis: rather than begin with things-in-themselves, we can begin with the lived body’s sensory experience of the world. This starting point does not reduce the world, however, to our conception of it; it rather has us attend to the lived body’s encounters in the more-than-human. It also highlights that sensations of the more-than-human are always already laden with meaning, attached to one’s sense of spatiality, and connected to potential action.

Lived Bodies: Nature-Culture-Power

I return to phenomenology notwithstanding the widespread critique of it, and while recognizing that many difficulties arise when drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology in the context of feminist and critical race studies.⁸⁰ One central problem concerns the politics of knowledge. Why ever feature another white, European, male philosopher? Feminist continental philosophy’s attachment to a particular canon (including my own attachment) appears at times to work against its very project. I address this problem below. But for the moment, let me consider the relatively easier difficulty: while Merleau-Ponty writes of embodiment, he treats the lived body as undifferentiated and unhindered by power relations. More precisely, predominant throughout *Phenomenology of Perception* is Merleau-Ponty’s belief in an anonymous, prepersonal body. It is on the basis of the existence of this body that Merleau-Ponty argues that our perceptions are shared. According to Merleau-Ponty, we similarly embody this anonymous body; we therefore share a world.

A brief investigation into feminist phenomenology and the phenomenology of race shows the limits of such an undifferentiated and foundational understanding of the body. For instance, in “The Lived Experience of the Black,” Frantz Fanon shows how what he terms the “historico-racial schema” comes to inform the ways that racialized bodies are lived.⁸¹ Fanon writes, “In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. . . . The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty.”⁸² The man of

color experiences himself through the white man, through “a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” that make him take himself “an object” and leaves him feeling “dislocated.”⁸³ In this example, the body as it is lived cannot be separated from its social, cultural, and political intersubjective constitution; “alongside phylogeny and ontogeny,” Fanon writes in the book’s introduction, “there is also sociogeny.”⁸⁴ This argument overlaps with Iris Marion Young’s classic essay, “Throwing Like a Girl,” which shows how feminine bodily comportment, self-image, and sense of spatiality are affected by sexism.⁸⁵ Young argues that “the lived body has culture and meaning inscribed in its habits, in its specific forms of perception and comportment.”⁸⁶ Reading such accounts, one can conclude, with Gayle Weiss, that it is “impossible to distinguish a ‘pure’ sense of proprioception or a postural schema from . . . racialized, gendered, religious, ethnic, and able-bodied body images.”⁸⁷

I do not want to claim, however, that culture, power, and politics only inform embodiment at the level of the body image. Rather, the constitution of the anonymous body is itself historical and shaped by nature-culture-power.⁸⁸ In as much as I follow Merleau-Ponty’s approach, I am influenced by a particular reading of the anonymous body—and with it, a particular reading of the “phenomenological reduction.” The phenomenological reduction, or the process of bracketing (also known as the *epoche*) is key to the phenomenological method, though not uniformly understood. Husserl begins the phenomenological enterprise by bracketing the “natural attitude,” which posits that there exists a world outside of ourselves that causes perception. He instead focuses on the world as it is known by the subject. He frames this retreat into consciousness as guaranteeing some sort of transcendental truth to phenomenological claims. Merleau-Ponty, in contrast, reworks phenomenology as an existential philosophy, developing a critique of Husserl’s idealism. He insists that consciousness is in the world and embodied. Since we are in the world, we can never stand outside of it to understand it; we can never bracket it as Husserl suggests. “The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “is the impossibility of a complete reduction.”⁸⁹ And yet some form of a reduction is necessary, in his view. He writes: “The best formulation of the reduction is probably that given by Eugen Fink, Husserl’s assistant, when he spoke of ‘wonder’ in the face of the world.”⁹⁰ Phenomenology in Merleau-Ponty’s version begins not by withdrawing into consciousness but rather by defamiliarizing that which is taken for granted, by reawakening ourselves to the richness of perceptual experience.

This reworking of the reduction has been important to the attractiveness of Merleau-Ponty’s writing in feminist thought because often feminist concerns are seen as empirical, having to do with the world. If phenomenology begins by

bracketing that world, retreating into consciousness, feminist interests would then become bracketed. Thus, as Johanna Oksala notes, “Many feminist phenomenologists discard the transcendental reduction. They usually turn to Merleau-Ponty and reiterate his view on the impossibility of complete reduction.”⁹¹ However, Bryan Smyth argues that the incompleteness of the reduction leaves the project tenuous, since it is on the basis of this reduction that phenomenological insights become differentiated from subjectivist, personal views. Smyth asks: if the reduction is incomplete, then what is the status of the claims that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology describes?

Smyth develops an important reading of Merleau-Ponty that solves this problem. He argues that Merleau-Ponty holds onto an understanding of phenomenology as transcendental, and yet reconceives transcendental phenomenology as a “human practice that never really leaves the empirical world.”⁹² Although the reduction is partial, this does not tarnish the completeness of phenomenology’s philosophical insights. Rather, Merleau-Ponty draws on a philosophy of history from Marx and Lukács, one that asserts that the prepersonal or anonymous body, the body that cannot be left behind or transcended, consists in a historical, universal incarnate. This impersonal, habituated body is “the repository of the general form or structure of past experience,” or the “concrete locus of historical apriority.”⁹³ The anonymous body is “prepersonal,” but as Sara Heinämaa argues in a recent reading of *Phenomenology of Perception*, this does not mean that it is “self-less.”⁹⁴ By “anonymous” and “prepersonal,” Merleau-Ponty is pointing to aspects of the bodily nature of perception that are often hidden, but that “include the sedimented accomplishments of earlier acts, some of which are not our own acts but acts of others unknown to us and preceding us in time.”⁹⁵ This means that while the organism cannot be bracketed, and while the organism is influential, its effects do not undermine phenomenological inquiry but rather contribute to it. Smyth writes, “[R]eduction cannot be seen simply as an act of freedom, a kind of heroic detachment, but rather must be understood in incarnational terms as a matter of ‘living my time . . . by plunging into the present and the world.’”⁹⁶ In this sense, phenomenology remains transcendental, not by detaching itself from the world but rather by losing one’s self in one’s organism, which crucially is conceived as historical.⁹⁷

Smyth’s powerful reading of Merleau-Ponty, along with Heinämaa’s analysis of the prepersonal body, provides an opening for how I draw on phenomenology in this context. To be clear: I am less interested in producing a faithful interpretation of *Phenomenology of Perception* than in articulating a useful approach to phenomenology in the context of feminist, ecocritical, and critical race studies.

The anonymous, prepersonal body can be understood as the corporeal materialization of history or nature-culture-power, and this understanding makes room for the analysis of how difference and power give shape to that body.⁹⁸ In other words, one's body image is not "just" an idea, but is incorporated in habit and patterns of affect. The process of bracketing then becomes an analysis of the production of the body-subject.

Several scholars working both in the phenomenology of gender and race consider how these social positions become embodied. For instance, Linda Martín Alcoff argues that "race and gender consciousness produces habitual bodily mannerisms that feel natural and become unconscious after long use."⁹⁹ She argues that the materialization of bodies emerges within contexts of power differentials and inequalities that shape those very bodies. "The body itself," she writes, "is a dynamic material domain, not just because it can be 'seen' differently, but because the materiality of the body itself is, as [Elizabeth] Grosz puts it, volatile."¹⁰⁰ Similarly, Emily Lee, making a case for the relevance of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology for the study of race, examines how the meanings ascribed to particular bodies shape individual experience, such that "the subject develops certain emotions, knowledge, ethical/moral postures, and sense of being-in-the-world."¹⁰¹ While recognizing that race (and, I would add, gender) are socially constructed, Lee considers how the ways that embodiment is lived suggests that these forms of social difference do "not lie as a superficial cover over the primary layer of common humanity."¹⁰² She continues, "[I]n a profoundly intimate sense, one lives race through the immediacy of the particular differences of one's embodiment."¹⁰³

Such an argument emerges in *Between the World and Me*, as well.¹⁰⁴ Coates explains, over and over, that race is a fiction—a biological narrative invented to legitimize exploitation and violence, invented to create a feeling of superiority and invulnerability amongst those who believe themselves to be white. Whereas many scholars in critical race studies recognize this fiction, but argue that racialized identities are nonetheless important sites of contestation, meaning making, and community, Coates insists that the language of race is never far enough removed from the essentializing biology narrative. "Race," he writes, "is just a restatement and retrenchment of the problem."¹⁰⁵ At the same time, however, Coates writes extensively about how racism and racial stratification shaped and shapes his body and senses. "Racism," he states, "is a visceral experience. . . . It dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth."¹⁰⁶ Within this context, Coates calls himself "unoriginal."¹⁰⁷ He feels frightened; he learns to make his body hard. He incorporates—at least in part—his social position. He learns "rules that [. . .] have you contort your body to address the block, and contort

again to be taken seriously by colleagues, and contort again so as not to give the police a reason.”¹⁰⁸ Coates explains how hard it is for him not to pass on these habits and this fear to his son. For example, when his toddler jumps right in and plays with others at a preschool, Coates finds himself wanting to run after him, and stop his playing: “‘We don’t know these folks! Be cool!’”¹⁰⁹ In short, Coates shows how one develops habits, forms of movement, and affective connections that materialize the experience of racialization and racism in and as the lived body.

And through these bodies, as Jeremy Weate argues in a reading of Fanon, “we belong to relatively different worlds.”¹¹⁰ In other words, the phenomenology of race pluralizes the “conditions of possibility for experience.”¹¹¹ This argument is also central to *Between the World and Me* where racializing experience shapes perception itself. “But oh, my eyes,” Coates writes. “When I was a boy, no portion of my body suffered more than my eyes.”¹¹² Coates explains how he had a limited sense of the world, and could not imagine any place beyond either the Baltimore of his youth or the white suburbs on television. Following a phenomenological approach, we can read this passage as a statement about his lived eyes, his eyes as they are seeing in the world. In other words, “his eyes” are neither a metonymy for his sense of the possible, nor is he writing about his physical eyes. It is not that his retina suffered. His eyes as they are lived suffered.

Yet while gendered racialization shapes both the body and perception, it does not determine it. Merleau-Ponty writes: “I am not the outcome or the meeting-point of numerous causal agencies. . . . I cannot conceive myself as nothing but a bit of the world, a mere object of biological, psychological, or sociological investigation.”¹¹³ Instead of seeing the lived body as determined, Alcott argues that Merleau-Ponty both recognizes the “importance of social influence” while also allowing “for meaningful intentionality.”¹¹⁴

In short: a problem with phenomenology, as Michel Foucault influentially argued, is that “it gives absolute priority to the observing subject, . . . which places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity—which in short, leads to a transcendental consciousness.”¹¹⁵ Yet Merleau-Ponty does not give priority to the observing subject as an origin or transcendental consciousness, if that consciousness is understood as standing above or apart from the field being perceived.¹¹⁶ “There is no inner man,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself.”¹¹⁷ “Man,” in Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of perception, is not reflecting on the world, standing apart from it, but rather living in it—apart of it. At a minimum, this immersion in the world takes form in and as the body itself, a historical materialization of nature-culture-power (and therefore not “man” at all). This implies that perception of the

more-than-human world is what phenomenologists call “intersubjective,” which is to say constituted (and not only situated) through nature-culture-power and affected by the production of social difference.¹¹⁸

Such a rendering of phenomenology, however, is still not sufficient. I’ve argued that Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* provides a useful method for considering the more-than-human world in a way that does not erase the embodied locations from which that world is perceived and yet that also points to something beyond us. I’ve also focused on how the anonymous body is not universal, and have argued that this body is best understood as the historical materialization of nature-culture-power in (and as) us. Analysis of the more-than-human world, however, need not simply consider the differential production of lived bodies. It also requires a historical rendering of the nature-power-cultures that shapes what comes to be sensed.

This is clear, again, in Coates’s and Fanon’s writing. For instance, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon describes a colonial world, divided in two along racial lines: the indigenous colonized sector, which is cramped and hungry, and a white, colonist’s sector, which is satiated and spacious.¹¹⁹ Violence and its threat separate these worlds; violence surrounds the colonized, transforming him into a “man penned in.”¹²⁰ As I argue in chapter 4, Fanon’s writing sheds light on geopolitics, the force relations that transform the surface of the earth. Geopolitics physically transforms the earth through techniques such as urban planning, architecture, engineering, agriculture, and surveying—but also through digging, logging, and marking territory. In this context, the description of someone’s perception of the more-than-human world requires not simply the analysis of the differential production of lived bodies but also an analysis of the production of the places and spaces in which these bodies move.

In short, *Earthly Encounters* develops a historicized phenomenology of the embodied subject, one that shows how such a phenomenology requires not simply an account of the production of the lived body but also of the production of the spaces and places we inhabit. It draws on phenomenology to provide a fuller account of the lived experience of racialized gender as it exists on this planet, a more-than-human world, and it offers the analysis of sensation as one lens for getting at that experience.

“Philosophy” and Feminist Theory

While highlighting phenomenology, this book is not a detailed study of this philosophical tradition or of any philosophy, for that matter. This book is not tethered

to a philosophical canon. While I argue for the relevance of phenomenology to contemporary critical theory, I also turn to a series of texts that blend autobiography with philosophy, poetry, fiction, and politics. This form of writing is a key genre in feminist theory. I read, for example, Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* and Rashmika Pandya's "The Borderlines of Culture and Identity." Written from particular historical and geographic locations, locations shaped by colonialism and settler colonialism, these texts archive earthly encounters in explicitly political contexts, contexts that demand attention to territory, appropriation, and belonging. The locations from which the texts are written do not remain unchanged through the writing process; they are not essential, and yet the texts highlight the embeddedness of accounts of materiality, as well as the power to affect and be affected by words, storms, and places.

My sideways treatment of philosophy responds to the political constitution of the discipline's boundaries; it is both symptom and statement. The book leans toward philosophical questions, but the philosophers who have most influenced me have not been primarily located in philosophy departments. Therefore, as symptom, this book is only partially philosophical, because philosophy has rejected those philosophers who most captured my political, creative, and conceptual imagination. But the book's treatment of philosophy, as well as its archive, is also statement. I do not engage in close analysis of any one canonical philosopher so as to widen philosophy's archive, to show the conceptual relevance of voices outside the discipline without subsuming these voices within it. I work not in the name of diversity, which assumes that differences can be named, known, even consumed, but rather for the purposes of humility.¹²¹ This humility refuses to universalize my own (white, Western) position that is tied to a particular canon, and seeks to challenge the privilege of ignorance entangled in that position, though it will never rid itself of it.¹²² This means that I take the risk of working with texts such as Head's. I recognize that I am in danger of appropriating such work, using it for the purposes of a theoretical tradition with which their writing is not explicitly engaged—Head, for instance, did not consider herself a feminist. She was not explicitly concerned with phenomenology. This book nonetheless takes the risk of appropriation, attending to this danger by paying attention to the contexts and intellectual debates that the books I refer to themselves engage. I want to show that philosophy comes in different forms and from different places; I want to show the relevance of voices not considered philosophical to philosophy. I take inspiration here from Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed* in its vision of ending what she calls the "apartheid of theoretical domains" that divides "academic endeavors by race, sex, class, gender, and identity."¹²³ If the problem in the

end remains that the book's central theoretical question emerges from a Western tradition and thus recenters the West, I propose that the method for addressing this question nonetheless unsettles this tradition as well.¹²⁴

Earthly Encounters' turn to first-person creative and political nonfiction (often written by women) follows a long history of women's studies scholarship that brings attention to women's voices. Such an approach has been deemed suspect. The claim is that the "evidence of experience," to use Joan Scott's phrase, or the autobiographical, in Nigel Thrift's version, spuriously treats the subject as foundational.¹²⁵ Scholars argue that such genres cannot account for how subjects are constituted; they provide a false sense of oneness, presenting the world retroactively within structures that appear always already there. These criticisms overlap significantly with the critique of phenomenology. And yet I argue that autobiographical writing can also explore and can be read to explore these very problems. Still more, autobiographical texts put pressure on philosophical traditions that are indifferent to difference, a problem that Luce Irigaray and Adriana Cavarero have made central to feminist philosophy.¹²⁶ Cavarero argues that the voice, emanating from deep within the body, captures a uniqueness, an "unrepeatable singularity" that philosophy has mistakenly, dangerously, treated as superfluous.¹²⁷ Although *Earthly Encounters* focuses on written rather than spoken words, I am influenced by Cavarero's claims. I analyze a range of texts, including autobiographical texts, paying attention to their location so as to refuse philosophy's tendency to ignore the materiality of singular bodies. This continues a long history of feminist thought.¹²⁸

Most recently, Mariana Ortega has challenged problematic distinctions between literature and philosophy, arguing that the writing of women of color, and Latina women in particular, has been relegated to the realm of literature as opposed to philosophy, because it often attends to "personal stories" having to do with "gendered and racialized selves" rather than "metaphysical inquiries" that attend to the "nature of selfhood and subjecthood in general."¹²⁹ Ortega argues, however, that these "personal stories" have theoretical, philosophical relevance. They incite us to rethink "the self." They show us how too often that which is taken to be universal or general is in fact white and masculine. They highlight how selfhood is situated. Following Ortega, one can argue that this book does not explore autobiographical or creative nonfiction, but rather expands the philosophical archive itself.

In short, *Earthly Encounters* brings attention to sensation in order to develop thought in more-than-human worlds. I draw on the work of Merleau-Ponty, all while considering the limitations of philosophy and its canon. I often analyze