IDLE TALK AND ANTI-RACISM: ON CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY, LANGUAGE, AND RACIAL JUSTICE

EYO EWARA
Loyola University Chicago

In this paper, I want to address the question of critical phenomenology's contributions to projects of racial justice and the production of radical imaginaries from a somewhat oblique angle.[1] While critical phenomenologists have offered many accounts of what it is like to live in a world shaped by *racism*—particularly in terms of embodiment—they have not drawn attention to questions about what it is like to live in a world increasingly shaped by *anti*-racist sentiment and action, the kind of world in which the question of critical phenomenology's contribution to projects of racial justice can itself arise. While race and racism have never stopped being urgent issues for many communities of color, talk about race, racism, and racial justice have once again become a central part of mainstream social and political discourse in America. Through public attention to continuing state violence against Black people, the exponential rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders during the COVID-19 pandemic, and both the growing awareness of the inextricability of American institutions from white supremacy and the ensuing backlash, what has been dubbed America's "racial reckoning" has made overt talk about racism and racial justice ubiquitous.[2] "Racial justice" is a phrase on our screens, on our streets, and on our own lips more and more often.

I argue that one avenue to approach the silence in critical phenomenology around the experiences and habits of anti-racism as they circulate in our discourse is to draw attention to how critical phenomenology, as it turns *to* questions of race, tends to turn *away* from explorations of language. Echoing Maurice Merleau-Ponty's claim that French thinkers had "interrogated phenomenology," Paul Ricoeur (1967), in his article "New

---

[1] My thanks to Emmanuel Carillo for putting together our "Philosophies of Race and Language" independent study at UTSA in the fall of 2020. The seeds for this paper grew out of our reading and thinking together in that space.

[2] See for example Sreenivasan 2021, Francilius 2021, and Balto 2021.

Developments in Phenomenology in France: The Phenomenology of Language," argued that a turn toward language was a central element of this interrogation (Ricoeur 1967, 10). Ricoeur offered a reconstruction of how, through taking up the work of the late Husserl and elaborating on phenomenology's turn to the problem of meaning as it grew out of a methodological reliance on "the reduction whereby every question concerning being becomes a question concerning the *sense* of being," language became an inescapable concern for French phenomenologists (10). Here, I want to interrogate how it is that critical phenomenologists approaching racial issues have nonetheless managed to escape explicitly thematizing language. I argue that this occlusion of language by critical phenomenology consequently leaves behind resources through which to ask ourselves what is happening as we articulate increasingly taken-for-granted ways of speaking and living out an opposition to racism.

Rather than offering an evaluation of anti-racist strategies as Linda Martín Alcoff (1998) does in her piece "What Should White People Do?" and Shannon Sullivan (2016) does in her *Good White People: The Problem with White Middle-Class Anti-Racism*, I am interested in what phenomenological work on language can offer in helping to describe *how* anti-racist speech circulates and becomes conventional, how we encounter it, and how it can suffuse and orient our experience.[3] My aim here is not to make a moral judgment about the diffusion of anti-racist speech or to participate in accusations of superficial "wokeness." There are clear reasons why widespread conversation about race and racism is a good thing. I argue instead that critical phenomenology is well positioned to bring to light how we talk about anti-racism and racial justice, how we encounter talk about anti-racism and racial justice, and what such talk enables or constrains. At the same time, I argue that there is something particularly important for the field of critical phenomenology in this project. Exploring anti-racist language use requires us to defamiliarize our own habits of critical thought and engagement and reexamine our expectations about what it looks like to take seriously race, racism, and racial justice in philosophical and specifically phenomenological work.

To talk about how language operates and shapes experience in taken for granted understandings and expressions of anti-racism involves scrutinizing how critical phenomenology describes itself as "an ameliorative phenomenology that seeks not only to describe but also to repair the world, encouraging generosity, respect, and compassion for the diversity of our lived experiences" (Weiss, Salamon, and Murphy 2020, xiv). It is not only our overtly harmful or racist sentiments and structures that can become hidden in their habitual operations in our lives, covering over and perhaps misleading us about their mechanisms and force. Our ameliorative, anti-racist sentiments can themselves become reflexes, habits of speech, orientation, and gesture that circulate without our noticing in ways and that can cause us to under-examine what we are speaking about or what we

---

[3] Though both these thinkers at times draw on Merleau-Ponty, Fanon, and other phenomenological resources in their descriptions of racist and racialized embodiment in other parts of their work, references to phenomenology disappear as they turn towards accounts of anti-racism. They turn to prescriptive arguments about what one ought or ought not do as an anti-racist, in contrast to the descriptions of the experiential conditions through which people take up such imperatives.

are doing with our speech.[4] While this habit-forming is not in itself a bad thing, I see phenomenology's particular power as its ability to draw our attention back to those habits. Phenomenology can draw us back to what we say because it goes without saying that we would, what we do because we understand—tacitly—that we should, and where we direct ourselves without always having a clear sense of what assumptions, structures, and mechanisms orient us. In that sense, it can offer a first step in evaluating and reimaging how we approach anti-racism in thought and action.

Toward that end, I will first draw attention to how critical phenomenological attention to race habitually de-emphasizes the phenomenological tradition's concern with and theorizations of language. Taking readings of Frantz Fanon's (2008) *Black Skin, White Masks* as an example, I note how, when critical phenomenologists do attend to language and speech in addressing questions of racial justice, they do so only as a part of a focus on *racism's* expressions. In doing so, they elaborate on what might already be well-recognized concerns as opposed—in perhaps more traditionally phenomenological fashion—to calling into question our taken-for-granted *anti*-racist sentiments, habits, and, particularly, speech. In the second part, I point to how this focus on racist language quickly segues from a concern with language itself into a concern with the body, which monopolizes much of critical phenomenology's attention in issues around race. In the third part, I then draw on Frantz Fanon's reflections on language and his descriptions of anti-racist language in conversation with Martin Heidegger's account of "idle talk" to offer a brief example of a critical phenomenological analysis of the diffusion of anti-racist language and what critical phenomenology can help us to understand about it.

CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY, LANGUAGE, AND RACISM

On the first page of their recent collection, *50 Concepts for a Critical* Phenomenology,* editors Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon (2020) write:

> One of phenomenology's most axiomatic methodological commitments is the refusal to accept the taken-for-grantedness of experience. This commitment entails the perpetual interrogation of the most familiar features of our everyday experiences, not to deny them but in order to know them better. Like literature, history, and anthropology, phenomenology has yielded rich descriptions of lived experience. Phenomenology is marked by a faith that such descriptions can disclose the most basic structures

[4] Throughout this paper I use "language" and "speech" interchangeably. Arguably, there are important differences here, differences that are tracked, for example, in the structuralist distinction between *langue* and *parole*. Investigating the relationship between race, racism, and language and a drawing on phenomenological work on language can encompass more than discussions of speech acts. That said, my goal here is to draw attention to the occlusion of language in critical phenomenological discussions in general and thus hopefully open room to explore how these distinctions become relevant for critical phenomenology and for thinking on racial justice that draws from phenomenological sources.

of human existence including temporality, perception, language, and intersubjectivity. (xiii)

In this passage, the editors articulate some of the key philosophical interventions of the phenomenological tradition that make its "critical" deployments both possible and powerful. Phenomenology can show us the structures that underly our experiences, even as their study often casts the everyday in a light that leaves it unfamiliar, strange, and open to critique. Their brief list of some of these structures point out central themes in phenomenological writing and research past and present. That said, though the volume that follows—like much of the work in critical phenomenology that has appeared thus far—does indeed involve accounts of temporality, perception, and intersubjectivity, *50 Concepts* exemplifies a tendency in the move toward a specifically *critical* phenomenology to leave behind thematic investigations of language.

The omission of much thematic investigation into language among critical phenomenologists is surprising, particularly insofar as language has been thematized by key phenomenological figures from Husserl onwards and has been a central and recurring area of phenomenological research. Concerns about language appear in Husserl's work as early as the *Logical Investigations* and already in Part II of Merleau-Ponty's much-cited *The Phenomenology of Perception*, and both thinkers continue a concern with language throughout their respective bodies of work. Heidegger—from whom critical phenomenologists have drawn in explorations of temporality, world, being-toward-death, and "the They"—both investigates language in relation to these other key concepts and as a pressing subject of investigation itself. As I will pay particular attention to, Frantz Fanon (2008) is concerned with language in what has become a key text for critical phenomenologists, *Black Skin, White Masks*. That language is a central area of research in the work of these figures in the phenomenological tradition has certainly not been missed in the scholarship that has read and hoped to extend their work.[5] Indeed, the importance of language to phenomenology is framed clearly in the very title of Françoise Dastur's 2017 book *Questions of Phenomenology: Language, Alterity, Temporality, Finitude*. Nonetheless, despite language's position as one of phenomenology's central and recurring questions, though references to phenomenological concerns about language are scattered throughout *50 Concepts*, none of the authors there and few elsewhere in the burgeoning field of critical phenomenology have centered either phenomenology's historical engagement with, or accounts of, language, or investigated their possible use for phenomenologically oriented critique.

The tendency of critical phenomenologists to decenter language is apparent particularly in the many and varied readings of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. As Robert Bernasconi (2011) has argued, "the prominence that phenomenology enjoys today within critical philosophy of race has much to do with the compelling and indispensable nature of the phenomenological accounts of the lived experience of racism presented by Frantz Fanon in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War" (552). It is unquestionably the case that thinkers within the areas of critical phenomenology, broadly construed, have drawn

---

[5] See for example Ricoeur 1967, Erickson 1970, Edie 1976, Bernasconi 1985, Inkpin 2016, Apostolopoulos 2019, and Engelland 2021 among many others.

heavily on Fanon's work in developing accounts of racialization and racism. Indeed, Weiss (2017) has written that

> Fanon's work has played a central role in inaugurating what Lisa Guenther calls a "critical phenomenology," a rigorous philosophical mode of inquiry that abandons the meta-level of 'pure' subjective description advocated by Husserl, and directly addresses the constitutive social, political, psychological, economic, historical, and cultural dimensions of the phenomena under investigation. (233)

The elements Weiss lists as part of the turn from Husserl's "pure" description towards a more Fanonian critical phenomenology are, once again, telling. While it could be subsumed in some senses under accounts of politics, psychology, history, or culture, language is never explicitly mentioned as an area of Fanonian intervention or of specifically *critical* phenomenological investigation in this passage, and only rarely and partially engaged in the literature.[6]

Michel Henry (1999) points out that there are two veins in which phenomenology engages with language. On the one hand, phenomenology is concerned with language insofar as it takes language as an object of investigation, one among many possible such objects open to phenomenological analysis and research. On the other hand:

> Far from being proposed as one theme or object among others for the work of phenomenological elucidation (a phenomenology of language just as there can be a phenomenology of social forms, of the work of art, etc.), language belongs, on the contrary, to the internal conditions of this process of elucidation; it is this internal condition if it is true that it bears within itself the capacity for making us see what it designates by naming it before pursuing the analysis of it either in the spontaneous assertions of common sense or in the advanced propositions of scientific knowledge. But, not only must the things be able to show themselves to us (the things to which these propositions refer), but also these propositions themselves must be able to show themselves, and they can do this only in a monstration proper to language, a monstration which constitutes its originary essence, its Logos. The primitive Saying is never therefore on the side of what is said, that is, on the side of what is shown; it is what shows. (344–45)

---

[6] See Gordon 2015 and Davis 2018, both of whom engage Fanon on language but, I argue, overlook his engagements with anti-racist speech. It is worth noting that David Marriott is particularly attentive to the role language plays in Fanon's work in his *Whither Fanon?* That said, importantly, Marriott's emphasis on language is part of his particular turn away from phenomenological and existential readings of Fanon and towards a more psychoanalytically oriented engagement therewith. In *What Fanon Said*, though Lewis Gordon (2015), emphasizes the importance of the existential and phenomenological elements of Fanon's work and does not set them in harsh opposition to his psychoanalytic influences, he does begin his longest engagement on Fanon's conception of language with a meditation on whether Fanon ultimately relies on or surpasses psychoanalytic insights (24).

In this passage, Henry not only points to how there is such a thing as a phenomenology *of* language but underlines how phenomenology's concern with phenomenality and elucidation inherently involves a concern *with* language. Insofar as phenomenology is concerned both with a project of description and with things as they show themselves, it is unavoidably concerned with language not only as one among other objects shown, but as the medium of that showing. Critical phenomenological investigation has almost completely occluded both phenomenologies of language and the relationship between phenomenology and language more broadly. While critical phenomenological investigations arguably do at times make use of language's function as "what shows," there is a tendency to then disregard that language as what allows things to show themselves and to move instead to an analysis of the things thus shown. This tendency plays out in readings of Fanon and particularly in readings of *Black Skin*'s most famous scene.

It might be argued that critical phenomenological investigation that draws from Fanon (2008) does indeed center language or speech in the many and varied invocations of the scene from *Black Skin* where a child cries out "'Dirty Nigger' or simply 'Look! A Negro!'" [*"Sale nègre!" ou simplement "Tiens un nègre!"*] (89). For example, already in response to the 1991 beating of Rodney King, Judith Butler centered the child's cry in their essay "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia" in ways amenable to what is now called critical phenomenology. Turning to Fanon's repetitions of "Look! A Negro!," Butler (2004) argued that

> Frantz Fanon offers here a description of how the black male body is constituted through fear, and through a naming and a seeing: "Look, a Negro!" where the "look" is both a pointing and a seeing, a pointing out what there is to see, a pointing which circumscribes a dangerous body, a racist indicative which relays its own danger to the body to which it points. (207)

In this passage, Butler does indeed exemplify how language for Fanon is a not just a saying but a showing, a way in which the black body is constituted as a phobic object through the cry that points it out, that calls to "look!" Nonetheless, note how swiftly Butler's account deprioritizes language *per se*. The child's call is read only relative to its content, its imperative to "look!" in such a way that the would-be critical phenomenologist's attention turns towards questions of seeing and of being seen as they constitute and operate on the body, and turns away from the role that speech and language play in this racist and racializing interaction.[7] "Look!" is primarily "a pointing and a seeing" in a way that distracts from any discussion of how it is also, and primarily, a *saying*. Here—to misuse a phrase from Levinas—the saying is lost in the said.

There are reasons why work in critical phenomenology might center this jarring scene and those like it in ways that decenter an explicit concern with language itself. The charged nature of the slur and its call in public interrupts the people on the train, throws the

---

[7] Something similar takes place in Lee McBride's (2020) reference to Fanon's "Look! A Negro" in his essay in 50 Concepts, unsurprisingly entitled "The Look."

dynamics of the scene into relief by interrupting the everydayness of the experience of its riders. Phenomenologists often center moments of interruption as attempts to break out of habitual and sedimented ways of perceiving the world so as to look at and think about its structures. Husserlian phenomenology called for an *epoché* that could suspend the natural attitude in order to study experience and its conditions. Heidegger, in *Being and Time,* articulates that it is only through the interruption of *angst*–tied notably here to the *call* of conscience [*der Ruf des Gewissens*]—that one is able to gain access to the existential structures of *Dasein* in its everydayness. Fanon's invocation of this slur arguably works in a similar way. The slur interrupts the familiarity of his reader's immersion in the world at the beginning of this chapter, meant to redescribe experience just as the character he describes is interrupted by the child's call as he goes about his day.

As George Yancy (2018) argues in defense of opening his work *Backlash* in Fanonian fashion with the repetition of the word "Nigger!":

> such an opening is so out of step given philosophy's penchant for conceptual abstraction where the messiness of the real world is left behind as theory soars unencumbered. Imagine the impact on philosophy books and philosophy courses where central foci deal with ethics, aesthetics, social and political philosophy, or even metaphysics, were they to begin with the reality that in white America there is this contemptible category that white people created called "nigger." (3)

For Yancy, this slur carries with it the power to interrupt the sediment of abstractions and metaphysical conceptions with which philosophy cloaks experience and with which America avoids its reality and turns us back—we could say—to the things themselves. Both Yancy and Fanon open parts of their studies with these slurs because both recognize that these words have the power to defamiliarize the world and our movement through it, opening it to investigation and redescription.

That said, in this context, centering slurs or other explicitly or recognizably racist language undermines a phenomenological engagement with language itself. These moments of speech are recognizably racist and thus charged in the sense that they draw attention to themselves, acting similarly to what Ian Hacking (1999) calls "elevator words" (22). As such, they do not call out for their own phenomenological defamiliarization or denaturalization since they are themselves already disconcerting enough to be used to spark types of verbal *epoché*, to raise the moral, social, and political stakes such that we are forced to turn back and reflect upon what had otherwise been business as usual. Focusing on racist language puts emphasis not on how language has been operating in overlooked ways as a part of everyday life, but on what other elements of everyday life can be illuminated *by* a kind of language that disrupts the everyday. There is no need to defamiliarize one's relationship to "Look! A Negro" since the charged framing of the slur itself resists familiarization in this interruptive instance. In the focus on what is recognizably racist language, language itself is taken as conspicuous and not in need of illumination or thematization. It acts only as a tool to focus on what is "really" overlooked as we live race and live with racism: the bodily

experiences and habits whose investigation has become the taken for granted contribution of critical phenomenology to anti-racist work and thought.

"LIVED EXPERIENCE" AND THE CENTERING OF THE BODY

In her careful phenomenological study of racism and embodiment, *The Habits of Racism,* Helen Ngo centers a moment similar to the Fanonian "Look!" that exemplifies the tendency to turn away from its analysis at the level of language and toward an account of the body. While her use of Fanon does not turn to the famous passage on the look, Ngo articulates her own account of a similar scene of intrusive racist speech, its reflection of a racist hypervisibility, and its effects on the body in a scene where a vendor calls out to her on seeing that she is an Asian woman. Ngo (2017) writes: "suddenly a loud, booming voice cuts across from the right. *NI HAO! (HELLO!)* My gut sinks. *Ni Hao!* I pretend not to notice, but a lump grows in my throat, my mouth grows dry . . . This is humiliating." (55). This scene begins Ngo's second chapter "The Lived Experience of Racism and Racialized Embodiment" and yet, though she opens the chapter with this moment of speech, she turns immediately to an account of the bodily experience of racism and racialization that leaves questions about speech and language behind. There is no explicit discussion of language throughout the rest of the chapter. Thus, while Ngo's framing example shows just how central instances of speech are to experiences of racism and racialization, she presents them only as invocations of a broader set of physical patterns and habits that instantiate racist structures and attitudes, turning "to a consideration of the *experience* of racism, with a particular emphasis on how those on the 'receiving end' of racism come to experience the phenomenon, and on their own *bodies*" (56, my emphasis).

There are scholarly reasons, beyond its interruptive character, that critical deployments of phenomenology like Ngo's, Butler's, and Yancy's, would center moments like Fanon's "Look! A Negro!" in ways that de-emphasize the role language plays therein and emphasize the body. Not only is the calling of the slur interruptive, it appears at the opening of the fifth chapter of *Black Skin,* "The Lived Experience of the Black," whose invocation of "lived experience" [*l'expérience vécu*] directly invokes phenomenological terminology and which contains Fanon's most extended engagement with Jean-Paul Sartre and his famous invocation of Merleau-Ponty. On the one hand, the tendency to de-prioritize Fanon's thinking on language, particularly in *Black Skin,* in favor of accounts of visibility might reflect the prioritization of this Fanonian debt to and dialogue with Sartre.[8] Fanon unquestionably draws from Sartre's own discussion of vision and the look and engages his discussions of Negritude directly in *Black Skin.* That said, Sartre's himself does not explicitly thematize the question of language,[9] putting Fanon's thinking on language in

---

[8] Indeed, Butler's longest explicit engagement with Fanon is expressly a reading of Fanon through Sartre in their 2006 essay "Violence, Nonviolence: Sartre on Fanon."

[9] See Ricoeur 1967. My thanks to Wendy O'Brien for her help on this point.

that text at odds with readings that emphasize its Sartrean engagements, however critical. In this Sartrean reading through the look, the body is then tacitly re-centered.

On the other hand, many thinkers including Ngo (2017), Weiss (2017), Alcoff (2006), and Alia Al-Saji (2010) prioritize Fanon's engagement with Merleau-Ponty and the concept of the corporeal schema in "The Lived Experience of the Black" as the key phenomenological element of that chapter. As I noted above, Merleau-Ponty does thematize language, but the focus among these readers as they have drawn connections between Merleau-Ponty, Fanon, and race has been on the corporeal schema, on bodily feeling, habit, and gesture. Here "lived experience" takes on a distinctly and reductively *physical* sense that, while acknowledging the body's existence in a world of history, cultural practices, and concrete others, creates a surprisingly isolated conception of what critical phenomenology is looking at when it looks at life as it is actually "lived" that centers the body's sensory and motor capacities. These Sartre-centered or Merleau-Ponty-centered interpretations point readers towards the idea that Fanon's most phenomenological interventions are indeed those in "The Lived Experience of the Black." They read Fanon such that, within that chapter, his is pre-eminently a phenomenological account either of the racialized and racializing look, of the effects of racialization on the body in terms of its sensory experience and physical navigation of its world, or both.[10]

These turns towards the conditions of visibility and towards a somewhat physicalist sense of embodiment reflect what I argue is critical phenomenology's ambivalent tendency to locate what is critical about phenomenology in its capacity to turn towards the body to the degree that the body is taken as the locus of race, gender, sex, and ability and of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism. While Weiss (2017) above notably presents what is critical about critical phenomenology as its turn away from the transcendental subject and towards quasi-transcendental structures like politics and culture that shape the subject, the body acts as the only point of contact for many critical phenomenologists between those structures and that subject. Gunther (2013) notably describes what is "critical" about critical phenomenology as its willingness to take into account discourses like those of critical race theory that show, "in different and sometimes divergent ways, how *embodied* subjects have been racialized through (for example) the colonization of the Americas, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the practice of plantation slavery and its partial abolition, followed

---

[10] Lewis Gordon tacitly points to how this slippage away from a direct engagement with Fanon on the question of language takes place. Gordon (2015) writes that, for Fanon, "language is a construction that has the force of transforming reality . . . To transform language, then, is the godlike project of transforming reality. Living language is, however, embodied. Flesh and such language are, in other words, symbiotic. Fanon is here referring to the phenomenological view of body and flesh; they refer, as well, to consciousness, which, from an existential phenomenological perspective, is always embodied consciousness of things, including intersubjective consciousness or the social world. This is because consciousness requires a point of view, a perspective, which cannot be achieved, as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty showed, without a body" (25). Gordon argues—notably in reference to both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty—that for Fanon the questions of language and of embodiment are closely aligned insofar as language, and consciousness along with it, is both embodied and has effects on its embodied speakers. While this is true, noticeably this conversation on language thus transitions into a conversation about the embodiment with which it is inextricably intertwined at the moment when what is supposedly a specifically *phenomenological* perspective is invoked.

by the hyperincarceration of black men and women in what is now the United States" (xiv, my emphasis). Note here the emphasis on *embodied* subjects that shapes Guenther's engagement with the structural and historical forces that she then lists. The specifically embodied quality of this analysis is set in contrast to either the "pure" phenomenological concerns with a disembodied transcendental subjectivity or what is often taken as more recognizably "post-structural" or "postphenomenological" emphases on discourse.[11]

Consequently, in invocations of moments like the child's explicitly racist call above, critical phenomenology does not attend to the import of language itself, how language operates or what its role is in the creation or maintenance of racial conditions. It does not ask how language might also operate as a point of contact between structures and subjects, but only about what language *does to* or *shows about* the body. Language certainly operates in these accounts, but while it instigates changes in how we look or feel or in how we approach our looking and feeling, its role outside of that initial moment and the promise of a power to arrest and illuminate the embodied self—the thunderous call to look, the jarring force of the word "Negro"—falls out of the picture. The orientation towards explicitly racist interventions and toward the bodily engagements and habits that they illuminate draws attention away from aspects of Fanon's work that arguably show his engagement with other key concerns of the phenomenological tradition. These would include his concern with language not in its intrusive effects on the individual body, but in its role in carrying and shaping the shared world.[12] Little attention in critical phenomenology has thus been paid to other chapters like the first in *Black Skin*, "The Black Man and Language," or even to the phenomenological import of other elements in "The Lived Experience of the Black" where Fanon centers quotations of more everyday accounts of what people tend to say in attempts at *anti*-racism that are not jarring interventions in the style of "Look! A Negro!" and not invitations to reflection on the body. Critical phenomenology thus turns away from

---

[11] This latter concern with the post-structural is reflected in Salamon's (2018) own reading of the question of what is "critical" about critical phenomenology as its inheritance of a Kantian sense of critique that she reads through its uptake by Michel Foucault. Whether a turn toward political and social structures as foremost in critique is where a critical phenomenology begins or where phenomenology-proper has been superseded is a question Gunther (2013) herself notes in writing that among the methodological issues that critical phenomenology raises is the fact that "it is not clear where critical phenomenology ends and postphenomenology begins" (xiv).

[12] Note, for example, how in their article on "World Traveling" in *50 Concepts*, Andrea Pitts (2020) turns away from an explicit theorization of world construction or maintenance when they turn toward the overlaps between María Lugones's work on worlds and world travelling and that of black existentialists, Fanon among them. After noting the tendency of readers to interpret Lugones's work alongside the "foundational texts of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, as well as those of Merleau-Ponty," citing particularly Mariana Ortega who has emphasized the overlaps in conceptions of world between Heidegger and Lugones, Pitts (2020) writes that "another interesting overlap within phenomenological traditions emerges between Lugones's conception of world-traveling and theorizations of resistance and agency found within the black existentialist tradition" (347). While they then turn to an engagement with Fanon, Pitts's interest there is in Fanon's critique of Sartre and the resistant tendency to disconnect concerns about one's blackness from wider concerns about freedom and embodiment in a part-whole relationship. The occlusion of Fanon discussions of worlds and travel between them is especially notable here as Fanon, like Lugones, emphasizes the intimacy of worlds and language. See Lugones 2003, 11, and Fanon 2008, 1. While Ortega (2016) references Fanon twice in her book *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenologies, Multiplicity, and the Self*, she too does not explore these connections.

resources in Fanon that can help to call into question and to re-examine what is happening in the uptake and circulation of the anti-racist discourse in which critical phenomenology itself often partakes. In what follows, I draw attention to just such passages, using both Fanon's own theorization of language and elements of Heidegger's work in *Being and Time*, to offer a brief example of how such language can operate.

LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE, AND IDLE ANTI-RACIST TALK

> Striving for a New Humanism.
> Understanding Mankind.
> Our Black Brothers.
> I believe in you, Man.
> Racial Prejudice.
> Understanding and Loving (Fanon 2008, xi)

On the first page of *Black Skin,* Fanon lists these as some of the "hundreds of lines that try to foist themselves" on him. Rather than beginning the text with an interruptive exclamation like "Look! A Negro!" or a reflection on bodily comportment, Fanon opens his work by drawing attention to these comparatively benign phrases. He orients his readers not to a scene marked by a racial slur, but to the diffuse anti-racist slogans that "foist" themselves on him, even as they appear out of nowhere, not tied to any particular moment, scene, or interlocutor like the child who calls out "Look! A Negro!" on the train. Who says these things? What do they mean? What ought we do with them? Though none of these questions are answered by the text, Fanon confronts his readers with the recognizable moral impetus these phrases contain in his experience of them. They are the kinds of things one says when one is trying to express anti-racist sentiment, to participate in a general dialogue about race and racism. They are also the kinds of things people of color hear from those working to show, put bluntly, that they are on "the right side of history" when it comes to racial justice.

> "You see, my dear fellow, color prejudice is totally foreign 'o me." "But do come in, old chap, you won't find any color prejudice here." "Quite so, the Black is just as much a man as we are." "It is not because he's black that he's less intelligent than we are." "I had a Senegalese colleague in the regiment, very smart guy." (Fanon 2008, 93)

These further passages appear in "The Lived Experience of the Black." Much like Fanon's earlier list of phrases, they are not narrativized or localized expressions and they do not present themselves as harsh racist intrusions. These phrases too "float," unmoored to a given space or speaker, and yet are familiar, the types of things one might have heard, or one might find oneself tempted to say without explicitly knowing why they ought to. Drawn out of context, these recognizable, common, unsurprising, perhaps *expected* expressions of anti-

racist sentiment are cast in a critical light, calling into question their very inconspicuousness. Uprooted, they show Fanon's attempt to draw attention to and defamiliarize these phrases not as interruptions that illuminate the body but as constitutive of a world.

Fanon (2008) writes in "The Black Man and Language" that "a man who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language. You can see what we are driving at: there is an extraordinary power in the possession of a language. Paul Valéry knew this and described language as 'the god gone astray in the flesh'" (2). Though it does not appear in "The Lived Experience of the Black," this earlier claim shows a key element of Fanon's specifically phenomenological engagement, insofar as he here explores the common theme in phenomenology of the relationship between language and world. D Davis (2018) writes that, on Fanon's account:

> through our understanding of a language we come to know the world as a certain *kind* of world—one that has a specific meaning and set of meanings and that "hangs together" in a particular way. Through this language we interpret and understand and, therefore, live in a certain world ("*this* world") and in a certain way ("*our* way of life"). (32)

Not merely descriptive, language here carries with it an understanding that holds together and discloses things in a particular, coherent way, tacitly interpreting the world for, and orienting, the speaker.

Though Fanon (2008) uses the phrasing here of a man who "possesses" a language [*un homme qui possède le langue*] in a way that carries an active sense of ownership, mastery, and use, several lines above he claims that "to speak means being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language, but it means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization" (1–2). Here to be able to use a language is to far more passively "assume" [*assumer*] a culture and "bear" [*supporter*] a civilization. Rather than saying that one takes possession of a language and with it a world, Fanon indicates that one is possessed by the world taken on through language, speaking not as master of it but as someone already beholden to it. One is shaped by that language and that world without necessarily recognizing how. Fanon argues for the weight of language and its power as part of a discussion on how "the more the black Antillean assimilates the French language, the whiter he gets–i.e., the closer he comes to becoming a true human being" (2). That said, as Lewis Gordon points out, the irony of this passage lies in the fact that what he then articulates is not an account of the successful, but of the somewhat *failed* and caricatured whitening on the part of the French speaker, one that does not liberate them from racial bondage but shows the depth of its force in continuing to present whiteness as "true human being." Gordon (2015) argues that

> the promise of language is not only seductive but also unfaithful. Semiotic resistance, albeit important—Fanon after all admonishes the use of condescending language—at times intensifies the problem instead of alleviating it. Mastering the language for the sake of recognition *as white* reflects a dependency that subordinates the black's humanity. (28)

While Fanon and Gordon here draw attention to what happens as black people work to transform themselves through the use of another language, a similar conception inhabits Fanon's deployment of instances of anti-racist speech. Such speech often possesses its speakers without their express knowledge, coming to them as part of a world and helping to disclose things in that world in ways that might not be evident. Still further, such speech might orient and transform that speaker in ways they neither see nor intend and that might undermine those intentions. In this sense, Fanon's comments on language overlap with the account that Heidegger offers in *Being and Time* on what he calls "discourse" [*Rede*] and his description of a diffuse anti-racist language converges with Heidegger's account of "idle talk" [*Gerede*]. [13]

Heidegger's (2010) discussion of idle talk takes place as an account of the everyday way in which discourse is one of the structures that "first make something like language ontologically possible," as it discloses a world and an extension of his much-cited account of "the They" [*das Man*] (157). For Heidegger, it is as a part of the They, as the "They-Self," that Dasein primarily understands itself in its everyday life, taking its understanding of what it is, who it is, how it ought to act, and what is possible for it from the already-disclosed, impersonal sense of what "one" is like. As Nancy J. Holland (2020) puts it:

> many aspects of our lives, from the grammar of the language we speak to how we use tools to the rules of etiquette and the laws we live under, aren't addressed to us as individuals but are understood or communicated to us impersonally as what "they" do in a particular situation or what "we" do or what "one" does. (315)[14]

This everyday, public understanding of things-- the way that they are already interpreted relative to an averageness for which they have been, as Heidegger (2010) says, "leveled down" in order to become generally accessible—is particularly harbored in language.

Not just one among other ways that "I" am primarily as "one," our relationship to language in our sense of what "one says" and our speaking "as one does," marks the key avenue through which we take up, maintain, and disseminate the average, public understandings of the They. Heidegger (2010) writes that

> in the language that is spoken when one expresses oneself, there already lies an average intelligibility; and, in accordance with this intelligibility,

[13] Heidegger resists the claim that his account of idle talk is part of a "philosophy of culture," perhaps in precisely the sense in which I am currently deploying it in conversation with Fanon. While I acknowledge that idle talk is not meant to indicate a particular cultural tendency to lose oneself in the masses but, rather, an existential structure, I see no reason not to articulate the former in terms of its conditions in the latter.

[14] Holland (2020) refers to Heidegger's account of idle talk in her contribution on "the They" in *50 Concepts*. That said, Holland mentions idle talk only briefly and does not engage with its particular function or explore how it operates as a phenomenological reflection on language-use, taking it only as an example of the ways that the They operates and is theorized, as she points to Heidegger's references to idle talk to argue that "'The They' makes authenticity possible" (316).

> the discourse communicated can be understood to a large extent without the listener coming to a being toward what is talked about in the discourse so as to have a primordial understanding of it. One understands not so much the beings talked about; rather one already listens to what is spoken about as such. This is understood, what is talked about is understood, only approximately and superficially. (Heidegger 2010, 162)

For Heidegger, idle talk is what allows us to speak about "what *one* knows," to carry an average interpretation of the subjects of our speech, without having any direct contact with what it is that we are talking about. As Heidegger is quick to point out, this does not make idle talk something meant "in a disparaging sense" (161). Part of the point of his analysis of the They is to show how it is perfectly normal that, as social beings, much of what we know and how we understand ourselves is built out of a reflection of average social understandings and behaviors, understandings that we pick up from and relay on to others through language in figures of speech, common phrases or claims, and recognizable verbal signals. In this sense, idle talk is not inherently a bad thing any more than it is inherently a bad thing that much of what we know and talk about we glean not from direct experience with our subjects but from the testimony of others. Much of what we talk about we gather from what we have understood only tacitly, what we have heard second hand in a diffuse way whose authority we both accept and reinforce as we participate in "*passing the word along*" (163).[15]

That said, though idle talk, like the They itself, is not inherently negative, it does carry with it particular kinds of dangers, the very dangers—I argue—that Fanon expresses in the idle anti-racist talk that he cites and parodies. Heidegger (2010) writes that

> discourse, which belongs to the essential constitution of the being of Dasein, and also constitutes its disclosedness, has the possibility of becoming idle talk, and as such of not really keeping being-in-the-world open in an articulated understanding, but of closing it off and covering over innerwordly beings. To do this, one need not aim to deceive . . . idle talk is a closing off since it *omits* going back to the foundation of what is being talked about. (163)

The concern with idle talk here is that, while it is true that there is much that we take up, understand, and relay through simply what "one says," omitting a return to the matter at hand or encountering and repeating *simply* what "one" says can dull our experience of what we speak about. This closes off our attention to and possible ways of relating with the people and things that appear to us out of the world thus disclosed. Heidegger notes that "idle talk, which everyone can snatch up, not only divests us of the task of genuine understanding, but develops an indifferent intelligibility" (163). In idle talk, it is not just that one does not take up—for better or worse—the work of coming to understand something in a direct way, but that one becomes indifferent to it, levels it down in the sense in which Heidegger will say that the averageness of the They "prescribes what can and may be ventured, watches

---

[15] My thanks to Andrew Cutrofello for his framing of idle talk as a reflection on something like testimony.

over every exception which thrusts itself to the fore. Every priority is noiselessly squashed. Overnight everything that is original is flattened down as something long since known" (Heideger 2010, 123). Idle talk runs the risk of undermining or occluding the disclosive power of language, preventing it from drawing our attention, our wonder, or our concern by presenting what is idly talked about as indifferent, unimportant, what everyone says since everyone already knows what it is and what to do with it. The right words seem to present themselves in their obviousness, to float to us out of our world.

In both of Fanon's (2008) lists of phrases above, there is a sense that what he is describing is idle talk and that just such a closing off has taken place. Unlike his "Look! A Negro!," these lines are not situated in a narrative frame or given to a particular speaker. Who in particular is saying such things is unclear, and yet they are recognizable as what *one* says or might say to show one shares in general ant-racist sentiment. While these phrases are recognizable in this way, it is equally clear from their critical placement in the text that in them, both racism and anti-racist commitments have become matters of indifference in ways that close off attention to and engagement with the matters they describe. This kind of idle talk, "holds any new questioning and discussion at a distance because it presumes it has understood and in a peculiar way it suppresses them and holds them back" (Heidegger 2010, 163). Indeed, this way of speaking has closed off attention to the very issues that such language casually invokes, for example, in articulating as a welcome the statement that "you'll find no color prejudice here."

An obvious part of Fanon's critique of such phrases is that they fail to recognize how the speaker is himself seeing their interlocutor's blackness, reading and responding to that interlocutor through a sense of them not, as Fanon puts it elsewhere, as a "man" but as a "black man." To do so, for Fanon, is to manifest the very kind of prejudice that their idle talk disavows in the casual and thoughtless repetition of anti-racist language become platitude. Fanon (2008) describes how "I see in this white gaze that it's the arrival not of a new man, but of a new type of man, a new species. A Negro, in fact!" (95). Yet in these moments not of the white gaze but of idle white anti-racist speech, he not only recognizes *that* he is taken as a new "type" of man but shows *how* that very recognition is elided in the seemingly obvious, levelled down claims like "you'll find no color prejudice here" and "the Black is just as much a man as we." The equal claim to the human is a potentially powerful statement, one that *could* be a call to resist the denigration of the humanity of black people in the very division into the type "the Black." Instead, here the latter type is reified as a conception of a kind of basic difference is diffused, dispersed through repetitions of these phrases as idle talk.

Heidegger's account of idle talk is ambivalent to the degree that idle talk carries this threat of a leveling down and closing off of the matters at issue in our speech, but at the same time disperses the possibility of a more powerful rediscovery of what that speech involves, even as it is disseminated in a way that is indifferent to what is spoken about. In idle talk, "the intelligibility already deposited in expressions pertains to the discoveredness of beings actually obtained and handed down, as of the current intelligibility of being, *and of the possibilities and horizons available for fresh interpretation*" (Heidegger 2010, 162, my emphasis). In this passage, Heidegger is clear that idle talk carries with it a kind of

access to the matters it passes over indifferently. It holds a path back to them even if that path is blocked or closed over. As such, the way that idle talk spreads what is talked about in "wider circles" (Heidegger 2010, 163) is both a dissemination of a leveled down and indifferent understanding of the matters spoken about, but also the dissemination of further opportunities for a fresh interpretation of them, for a re-thinking or re-exploration of what it is one habitually says, what one thought one knew well enough in knowing how to talk about it with ease. This ambivalence is echoed in how Fanon does not ever actively reject these phrases. His concern is not that these phrases simply involve the use of the "wrong" words. Particularly, his inclusion of "Striving for a New Humanism" should alert readers to this fact insofar as Fanon himself advocates for a new humanism throughout his work.[16] There is, in the very uprooted dispersion of these phrases, an expansion of the possibility that they might come to more than an indifferent attention, their use become subject to critique, and for phrases like "a new humanism" to be seen in new and potentially more effective ways. Both these dangers and these possibilities in the dispersion of anti-racist speech appear to the degree that this speech itself becomes a question, to the degree that language's character as part of a world comes to the fore in our analyses of race, or put briefly, in the light that a critical phenomenological approach to language can reveal.

CONCLUSION

Above, I have worked to put in question critical phenomenology's habitual ways of theorizing race and racism as these are reflective both of its own tacit senses of what anti-racist contributions look like and of its tendency to explore and describe how overt racism—and not attempts at anti-racism—take place. This questioning has pointed to how critical phenomenology has conspicuously overlooked the resources of the phenomenological tradition's work on language and selectively interpreted the role language plays in racist scenes, focusing on the body. Finally, I offered a brief example of a critical phenomenological account of anti-racism and language, one that I hope shows both the richness of the possibilities still open for phenomenological work on race and the importance of examining what it is that we are doing as, in our potentially idle anti-racist speech, we pass the word along.

REFERENCES

Alcoff, Linda Martín. 1998. "What Should White People Do?" *Hypatia* 13 (3): 6–26. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810696.

———. 2006. *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

---

[16] For accounts of Fanon on a new humanism see Bernasconi 1996, Silverman 2012, and Lee 2015.

Al-Saji, Alia. 2010. "The Racialization of Muslim Veils: A Philosophical Analysis." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36: 875–902.

Apostolopoulos, Dimitri. 2019. *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Language*. Lanham and London: Rowman and Littlefield.

Balto, Simon. 2021. "We Are Told America Is Living Through a 'Racial Reckoning.' Is It Really?" *The Guardian*, May 25. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/may/25/america-racial-reckoning-simon-balto.

Bernasconi, Robert. 1985. *The Question of Language In Heidegger's History of Being*. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan.

———. 2011. "Critical Philosophy of Race." In *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, edited by Sebastian Luft and Soren Overgaard, 551–62. London and New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 2004. "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia" In *The Judith Butler Reader,* edited by Sara Salih and Judith Butler, 204–11. New York and London: Blackwell.

---------. 2006. "Violence, Non-Violence: Sartre on Fanon." *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 27 (1): 3–24.

Critchley, Simon and Reiner Schürmann. 2008. *On Heidegger's Being and Time*. London and New York: Routledge.

Dastur, Françoise. 2017. *Questions of Phenomenology: Language, Alterity, Finitude*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Davis, D. "Fanon, Language, and the Performativity of Race." *Social Alternatives* 37 (4): 32–38.

Edie, James M. 1976. *Speaking and Meaning: The Phenomenology of Language*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Engellend, Chad. 2021. *Language and Phenomenology*. London and New York: Routledge.

Erickson, Stephen A. 1970. *Language and Being: an Analytic Phenomenology*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Fanon, Frantz. 2008. *Black Skin, White Mask*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.

Francilus, Joey. 2021. "'I Can't Breathe:' a Year of Racial Reckoning in America." *ACLU of Florida*, May 21. www.aclufl.org/en/news/i-cant-breathe-year-racial-reckoning-america.

Gordon. Lewis. 2015. *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Guenther, Lisa. 2013. *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives*. Minneapolis and London: The University of Minnesota Press.

Hacking, Ian. 1999. *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Heidegger, Martin. 2010. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Edited by Dennis Schmidt. Albany: SUNY Press.

Henry, Michel. 1999. "Material Phenomenology and Language (or, Pathos and Language)." *Continental Philosophy Review* 32: 343–365.

Holland. Nancy J. 2020. "The They." In *50 Concepts for a Critical* Phenomenology*, edited by Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon, 315–20. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Inkpin, Andrew. 2016. *Disclosing the World: on the Phenomenology of Language*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Lee, Christopher J. 2015. *Frantz Fanon: Toward a Revolutionary Humanism*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Ngo, Helen. 2017. *The Habits of Racism*. London: Lexington Books.

Ortega, Mariana. 2016. *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Pitts, Andrea. 2020. "World-Travelling." In *50 Concepts for a Critical* Phenomenology*, edited by Gail Weiss, Ann V Murphy, and Gayle Salamon, 343–50. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1967. "New Developments in Phenomenology in France: The Phenomenology of Language." *Social Research* 34: 1–30.

Salamon, Gayle. 2018. "What's Critical About Critical Phenomenology?" *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology* 1 (1): 8–17.

Sullivan. Shannon. 2014. *Good White People: The Problem with White Middle Class Anti-Racism*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Sreenivasan, Hari. 2021. "From MLK Jr. to Black Lives Matter' A'ERICA'S 'Racial 'eckoning'." PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, April 4. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/from-mlk-jr-to-black-lives-matter-americas-racial-reckoning.

Weiss, Gail. 2017. "Phenomenology and Race (or Racializing Phenomenology)." In *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Race*, edited by Paul C. Taylor, Linda Martín Alcoff, and Luvell Anderson, 233–244. London and New York: Routledge.

Weiss, Gail, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon. 2020. "Introduction: Transformative Descriptions." In *50 Concepts for a Critical* Phenomenology*, edited by Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon, xiii–xiv. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Yancy, George. 2018. *Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly About Racism in America*. Lanham and London: Rowman and Littlefield.