

BODILY ALIENATION AND CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGIES OF RACE

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Frantz Fanon's (2008) descriptions of lived experience in *Black Skin, White Masks* have become canonical examples of bodily alienation. In several famous passages, Fanon shows how, faced with the White gaze or upon entering White spaces, Blacks may no longer feel at home in their bodies and become burdened by them: "And then we were given the occasion to confront the white gaze. An unusual weight descended on us" (90).¹ For instance, confronted with a habitual task, such as finding a seat on a train, the Black man finds himself disoriented: "In the train, it was a question of being aware of my body, no longer in the third person but in triple . . . I was unable to discover the feverish coordinates of the world. I existed in triple: I was taking up room" (92).

Since Fanon (2008), the concept of bodily alienation has been deployed by philosophers of race working in the phenomenological tradition (Yancy 2008; Zeiler 2013; Ngo 2017). What is interesting about this concept is that it brings with it a judgment of value: to be alienated from one's body is a *defective* state of affairs. Yet, the normative component of the language of alienation brings with it a methodological concern. Descriptions of bodily experience clearly belong to the domain of phenomenology. But what place is there for normative judgments within the field? Phenomenology's vocation, as it was originally articulated by Husserl, was to be a *descriptive* science. What are the merits of going beyond description and integrating the concept of bodily alienation into our phenomenological toolkit?

Before trying to address such a question, let us better circumscribe the experience at play. Kristin Zeiler's (2013) "A Phenomenology of Excorporation, Bodily Alienation and Resistance" offers a fruitful starting point since it develops an ample analysis of bodily alienation. Zeiler begins with the notion of *incorporation*. Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, she contends that when we habitually use certain movements or tools, they disappear from focal awareness and become integrated—at the level of lived experience—into our bodies.

¹ Although Fanon does not capitalize the adjectives "white" and "black," I choose to do so to indicate that Whiteness and Blackness are identity categories, rather than mere descriptors of racial features.

For instance, after practicing a harp piece many times, I no longer need to focus on how to pluck each string; instead, the movements required for executing that piece become second nature. Suppose, however, that I begin to think about the process of playing. As has happened to me before, when I reflect on how well a performance is going, this change may disrupt my fluid execution of the piece. Suddenly, I can no longer play! What has happened is the opposite of incorporation; instead, the experience taking place corresponds to what Zeiler (2013) terms *excorporation*. When previously incorporated movements or tools return to focal awareness, they have been excorporated. Bodily alienation results from sustained experiences of excorporation: “Excorporation can lead to bodily alienation. I suggest that there also is a qualitative difference between these two, where alienation implies a more thorough and deeper breakage of the subject’s lived body” (80).

In the context of racialized interactions, such as those described by Fanon (2008), what occurs is this: the White gaze, or the entrance into a White space, sparks experiences of *excorporation* and eventually of *bodily alienation*. This is evident in Fanon’s example of the train. The Black man can no longer perform the motions required for finding a seat: the motions have been excorporated from his repertoire of habitual bodily movements, and this excorporation leads to pervasive disorientation and weightiness—that is, an experience of bodily alienation.

Now, what can descriptions of bodily alienation do for us? As I foreshadowed, the concept of alienation is dual: it involves *descriptive* and *normative* components. As Rahel Jaeggi (2014) puts it in *Alienation*, the concept is *diagnostic*: it simultaneously describes a state of affairs and judges that state as either good or bad. To borrow one of her examples, if I say, “you look sick,” I’m not only describing your appearance but also evaluating it: implicit in this statement is the belief that there is something wrong with you (26). There is no need to engage in further inferences: if a person is told they look sick, then something bad is going on. To further clarify Jaeggi’s point, consider the difference between the claims “you look sick” and “you look tanned.” In the latter case, there is no implicit belief about the goodness or badness of your look. Depending on one’s beliefs about the dangers of tanning, or one’s aesthetic preferences, one may then make a separate judgment: the fact that you look tanned is deemed good or bad.

Because the concept of alienation combines description and evaluation, it can be used to develop *critical phenomenologies*. Using first-person testimony, one can evaluate a state of affairs as alienating or not. Let’s return to Fanon. His phenomenology implies that there is something problematic going on in the Black man’s encounters with the White gaze or passage through White spaces: it is bad to undergo experiences such as these. Ideally, they *should not* occur. Consequently, using the concept of bodily alienation within phenomenology allows us to bridge the merely descriptive and the normative. This use has a further upshot: describing social interactions or spaces as alienating may motivate us to change them.

To sum up, the concept of bodily alienation is promising for critical phenomenologies of race because it marries description and evaluation. With this concept, we can go beyond mere descriptions of lived experience and provide arguments for challenging the status quo. In fact, we can steer clear of another danger: an overly “objective” form of theorizing

about race that is unresponsive to the lived experiences of the subjects whose lives it aims to reimagine. By contrast, phenomenologies founded on the concept of bodily alienation teach us which social interactions and spaces alienate people of color. In turn, this knowledge can help us envision a more hospitable world for all.

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