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Phenomenology in “Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America”

Phenomenology is about what it is to be, and in Yancy’s writing he incorporates what it is like to be him to drive home his message of what it is like to be a black body under the white gaze. Yancy takes a philosophical approach to writing about race, which differs from writing about race I have encountered in the past. Through reading I was able to identify many connections between what had previously learned through discussing Zahavi’s “Phenomenology: the basics” and Yancy’s points. In this essay I plan to draw connections between the phenomenological topics Zahavi describes in his book to the concepts and ideas Yancy explains in “Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America” regarding critical race theory and incorporate some of my own experience. I grew up in one of the least diverse counties in Maryland. According to Data USA, 89.5% of the population in the county is white and the next highest percentage is the 3.32% that is black (Data USA). This gave me an interesting experience growing up and in college when I was exposed to diversity at a higher rate. In 2017, when I came to Bridgewater, it followed the summer where the events of Charlottesville took place and when Colin Kaepernick became well known for kneeling during the anthem to bring attention to injustices in the U.S. I spent class periods in more than one of my classes discussing these events. And became educated on them in my spare time as well. Now in 2020, my senior year began following this past summer where protests and rallies in the BLM movement occurred at large numbers after the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain and many more. I again spent lots of time researching and trying to better understand the movement from my house in Carroll County. This class and others have allowed me to read literature such as Yancy’s book and engage in conversation surrounding race. In this essay most specifically, I will touch upon the phenomenological concepts of embodiment, historicity, intersubjectivity, and intentionality.

A large emphasis in Yancy’s work is embodiment, meaning that he focuses on the fact that we are real flesh and bone in the world. He explains how racism is not merely a cognitive event, it is embodied in our actions and incorporated into our behaviors. In phenomenology, embodiment revolves around the idea of the lived body. This is the fact that you are the body, and it is not separate or objectified, there is no mind body split. The body is the primary here that orients the rest of the world around us. This is best exemplified when Zahavi states "...the body is first and foremost this perspective on the world, and, therefore, not originally an object that I can take a perspective on" (Zahavi, 79). I think this most relates to the point Yancy makes in the subsection of chapter one: “White Spaces as Sites of Occlusion”. He describes how white bodies are rarely aware of their race when moving about spaces that are predominantly white, in this case he uses the example of philosophy conferences. He reflects upon how black bodies are always aware of their blackness, while white bodies are so used to spaces that are accepting of them and built to benefit them when he states “Yet, as a Black body, my body becomes stressed within such white conference spaces and such white academic spaces. White bodies move through those spaces habitually…” (Yancy, 9). Therefore, the white bodies are not going through life with this sense of embodiment, they are not aware that they are the lived body, and when topics of race arise, they often separate the mind and body with statements about how they are an exception, they are not racist even though their skin is white. They make the separation between their “non-racist” mind and their racist body. Which Yancy condemns, reminding us that we are our bodies, and this separation is not possible, like Zahavi describes in his writing as well. Yancy’s discussion of his experience in philosophy conferences reminded me if an experience I had this summer. This summer, I was training to become a soar mentor over zoom, and we paused our training to check in with each other as the tensions around race grew even higher after George Floyd’s death. One of my fellow soar mentors who is black described how she feared coming to Bridgewater as an incoming freshman because it is a PWI (Predominantly White Institution), which would be much different than the community she grew up in. She feared that she would be treated differently because it is a white space, and she was aware of how her black body might be perceived in it. This was eye opening to me because I did not even know that Bridgewater is a PWI and compared to my hometown, the college is much more diverse. This is exemplary of my white privilege in that I did not have to spend my time worrying about this transition, but black students do. This relates very closely to the idea of historicity. Though those white people who deny their racism did not necessarily build the racist society we live in, they must acknowledge that it is enveloped into the historical context of the society that we live in.

Historicity is the idea that we are born into a world that is already filled with meaning. And this historical context affects us directly as we move and act within the world. Heidegger uses the concept of “with-world” to reflect upon how we did not ask to be born and we must learn to understand this world and the meaning that already exists. For Merleau-Ponty, it is how we are “condemned to meaning” and there is no way to escape that meaning because we are always in the world with it. Yancy agrees that we cannot escape the meaning, rather we must work every day to understand it and undo it. It is a lifelong process to undo the racist ways that we have all been raised in, we must work consciously to undo it slowly, piece by piece. It would be impossible to undo it all at once, and I think that is what people try to do when they try to escape it. In chapter four, Yancy best describes the historical context in which we live when he states “Historically, ‘the imago of the [Black] in the European mind’ has involved a process of discursive and material violence…this violence was designed originally to aid in breaking the Black body’s claim to dignity and humanity” (Yancy, 106). And in chapter two when he says “…simply reducing the whiteness qua racism to a set of false beliefs can lead to the consequence of not acknowledging or even rejecting the existence of the larger systemic power relationships … that form a system of white supremacist practices that are supported by white legal, material, socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and cultural power” (Yancy,42). These quotes reflect upon the imbalance between the treatment of black bodies and white bodies. Where black bodies are being torn down by historical practices, white bodies are supported and raised higher continually by practices that still exist today, even though some would say racism isn’t as big of a problem as it used to be. The divide is growing because little is being done to work to undo racist practices and the practices that benefit white bodies are not slowing or stopping at all. Yancy is trying to get white people to understand that if you are racialized as white, you are racist. This is because racism is thoroughly embedded in western culture that you cannot help but be racist in some degree. And although you may be an “exception”, the pattern still exists, and it needs to be addressed. Excluding yourself from the problem diverges from the actual issue at hand and allows it to continue. Only when we take the time to work through issue and try to fix it can it get better. Ignoring this bare fact impedes the necessary progress this country needs to make in terms of race.

I found that in chapter seven, Yancy’s description of his encounter with one of his students related closely to the phenomenological idea of intersubjectivity and empathy. In the chapter, Yancy tells the story of a time he was going over the elevator effect and a white, female student interrupted him by simply calling out the word “Bullshit”. This word showed that she was attempting to negate the experience of black bodies and take no responsibility for trying to empathize with how Yancy claimed to have felt. At one point he states “As Joe Feagin and Hernan Vera state. ‘White racism involves a massive breakdown of empathy, the human capacity to experience the feelings of members of an out-group viewed as different” (Yancy,218). Though the definition of empathy in phenomenology differs a bit from what Yancy claims here, it relates to the point he is trying to make. In his chapter on “Intersubjectivity and Sociality” Zahavi states, “For phenomenologists, empathy is not to be conflated with emotional contagion, imaginative perspective-taking, sympathy, or compassion. Rather, they consider empathy a basic, perceptually based form of other understanding, one that other more complex and indirect forms of interpersonal understanding presuppose and rely on” (Zahavi, 92). And he goes on to say, “But is the experiential life of the other really given as directly to us as our own? As Merleau-Ponty would insist, although I can perceive the grief or the anger of the other in his or her conduct, his face or hands, the grief and the anger of the other will never quite have the same significance for me as they have for him. For me these situations are displayed, for him they are lived through” (Zahavi, 92). This second quote relates well to Yancy’s example. Though this student can never live through the experience that Yancy had on the elevator, it should be displayed to her. Phenomenology and Yancy call for us to empathize with others and their experiences. Zahavi attempts to draw us away from experiences of consciousness where we are isolated minds. Because our experiences are not isolated, though they are not the same, they happen within context of each other. It is about feeling and reaching out to other people, without forcing them into boxes. This allows us to give real credit to other’s experiences, and not rob them of their subjectivity. Which is what Yancy is asking of his student. Rather than yell out and claim his experience in the elevator was not how he perceived it, she should give credit to him and empathize with his points. This reminded me most of conversation I have had over the summer and seen on social media where white people try to deny that there is a problem. I have some people try to discredit the BLM movement because they do not see the issues and oppression that the movement fights to end. They find it easier to feel offended and claim that “All lives matter” than to listen and empathize with those who are suffering the consequences of the historical context we live in. I think these kinds of people are just like the woman who called out “Bullshit!” when Yancy described what happened to him on the elevator. And like Yancy said, it is a massive breakdown of empathy with white racism. Their ability to take a step back and realize that other people do not have the same shared experience as them and even though they do not live through these same experiences is compromised. Instead they assume that because they do not live through issues, they do not exist. But, if they looked at the situation phenomenologically and empathized with others, recognizing their grief and anger, the issues would be displayed to them. And then they too would feel anger and grief, in a different way of course, and want to do something to make a change as well.

In chapter two, Yancy describes how racism cannot be reduced to a set of beliefs. It is illustrated when he states: “Moreover to reduce whiteness to a set of false beliefs overlooks the fact that many whites, those who have very honorable intentions, those who might be described as ‘goodwill’ whites, who deny holding racist beliefs, benefit from acting whitely-in-the-world in ways that themselves may not consciously intend” (Yancy, 42). I believe this relates to the phenomenological concept of intentionality. Intentionality, a topic first introduced by Aristotle, is a topic that Husserl worked on through all of his work in phenomenology. Zahavi describes it in the following statement. “Consciousness is not concerned or preoccupied with itself, but is, rather, by nature self-transcending. For phenomenologists, ‘intentionality’ is the generic term for this pointing-beyond-itself proper consciousness.” (Zahavi,16) Husserl focused on the primacy of perceptual intentionality, which is the primary and original intentionality, examining the pre-theoretical life and experiences we have in our consciousness. Heidegger instead uses his term “Dasein” which means being-there to avoid the idea of the mind body split that some might perceive from Husserl’s work. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty talks about the inseparability of the world and the subject, which he delves into in his work Phenomenology of perception. It is in this instance he describes the being-in-the-world, as it further proves the connectedness of the world and the subject. I think that when racism is reduced to a set of beliefs, then we are preoccupying our consciousness with itself. Instead, by being intentional in a phenomenological sense, we can conceive of our consciousness in a proper sense and recognize that racism is rooted within our experience by the historical context in which we live. When someone claims to not hold racist beliefs, they are attempting to separate themselves from the world. The world that we live in is racist, and therefore we are racist because of the being-in-the-world that Merleau-Ponty describes. And again, goes back to the points I made that about racists trying to separate their white body from their “racist” mind and Heidegger’s dasein. And it relates to experiences I have had with “All lives matter” folks. When they get offended by the statement “Black lives matter” and assume that this means that people within the movement are saying that black lives matter more than anyone else’s, they fail to recognize that as white people, they benefit from the world we live in. Their whiteness gives them an advantage because the world was historically made to benefit them. Like Yancy stated in his quote on page 42, even those who deny the fact that they are racist, benefit from acting “whitely”. If they instead took the time to do research and listen to what people are saying, they would realize that the movement is not enforcing the idea that anyone’s life matters more than another. It is about recognizing that the world does not benefit black bodies the same way it does white bodies and calls for this to change. It is about equality.

Citation

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