PHENOMENOLOGY AND RACE (OR RACIALIZING PHENOMENOLOGY)

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Fanon’s Phenomenological Challenge

The major influence that the phenomenological concepts introduced in the early twentieth century by Edmund Husserl had upon many of the most famous philosophers of the twentieth century, including Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, has been well documented. Although each of these thinkers took up and transformed Husserlian phenomenology in remarkably innovative and productive ways, the publication in 1952 of Frantz Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*) broke new ground in its revolutionary application and critique of Husserl’s phenomenological method. Indeed, the philosophical upheaval produced by this amazing text continues unabated today, over a half century after its original publication. More specifically, 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. As Guenther observes, “[b]y critical phenomenology I mean a method that is rooted in first-person accounts of experience but also critical of classical phenomenology’s claim that the first-person singular is absolutely prior to intersubjectivity and the complex textures of social life” (Guenther 2013: xiii).” Subjectivity, critical phenomenologists emphasize, develops *in and through* our intersubjective experiences, not apart from them. Thus, there is no way to inoculate one’s own first-person perspective from the influences of others since the former is always already mediated by the social world(s) in which one lives. This core insight regarding the essential intersubjective dimensions of subjectivity, while implicit in Husserl’s own work, has played a central role in phenomenological accounts such as Fanon’s that seek to address the first-person experience of racial oppression.

Fanon’s emphasis upon the formative role others play in an individual’s psychic development can be traced not only to his formal psychoanalytic training but also to his distinctive experience growing up as a colonized subject in the French Antilles. While...
some of his philosophical contemporaries, including Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, also insist upon the interdependency of self and other, there are at least two reasons why Fanon’s work constitutes such a radical phenomenological intervention with profound implications for critical race theory. The first is his definitive rejection of a central tenet of Husserlian phenomenology, namely, the possibility of providing “neutral” or universal descriptions of the phenomena one is examining that would hold true for all possible subjects. Indeed, through his searing descriptions of the systematic, daily dehumanization he and other native Martinicians suffer at the hands of their French colonizers, Fanon powerfully undermines Husserl’s overly confident claim that

All that which holds for me myself holds, as I know, for all other human beings whom I find present in my surrounding world. Experiencing them as human beings, I understand and accept each of them as an Ego-subject just as I myself am one and as related to this natural surrounding world.

(Husserl 1982: 55)

Rather than simply rejecting Husserl’s uncritical presumption that each human being we encounter is understood and accepted by us “as an Ego-subject just as I myself am one,” Fanon presents this affirmation of our equal humanity as a regulative ideal that unfortunately is often belied by the dehumanizing treatment many human beings have suffered (and continue to suffer) at the hands (and in the minds) of others. Thus, what is for Husserl a fairly straightforward factual statement that grounds his universal claims regarding the essential features of human consciousness, is problematized by Fanon as a hasty assertion that has more frequently been deployed to justify the exclusion of some people from the domain of the human as opposed to placing all human beings on an equal footing. For, as Fanon poignantly observes: “if equality among men is proclaimed in the name of intelligence and philosophy, it is also true that those concepts have been used to justify the extermination of men” (Fanon 2008: 12).

Beauvoir’s groundbreaking, interdisciplinary analysis of women’s oppression under patriarchy in The Second Sex, which appeared three years prior to Black Skin, White Masks, also provides a serious departure from and challenge to the (allegedly) universal phenomenological descriptions of consciousness, being-in-the-world, freedom, and perception offered by Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, and in so doing, it provides an important precedent for Fanon’s own account (Beauvoir 2010). While this text includes both fictional and non-fictional accounts of women’s distinctive experiences within a male-dominated society, Beauvoir does not offer the reader personal anecdotes of her own sexist treatment as a (white) woman in a (white) man’s world; instead, she utilizes the same dispassionate language employed by classical phenomenologists to describe women’s experience as “the second sex.” Rather than indicting Beauvoir for not being radical enough, however, it is crucial to recognize that one of the reasons that The Second Sex was and remains such an important text is precisely because she deploys classical phenomenological tools to address a decidedly non-traditional subject, namely women’s second-class status under patriarchy. Thus, while her controversial topic, like Fanon’s, marks a definitive departure from the “typical” phenomenological analysis provided by her peers, and, in so doing, helps pave the way for the latter’s work since she also focuses directly on the internalization of oppression and the resultant damage done to one’s self-understanding, relations with others, and
life aspirations, her philosophical style, or manner of writing about these important issues, adheres more closely to established philosophical conventions.

Rejecting Beauvoir’s strategy of pairing an unconventional topic with a more impersonal style, Fanon offers his readers a visceral, autobiographical account of the irreversible psychic, linguistic, familial, cultural, educational, and economic damage wrought by the legally sanctioned domination of one set of human beings, who are deemed to be irredeemably inferior, by another. This is a second reason why his work has played such a crucial role in the development of a new, critical phenomenology of race. Fanon’s brutally honest, first-person descriptions of the evils of anti-black racism, like those more recently offered by American critical race phenomenologist George Yancy and others, make ethical demands upon their readers, calling upon them to recognize their own ignorance of and responsibility for the perpetuation of racism. By rejecting altogether the separation of “pure” phenomenological descriptions from the urgent social, political, and profoundly ethical issues that are inevitably raised by them, Fanon’s work charts a new course for phenomenology, namely as an indispensable ally in the struggle for social justice.

**Denaturalizing the Natural Attitude**

To do full justice to the influence that Husserlian phenomenology, which seeks to provide comprehensive, unbiased, first-person descriptions of lived experience, has had upon critical race theory, as well as the profound impact that critical race theory, with its powerful revelations concerning the lived experience of racism, has had upon phenomenology, it is helpful to turn to two of the most problematic, yet most important phenomenological concepts introduced by Edmund Husserl to describe the aim and method of his new philosophy in his classic 1913 text, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, namely, “the natural attitude” and the “phenomenological reduction [epoché].” “The natural attitude” is a paradoxical expression in its own right, for in a crucial sense it is not natural at all. Rather, it consists of tacitly accepted and thoroughly naturalized beliefs, behaviors, value judgments, and affective responses that an individual gradually acquires through her daily intersubjective experiences from her earliest childhood. Though it is critical race and feminist theorists rather than Husserl who develop the rich implications of this point, his own descriptions of the “givenness” of the natural attitude make it clear that it is not innate, “hardwired,” or pre-determined in any way, but instead is a thoroughly historical, culturally variable, socially constructed, and extremely complex phenomenon that becomes sedimented over time into a typical or habitual orientation toward the world. As such, it is relatively stable, functioning in the background of our experience to establish the parameters for what is viewed as normal, natural, and desirable. And yet, as history has shown us, in the face of unfamiliar or extraordinary experiences that defy or even rupture the complacency of the natural attitude, it also has the potential to undergo radical transformation, an alteration that, depending on the severity, duration, and public attention associated with the atypical event, is capable of affecting it permanently, for better or worse.

The possibility of fundamentally changing the natural attitude by expanding the horizons of what counts as “normal” or “familiar” is not taken up by Husserl. It is this latter possibility, however, that critical race, feminist, and disabilities studies scholars
have seized upon, leaving traditional, Husserlian phenomenology, with its goal of pure description, and its failure to acknowledge sufficiently the determining role that social and material conditions play in establishing natural attitudes in the first place, definitively behind. And yet, at the same time, Husserl’s insistence upon the crucial importance of providing comprehensive, unbiased descriptions of lived experience that take us beyond the limits of our natural attitudes to the truths revealed by “the things themselves” remains, I would argue, the indispensable first step in recognizing and ultimately eliminating racism, sexism, ableism, and other unjustifiable prejudices from our own natural attitudes.

As critical race theorists, feminist theorists, and Marxist theorists have forcefully demonstrated, an individual’s natural attitude reflects her racial, sexual, gender, class, and other social identities. Whether these identities are embraced, contested, or unacknowledged, whether they are sites of privilege or marginalization, if they play a central role in a person’s life then they will undoubtedly shape her natural attitude, although the respective influences of an individual’s multiple and disparate identities upon her natural attitude will inevitably vary from person to person and context to context. What can be considered natural about the natural attitude from a Husserlian perspective, despite its contingency, relativity, and conventionality, is that it enables us to take the existence of the world, ourselves, and others for granted, without explicit reflection, as we go about our daily lives. Another important reason why the natural attitude is understood by Husserl to be natural is that it emerges organically over time and across space in and through an individual’s mundane interactions with others, eventually providing a (more or less) reliable framework that establishes a person’s “normal” expectations for herself, others, and the more general world of her concern. Insofar as it provides the basic presuppositions or “default” perspective that each of us brings to bear on our respective situations, it largely functions in the background, shaping the meaning we give to our experiences on an ongoing basis, most often without our explicit notice. Indeed, if we do reflect upon the natural attitude and the way it tacitly establishes our sense of the familiar, we are no longer operating within it, but, in fact, performing what Husserl calls the phenomenological reduction, which involves re-examining the familiar world from a fresh perspective, or as if we were experiencing it for the first time.

Though we all leave the perspective of the natural attitude from time to time, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, especially when we confront situations that defy our pre-established expectations, it is the philosopher who seeks to systematically examine the presuppositions that underpin the natural attitude from this altered perspective. More specifically, it is only by willfully detaching oneself from the comfort provided by the natural attitude, Husserl suggests, that the phenomenologist can provide a comprehensive and essential description of one or more aspects of our lived experience without relying on taken-for-granted assumptions about it. In order to accomplish this goal, he asserts, a person must undertake the phenomenological reduction, a systematic, reflective activity which involves “bracketing” or “suspending” the familiar, everyday world presented through the natural attitude, a world, he tells us, that “is there for me not only as a world of mere things, but also with the same immediacy as a world of objects with values, a world of goods, a practical world” (Husserl 1982: 53; emphasis added). Comparing this method to that of Descartes, who claims over 200 years earlier at the outset of The Meditations to have freed himself from the cultural, historical, scientific, and
personal values, biases, and predilections that had previously guided his understanding of himself, others, and the world, Husserl maintains that the phenomenologist can, with a similar effort, describe “the things themselves” without presuppositions, thereby arriving at an essential understanding of them that can in turn be verified by any other person employing the same method.

Both Husserl’s and Descartes’s very optimistic conviction that a person can (albeit only after serious mental exertion), set aside her familiar or “taken-for-granted” perspective on some aspect of her lived experience in order to provide an essential description of it that would hold true for any other individual has been challenged not only by phenomenologists, critical race theorists, feminist theorists, queer theorists, and disability studies scholars, but also by a wealth of empirical evidence, including the conflicting testimonies of witnesses to a given event who are asked to provide an unbiased, detailed description of exactly what happened. While witness testimonies are often requested or even demanded by others in the immediate aftermath of unanticipated, extremely traumatic incidents such as violent crimes, contexts that differ quite radically from Descartes’s voluntary choice to dispassionately examine his former beliefs in his comfortable armchair by the fire or Husserl’s own investigation of the essential structure of human consciousness in his home study, the goal in each of these cases remains basically the same, namely, to provide an in-depth, first-person account of an episode or phenomenon that is, at least in principle, intersubjectively verifiable.

Even though several extremely persuasive criticisms have been and continue to be made regarding Husserl’s presumption that it is possible to bracket and “put out of play” the habitual presuppositions and value judgments that underpin one’s own natural attitude, the aim of providing just such an unbiased description of the familiar world by attending to features of it that typically escape one’s notice precisely because they are so familiar, has remained a persistent and powerful regulative ideal in phenomenology as well as in critical race theory, feminist theory, disability studies, queer theory, decolonial studies, and other fields that, in contrast to traditional Husserlian phenomenology, do not restrict themselves to the admittedly important labor of description, but rather seek to improve the basic social, political, historical, and material conditions that have such a major impact on what an individual accepts as natural in the first place. In fact, I would argue, the goal of providing an unbiased description of a person’s, group’s or community’s lived experiences could not be more pressing if one is seeking to identify and ultimately combat the familiar and painful experiences of marginalization and oppression that so forcefully impact the natural attitudes of underprivileged people but that are often invisible to those who enjoy racial, sexual, class, able-bodied, and/or other cultural advantages.

While many of Husserl’s critics have remained skeptical of his claim that phenomenology can be practiced as rigorously as any of the natural sciences because the former relies so heavily upon the subjective experience of a given individual who must make a personal effort to suspend customary or habitual ways of understanding her experience in order to re-examine it from a new, unfamiliar perspective, Husserl frequently reminds his readers that every “objective” scientific investigation also depends upon the subjectivity of the observer to carry it out and verify it, and thus there is no way to bypass our subjective experience in order to arrive at objective truths about the world in which we live; indeed, the former is the only means of accessing and identifying the latter. Husserl thus affirms the primacy of the first-person, subjective perspective as the foundation of all knowledge claims whatsoever, a core claim that is also embraced by critical race as
well as feminist activists and theorists. And yet to say that we can’t transcend or escape our subjective perspective whether we are doing science or phenomenology is not to say that the first-person perspective is itself infallible, nor does it imply that it is solipsistic or formed in isolation from others. On the contrary, Husserl emphasizes that each person’s subjective experience is itself undergirded by a “zone of indeterminacy,” namely, historical, cultural, temporal, spatial, and thoroughly intersubjective “horizons” that we continuously draw upon to make sense of ourselves, others, and the world that we share. The goal of the phenomenological reduction, Husserl suggests, is to render these multiple horizons and the constitutive role they play in framing our expectations for a particular experience visible, in all of their indeterminacy. And, it is the impossibility of achieving this goal due to the essential indeterminacy of these horizons that leads Maurice Merleau-Ponty to famously declare in the preface to his 1945 *Phenomenology of Perception*, that “the most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction” (Merleau-Ponty 2012: lxxvii). For Merleau-Ponty, however, this is not intended to be a fatal critique of Husserl or of phenomenology, but rather a guarantee that the phenomenologist’s work is never done, since new perspectives can always be taken up with respect to a given phenomenon, yielding in turn new insights on the subject in question.

What, we might ask, do these Husserlian claims about the method and goals of phenomenology have to do with race? Nothing and everything, it would seem. Nothing, because Husserl never discusses race, much less acknowledges that an individual’s racial identity (whether actively embraced or contested), as well as her gender, sexuality, class, and bodily abilities, can profoundly affect her life experiences, and in turn, her subjective perspective, thereby seeming to threaten the possibility of arriving at universal descriptions of the phenomena we encounter that would hold true for all of us regardless of where, when, and how we live. Everything, because Husserl’s account of the “natural attitude” or the “default,” familiar perspective that most of us adopt most of the time in our lives is, as previously noted, itself profoundly influenced by an individual’s racial as well as sexual, class, religious, national, and other identities, identities that are largely determined for us by others even as we each embody and modify (or, as Judith Butler notes in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, fail to embody or modify) them in our own idiosyncratic ways. While it seems evident on Husserl’s own account that even two family members’ natural attitudes will not be identical insofar as each possesses her own subjective perspective and has had unique experiences, it is also the case that one’s natural attitude is never constructed *ex nihilo* by a single individual operating independently of others. Moreover, the crucial question of whether we can indeed bracket our (not so natural) natural attitudes and the prejudices that form them, putting them “out of play” in order to provide neutral, intersubjectively valid descriptions of “the things themselves” as Husserl himself sought to do, is itself an extremely controversial issue with profound implications for both contemporary phenomenology and critical race theory. Indeed, it is this very Husserlian project of suspending the natural attitude, with all of its attendant difficulties, that marks not only the limits but also the promise of phenomenology for contemporary critical race theory.

**Racist Legacies: Constrained Horizons and Compromised Bodily Agency**

In his 1945 *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the central role our bodies play in all aspects of our lived experience. Not only are our bodies mobile
perceptual agents (or “body-subjects”) in their own right but we also communicate with others and the world through our bodies via both non-verbal and verbal gestures. Our bodies, Merleau-Ponty repeatedly suggests, are what anchor us within the world, establishing our unique place in it and our perceptual orientation toward it. Furthermore, our concrete bodily presence within the world is precisely what enables us to be perceived and responded to by others, which in turn affects not only how we perceive and respond to them but also how we view and understand ourselves. Moreover, as Adrienne Rich, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and other feminist theorists have pointed out, our bodily interactions with others precede our explicit awareness of them since they are already taking place in utero. Indeed, as numerous empirical studies have amply illustrated, we can be harmed or benefitted by the actions of others and our material environments before we are even born.

Despite his welcome insistence upon the central role others, our social class, and our larger cultures play in shaping the gestures we use, the attitudes we adopt, and the perspectives we develop in our lives, Merleau-Ponty, like Husserl (and unlike Sartre, whose character Garcin famously declares in No Exit that “hell is other people”), offers far too rosy a picture of our relations with others, presenting them most often in an enabling light that encourages bodily agency rather than a disabling one that inhibits it. For instance, in the chapter, “The Body as Expression, and Speech,” Merleau-Ponty declares:

Communication or the understanding of gestures is achieved through the reciprocity between my intentions and the other person’s gestures, and between my gestures and the intentions which can be read in the other person’s behavior. Everything happens as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body, or as if my intentions inhabited his body. The gesture I witness sketches out the first signs of an intentional object. This object becomes present and is fully understood when the powers of my body adjust to it and fit over it. The gesture is in front of me like a question, it indicates to me specific sensible points in the world and invites me to join it there. Communication is accomplished when my behavior finds in this pathway its own pathway. I confirm the other person and the other person confirms me.

(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 190–191)

In contrast to the rich possibilities for individual and community development that would presumably flow from this mutually beneficial, embodied exchange between self and other is the undeniable fact that, as Fanon, Beauvoir, Iris Marion Young, Robert Murphy, and so many other critical race, feminist, and disability theorists have demonstrated, it is incompatible with the actual conditions of domination that have defined the parameters of “normal” existence for the majority of human beings in the past, the present, and the foreseeable future. Indeed, this reciprocal, embodied affirmation of oneself by another has historically not been a universal human birthright which we all enjoy equally throughout our lives, but a privilege that is extended to some bodies (e.g., white, male, heterosexual bodies) more than others. And, it is precisely this recognition of the unequal and unjust treatment suffered by so many people because of their presumed racial, gender, sexual, and other “deficiencies,” that continues to provide the strongest possible ethical motivation for critical phenomenology today.
To contest Merleau-Ponty’s very positive phenomenological description of intersubjective communication, as critical race, feminist, and disability theorists have done, however, is not to dispute that this would indeed be a very desirable state of affairs if it actually obtained; rather, the critique concerns the fact that Merleau-Ponty’s vision of an interpersonal harmony of intentions in which “I confirm the other person and the other person confirms me” is not an accurate description of reality. Instead, it is a white, male philosopher’s fantasy that is erroneously (wishfully?) presented as a fait accompli. And even if this is a good fantasy that might be held up as an ethical ideal we should all be striving for in our embodied exchanges with others, by failing to acknowledge how often such a mutual affirmation of self and other is belied by the inhuman treatment people inflict upon one another every day, as well as by the structural inequalities that actively constrain our horizons of possibility and compromise bodily agency, the phenomenologist fails to do justice to the very phenomena she seeks to describe.

Fanon concludes *Black Skin, White Masks* with a dream of a new social order defined by relations of discovery and desire rather than subjugation. The bright future he envisons clearly resonates with the mutually affirming forms of human communication proffered by Merleau-Ponty, yet, unlike Merleau-Ponty, Fanon never presents this currently unachievable reality as a description of our everyday relations with others. “I, a man of color,” he tells us, “want but one thing”:

> May man never be instrumentalized. May the subjugation of man by man—that is to say, of me by another—cease. May I be allowed to discover and desire man wherever he may be.

(Fanon 2008: 206)

As Fanon and critical race phenomenologists well realize, obtaining this wish requires that it must also become the wish of the colonizers who have profited for centuries from the economic, social, political, cultural, psychological, and material oppression of other human beings. For, as history teaches us, the collective refusal of colonized peoples to accept their inferior status, though crucial, is almost never sufficient to bring about fundamental changes in the prevailing natural attitude that normalizes relationships of domination between colonizer and colonized. To convince those people who have benefited from existing social and political structures because they are members of the dominant race, gender, religion, and so forth, to acknowledge and make amends for their unearned privileges through a de-naturalization of their natural attitudes, is a tall order. Indeed, as critical race, feminist, and disabilities activists and scholars have shown us, it requires a variety of overlapping strategies that work best in conjunction with one another, not alone.

The multiple methods critical race theorists have employed both to draw attention to, and to help end our long sordid history of racial subjugation include (but are by no means restricted to) identifying and combating controlling images of black people and other racial minorities (Fanon, Collins, Gordon); exposing the racist horizons that tacitly structure our perceptions from earliest infancy (Butler, Ahmed); encouraging the cultivation of anti-racist habits of perception (Al-Saji, Fielding); deconstructing the reductive effects of a hegemonic black-white binary that fails to do justice to the complexity of racial identities (Alcoff, Cho); embracing the unique, non-normative perspectives that flow from mixed and/or multiple identities (Lorde, Anzaldua, Ortega);
interrogating how racist institutional structures, such as the prison-industrial complex, disproportionately target black people and other racial minorities, consigning many prisoners to a “social death” that simultaneously stigmatizes (and often impoverishes) their families (Davis, Alexander, Guenther, Sherh, Coates); advocating the expansion of our racial, cultural, temporal, spatial, and class-bound horizons through boundary-crossing experiences such as “world”-travelling (Lugones); and illuminating how taken-for-granted assumptions such as ontological expansiveness, or the idea that white people are entitled to enter any space they choose, actively, yet often invisibly, advantages white people (especially educated white men) and simultaneously threatens countless other people, many of whom have paid with their lives, for either deliberately or inadvertently presuming to share the spatial trappings of white privilege (Sullivan, Young, Yancy).

To end racist, sexist, ableist, and other forms of discriminatory treatment, whether by people, communities, and nations, and/or by educational, social, and political institutions, critical phenomenologists suggest, we must examine not only specific racist structures and incidents, but also the familiar, taken-for-granted assumptions that are tacitly operative in our lived experience, influencing how, when, why, where, and with whom people interact as well as the significance both individuals and societies attribute to these encounters. Although several of the authors I have cited above are not ordinarily regarded as phenomenologists or directly associated with the phenomenological tradition, their work, I am suggesting, directly advances a critical phenomenology of race insofar as they seek to describe, accurately, comprehensively, and in as unbiased a manner as possible, the racial identities, racial prejudices, racist perceptions, racist institutions, and the subtle as well as unsubtle varieties of racist oppression that are operative in our everyday lived experience. Controlling images of racial groups, sedimented habits of racial privilege, racist perceptual horizons, denigrated racial identities, and internalized racial inferiority, these critical race scholars show us, are not esoteric or ephemeral phenomena but pervasive, structural components of our natural attitudes, despite the fact that they have historically escaped the radar of the white, male phenomenologists who are credited with establishing this dynamic field of inquiry.

The detailed, moving, and often painful accounts of the lived experience of racial oppression offered by critical race phenomenologists not only provide corrective descriptions of social reality that present it as it truly is, and not as we might wish it could be, but also help to fulfill a pressing ethical and political imperative, namely, to provide a full accounting of the deleterious effects of racial injustice so that we can deploy more productive strategies for its eradication in the future. It is noteworthy that many (though not all) of the strategies critical race phenomenologists offer appear to
be negative, that is, they involve things we need to stop doing in order to de-naturalize oppressive natural attitudes as well as oppressive behaviors and institutions. And, while the list of behaviors, perceptions, identities, stereotypes, and social, legal, and educational institutions that need to be fundamentally altered to combat racial ignorance, unearned racial privileges, racial hierarchies, and the ubiquity of racial oppression seems to get longer by the day, it is also important to remember, as Alcoff argues in *The Future of Whiteness*, that:

> because racial concepts are social, ideas about particular races can change pretty radically in different social contexts, across time and space, both in terms of the content of the ideas and in terms of how this particular content is valued. Nothing about our social identities is absolutely fixed.

(Alcoff 2015: 39)

Lest we are tempted, however, to appeal too hastily to the concrete ways in which people’s racial identities have changed over time, to the fact that these are dynamic, not static phenomena, in an attempt to minimize the guilt and shame we may feel concerning our own racial ignorance and racial responsibilities, the active persecution of an ever-growing number of racial minorities in the twenty-first century serves as a palpable reminder that not every change is for the better. Moreover, we must continue to contend with one of the major barriers to eliminating racist oppression once and for all, namely, as Mills, Sullivan, and many other critical race theorists have pointed out, the fact that it so frequently operates tacitly and pre-reflectively, rather than overtly. As Mills astutely observes, we are:

> Socialized from birth to discern race, the marker of full and diminished personhood, we learn to apprehend this world through a sensory grid whose architecture has been shaped by blueprints still functioning independent of our will and conscious intent, and resistant to our self-conscious redrawing.

(Mills 2014: 37)

While it seems undeniable that the racist blueprints that structure our perceptions “independent of our will and conscious intent” are indeed “resistant to our self-conscious redrawing,” as Mills asserts, and while this may seem to be a cause for extreme pessimism regarding the possibility of identifying and overcoming racist perceptual habits, it is precisely the clear-sighted diagnoses provided by critical phenomenologists of race that challenge us to work collectively, in strategic alliances with others across racial, gender, class, cultural, sexual, and other socially constructed barriers, to eliminate naturalized racist attitudes. Such a project does not, it should be noted, call upon us to jettison our racial identities altogether, even if we were in a position to do so (which we certainly are not). Indeed, as Alcoff insists, “identity terms are not mere historical holdovers of oppression, or ideological claims, but explanatory terms that help us to make sense of what we experience as well as to comprehend larger historical events” (Alcoff 2015: 46–47). Racial identities, Alcoff maintains, need not be racist despite the racist histories in which they are embedded. The challenge posed by critical race phenomenology, then, is not to deny or minimize the importance of our racial identities but rather, to identify and thereby disrupt the racist natural attitudes that so often
accompany them, and that represent one of the greatest obstacles to the realization of an anti-racist future.

References