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Phenomenology of racial embodiment

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Introduction

The experience of school is intimately tied to race. In educational research though, the actual experiences of racialization have rarely been analyzed as such. The real-time, embodied, and felt moments of whiteness in school have not received the analytic attention they deserve. There is a wealth of research carefully explicating the ways that educational structures work to recreate white supremacy, such as those detailing the relationship between racial inequity and issues ranging from segregation, tracking, and unequal school funding, to testing, biased curriculum, and discipline policies (Au, Brown, & Calderón, 2016; Gillborn, 2005; Lewis & Solórzano, 2006; Slater & Seawright, 2018; Tyson, 2011; Vaught, 2011). Educational research has also thoroughly examined white teacher identity and the link between the psychology/ideology of white supremacy and teachers’ conceptions of education (Allen, 2004; Applebaum, 2010; Boucher, 2014; Matias, 2013a; Marx & Pennington, 2003; Picower, 2009; Jupp, Berry, & Lensmire, 2016). While both ideological and structural forms of white supremacy do indeed influence the lived experience of school, there is yet to be a concerted push within educational research to understand racialized experiences in terms of their embodied, quotidian, real-time, and existential dynamics (Seawright, 2018).

To facilitate such an engagement with race and the existential variables of school-life requires a shift in analytic scale. For instance, structural theories of white supremacy used to analyze systemic trends conceptually operate at a supra-individual level. Meanwhile, analyzing the psychological/ideological forms of whiteness analyzes at the interior reflective/cognitive level. Neither work for an existential interrogation of whiteness.

Studying the existential dynamics of race requires a focused look at how race unfolds through social interaction, which necessarily involves an attention to the social significations that give meaning to interaction. The relationally dependent social significations that facilitate racializing interactions are co-constitutive with macroscopic social understandings that operate beyond any single interaction. For instance when a white teacher offers up a stricter form of discipline to a student of color because they need to “take responsibility”
for their actions (Margonis, 2016), or when a teacher harbors a deficit view of students of color (Valenzuela, 1999), those teachers are putting to work both the psychology and social structure of white supremacy. Both the psychology and structure of white supremacy come to life in real time through embodied interaction. So, to fully understand the dynamics between race and schooling, educational researchers must also understand the human experience at the core of white supremacy.

This is not a dismissal of the importance of structure and psychology, but an attempt to understand how whiteness organizes social life across its many levels. Rather, in advocating for an expansion of analytic possibilities within the study of whiteness education I am seeking an analytic space where the object of knowledge can be the conditions of being human (Wynter, 2001, 2003). An analytic space is needed where the epistemological and ontological nuances associated with how race happens in real time within intimate, intersubjective, and embodied social fields is the intended focus (Seawright, 2018). In turning towards the existential variables of race we, as a field of researchers and practitioners, open up our understanding of what whiteness looks like in the classroom and potential ways to disrupt it.

As educational researchers develop studies aimed at grappling with the existential variables associated with racialization in schools there must be a concerted effort to expand the methodological repertoire and draw upon traditions that have been left out of positivist-centric conceptions of “research.” Such a shift not only requires a reorientation to the focus of research, but also a fundamental reconsideration of how research is approached, designed, and carried out, which includes how meaning is made from “data” broadly conceived.

As part of this methodological expansion I suggest turning to philosophers like Frantz Fanon, Lewis Gordon, Linda Alcoff, George Yancy, Sara Ahmed, Frank Margonis, Alia Al Saji, and Emily Lee who have contributed a collection of thoughts interrogating the embodied relational dynamics of race, gender, and coloniality. To this, researchers should give greater consideration to the use of the philosophical field of phenomenology as method in general. In particular though, I propose phenomenology of racial embodiment (PRE) as a critical method designed to engage the epistemological and ontological nuances associated with experiencing life conditioned by what I call white humanity. White humanity serves as an analytic that draws attention to the ways a social system of white supremacy curates the quality and condition of being human, while PRE serves a method to study it. Through PRE, the quotidian aspects of race and its embodied, visceral, relational, temporal, and spatial aspects can be analyzed on their own terms.

This chapter illustrates how to put PRE to work as a method. First, using the work of W.E.B. Du Bois and Sylvia Wynter I present white humanity as an analytic through which to consider the need for PRE as a method. Following this, I provide an overview of the philosophy of phenomenology, and the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and a review of phenomenology racial embodiment as propelled by Frantz Fanon, Linda Alcoff, and other contemporary
thinkers. For the second half of the chapter I work through a recent research project guided by PRE. This project focuses on the ways that space and student voice become intersubjectively racialized in mundane classroom interactions. Working through this example highlights the ways by which PRE functions as a method across the research process. In conclusion I discuss how PRE applies to further research.

Research on antiracism, whiteness, and white humanity: theoretical and methodological precursors

W.E.B. Du Bois (2003) once pondered, “But what on earth is Whiteness that one should so desire it? Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that Whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!” (p. 56). In this short quote Du Bois jumps from individual desire to ownership over the earth in a matter of two sentences. This is not sloppy or flamboyant writing. Nor is it Du Bois merely expressing his frustration with the virulent persistence of structural white supremacy. In this quote, he is giving voice to his theory of whiteness that conceptualizes the racial hierarchization of the United States as maintained through institutional, political, and economic discrimination, as well as through social, epistemological, and ontological dynamics of everyday life. For Du Bois, whiteness is a normative social system that saturates all aspects of the “White World.” Du Bois is suggesting that being white, and being counted as a proper member of the White World, corresponds with a seemingly naturalistic access to ownership over the earth (silently but clearly).

Implied in this theory of whiteness is a necessary relationality that situates the mere fact of being a person of color as tantamount to trespassing on the white man's ontological property. In other words, being a person of color in a white world doesn’t really count as being human, because being human is a condition reserved for white people and white people only. Along these lines, PRE is continuing in a Du Boisian tradition as it is intended to offer a robust illustration of the ways that the “great maelstrom of White civilization” organizes social life (Du Bois, 2001, p. 100).

Up to this point, the antiracist and whiteness studies in education literature have not directly wrestled with the relational and existential nuances of race and education. For years, antiracist educators and scholars studying whiteness have developed many pedagogical strategies to ameliorate racial inequities in schools. These scholars have devised strategies to engage the fact that communities of color are less represented in curriculum (Au et al., 2016), that students of color are more frequently taught in facilities with fewer resources (Buras, Randels, Salaam, & Students at the Center, 2010; Vaught, 2011), by teachers with less experience, and are being disciplined at three times the rate of their white peers (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2011), and are thusly introduced to a school-to-prison pipeline (Lewis & Solórzano, 2006; Wald & Losen, 2003). Moreover, these scholars have rigorously attended to the concomitant
psychological effects of living and learning in such a racist environment (see Matias, 2016b). Corresponding to this, the movement for antiracist education has maintained a clarion call for the United States’ majority white teaching force to develop a “critical consciousness.” Such a critical consciousness is intended to come on the heels of an honest engagement with the racial history of the United States, stripping bare the realities of systemic white supremacy and interrogating one’s relationship to it (Applebaum, 2010; Matias, 2013a). This includes white teachers working to understand their students outside of normative deficit perspectives (Picower, 2009; Sleeter, 2001) in addition to interrogating their “white selves” in the face of privilege and complicity in a system of whiteness (Applebaum, 2010; Matias, 2013a).

Within antiracist education there has been an implicit assumption that if a teacher thinks in antiracist ways they will subsequently act in antiracist ways. Such an approach elides the complex dynamics of social interaction and assumes what I have called a cognitive-centric analytic that relies on a reflective understanding of the self and the system of racial injustice (Seawright, 2018). Cognitive-centric analytics are not faulty; they just aren’t up to the task of making meaning from existential conditions. Epistemologically, cognitive-centric analytics situate the locus of concern in a reflective realm; as in, the way people are thinking about an issue will be the focus of critical analysis. In this way, the object of knowledge in these studies is the mind (see Matias, 2013b). These studies aim to unearth the way epistemologies of ignorance are operationalized within a system of whiteness. Studies reflective of this approach work with teachers to interrogate racializing social epistemologies (Mills, 1997, 1998) and how they ultimately come to bear on teachers’ sense of self and their “common sense” ideas about the social world. This interrogation is done in hopes of cultivating a more social-justice-oriented outlook (Applebaum, 2010; Hytten & Warren, 2003; Matias, 2013a; Marx & Pennington, 2003; Picower, 2009; Thompson, 2003).

Similarly, studies focused on elucidating the dynamics associated with being white, which implicitly have an ontological analytic character, also tend to rely on reflective sources of meaning-making. This can be seen in research that falls under the umbrella of first- and second-wave white teacher identity studies, which see the cultivation of antiracist identity (i.e. self-conception or idea of the self) as the precursor to antiracist action (for a thorough review of this literature see Jupp et al., 2016).

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Slattery, 2015), and, in addition to PRE, there are increasing examples of scholars pushing the methodological boundaries. For instance, the use of affect theory is gaining traction in whiteness theory and being used to ask questions similar to those herein about how whiteness is ultimately felt (Matias & Zembillas, 2014; Matias, 2016). Further, some scholars have turned to new methods such as duo-ethnography to more closely analyze the relational aspects of race and whiteness (Agosto, Marn, & Ramirez, 2015; Hummel & Toyosaki, 2015). There are also several articles conceptualizing how whiteness is operationalized within a social field, and how this is complementary yet distinct from its structural and psychological effects (Lewis, 2016; Ohito, 2020; Seawright, 2017, 2018; Walton, 2017). And, finally, there is a recent edited collection focused solely on elucidating educational case studies of embodied forms of sociocultural difference (Travis, Kraehe, Hood, & Lewis, 2018).

While there has yet to be a collective push toward specifically analyzing the real-time existential dynamics of whiteness and white supremacy, the research landscape is ready for growth. PRE shifts the locus of meaning-making toward the real-time social aspects of teaching and learning, and the ways that race shapes the act of teaching in the moment of teaching. So, in as much as antiracist education is concerned with cultivating empowering educational relationships that ameliorate socially imposed forms of inequity, PRE demands a dogged attention to how these forms of inequity get folded into the lived and visceral relational dynamics of pedagogy.

As a method, PRE serves as vehicle through which to ask and answer research questions. But, since it is a new method for the field of whiteness studies in education it is beneficial to consider the analytics — the objects of knowledge — that would organically extend from PRE. With this in mind, before diving into more depth concerning what PRE is, I would like to first present white humanity as an analytic applicable to PRE, as well as one that is illustrative of new conceptual territory to be approached through it.

**White humanity**

Phenomenology of racial embodiment is fundamentally concerned with the way that race impacts daily lived experience. As a method then, PRE looks to the social field in which experience unfolds in order to understand it. But, since the majority of the existing conceptualizations of whiteness operate at either a macroscopic or psychological level of analysis, how does PRE’s shift in analytic scale impact the theorization of whiteness?

In the departure from the macroscopic framing of structural accounts of whiteness, as well as the interiorized focus on identity found in psychological approaches, educational research needs to consider white humanity. As an analytic, white humanity draws focus to the ways that a social system of whiteness *curates the quality and condition of being human*. Following Sylvia Wynter (2001, 2003), focusing the object of knowledge on being human serves as a
realignment away from structural theories that understand power as something that gets foisted upon people toward one that sees systems of power as having their roots in the way that violence is socially enacted (Wynter, 2001, 2003).

Wynter (2001) suggests that racial discrimination must be engaged in terms of a “sociogenic principle” that acknowledges the fundamental relationship between racial identities and being human (p. 30). In other words, racialized forms of identity, mind, and/or consciousness are inherently phenomena that must be examined as part of an intersubjective social field (Wynter, 2001). Wynter (2003) explains further that the ontological conditions that set the stage for racializing experiences are consistent with hierarchized “genres of being human” (p. 264). At the top of the hierarchy, maintaining an ontological supremacy, is what Wynter (2003) simply calls “Man” – which corresponds to the particular Anglo-European-Christian social morphology that we would now call whiteness and maleness (p. 327). Due to the way that the white model of humanity is simply seen as the natural state of being, the genres of being human exhibited by Africans and Indigenous North Americans have been perceived as not-being, at least not in a human way (see also, Mills, 1997). In this way, Wynter’s theorization here echoes Du Bois’s conceptualization of white ownership over the earth.

An analytic focus on white humanity expands concerns for whiteness into a realm where macroscopic trends of racial inequality intersect with daily human living. Giving consideration to quotidian human existence provides an analytic alternative to structural and psychological approaches that can seem disconnected from the materiality of everyday teaching (Seawright, 2018). However, it is important to recognize that the concept of white humanity does not exist in between a binary of structural and psychological understandings of race. Rather, white humanity is intended as a tool to disrupt this false binary and illustrate what exists underneath both structure and psychology.

In suggesting that white humanity is underneath racialized forms of social structure and psychology I seek to illuminate the degree to which human experience is a prerequisite to both structure and psychology. In this way, the human experience of concern here is not an individualized form of experience, but rather, an intersubjective one. Meaning, in order to analytically consider the experiential foundations of structure and psychology, experience qua experience must be understood as intersubjective phenomena. This is to say, there is no structure without collective human experience, and there is no individual psychology without a social world to engage with, and with PRE, the social world becomes the locus of concern.

**Detailing phenomenology of racial embodiment (PRE)**

Phenomenology of racial embodiment (PRE) is a mode of inquiry through which to question the existential dynamics of race on their own terms. Like any method, PRE serves as a framework for asking questions, gathering data, and analyzing said data; offering guidelines for what could be included as data,
and then, how to make sense of it. In this way, PRE, as a research method, is fundamentally about providing a unique epistemological and ontological lens that anchors meaning-making in the lived-in intersubjective world.

Genealogically, PRE can trace its roots back to the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968, 2012) and the Martinican philosopher Frantz Fanon’s (2008) critique of his work. Since the publication of Fanon’s (2008) *Black Skin, White Masks*, PRE has been expanded by contemporary thinkers like Linda Martín Alcoff (2006), who was the first to actually use the term; as well as Lewis Gordon (1995), George Yancy (2014), Sara Ahmed (2007), Emily Lee (2014), Alia Al-Saji (2001), and others. While these thinkers are crucial for engaging with the *racial* aspect of PRE, to fully understand the embodiment aspect of it we have to go back to Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty’s contribution to the larger field of phenomenology is the phenomenology of embodiment, which identifies meaning as something that comes to life through active engagement within an intersubjective world. Intersubjectivity is the understanding that who we are as humans, our subjectivity, is not an individualized condition, but rather predicated upon a relational existence. Meaning, who I am cannot be disentangled from the material and fleshy world I live in and those I interact with; and, what’s more, the nature of the world I exist in is constituted by the collective action of those people living in it with me. In this sense, the intersubjectivity at the core of PRE is better understood as an *intercorporeality*, because it is not just that the human self is co-constituted vis-à-vis relationships, but is also rooted in material embodied engagement (Merleau-Ponty, 1968).

This conception of intercorporeality shapes the epistemological and ontological outlook of PRE. Epistemologically, intercorporeality suggests that how we come to know is through embodied engagement within a particular social world that reflects its ideological, ethical, and relational preconditions (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Similarly, the ontology of intercorporeality suggests that being is inseparable from the worlds we exist in. From an intercorporeal perspective then, to understand how humans come to know and be one must study the social field in which they exist (Merleau-Ponty, 1968).

Fanon (2008) did not disagree with this, but he did identify a serious oversight in Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualization: race. In his critique, Fanon extends Merleau-Ponty’s intercorporeality by accounting for the ways by which humans come to know and be in particularly racialized ways. Expanding upon this, Linda Alcoff (2006) suggests that the racializing social norms are extended through “habits of perception” that correlate with enfleshed racial assumptions and a coded visual registry that informs “reactional capacity, epistemic reliability, moral condition, and, of course, aesthetic value” of a person based on skin pigmentation, shape of eyes and nose, hair type, perceived gender and sexuality (p. 191). Alcoff is quick to remind that we do not see these social habits, we perceive through them. Emily Lee (2014) describes further that such habits are the embodied reflection of structural forms of oppression; structural forms of racism do not only exist in terms of laws and institutions, or as conscious or
unconscious belief about different racialized body features, but become sedimented in the “very way one lives in one’s body, in one’s body movements” (p. 247). What this means is that within systems of whiteness relational conditions exist beyond the control of any one individual, but nevertheless implicate each individual in the way that certain bodies are treated. Following from a conceptualization of white humanity, whiteness, then, shapes the quality and condition of being human on a daily basis, with some bodies being treated as full humans while others are racialized in a way that inspires dehumanization—all of which transpires under the guise of mundanity.

The everyday intercorporeality that sits at the core of PRE serves to frame asking, approaching, and answering questions of race. In order to illustrate what PRE looks like in action, next is an excerpt from a qualitative study of how whiteness curates the relational conditions of a classroom.

Racialized voice: a case example of PRE applied

Ashton and James

All eyes were on Ashton and James as they offered their assessment of the class conversation. During every full-class dialogue Miss Alexander would ask two students to keep track of conversational features like “active participation,” “acknowledging previous speakers,” “connectivity,” “kindness,” “focus,” and “sophistication.”

As the pair got settled in front of the class, Ashton, a white male student, got things rolling with his take on the class’s participation; he perched on a small rectangular table, and James, a Black male student, sat in a chair next to him. This task of evaluating peers was always reluctantly accepted. Ashton and James were no different. Their uneasiness with evaluating their peers was evident in the slow walk to the front of the classroom, and in the way their peers in the audience smirked, or rested their hands over their mouths as if unsure of how things would go.

Ashton finished his initial assessment of student participation unimpeded, uninterrupted. Now it was James’s turn:

“You know, I agree with that . . .”

“Little louder,” Miss Alexander interjected from across the room with a hand cupped over her ear.

“I agree with that.” James enunciated, louder, followed by a cluster of giggles and snickers from friends, breaking the audience’s silence.

Miss Alexander offered a smile in return that reflected the general affability in the room. James continued with a breakdown of how well his fellow students connected their points of conversation.

Ashton, too, continued. And their peers patiently and quietly listened, while Miss Alexander quickly answered a question from a fellow teacher who had stepped in without disrupting either of the presenters.

As the fellow teacher was leaving the room, Miss Alexander turned her attention back to James who was in the middle of presenting the score he had given to focus.
She interjected, “Louder,” this time accompanied with the twin gesture of cupping both ears. Increasing his volume again, James restated, stretching his neck a little to enunciate, “For focus, I gave an eight.” This time with fewer giggles, but with a few head-nods from the rear of the classroom near the teacher.

A friend sitting across from James offered a small gesture of solidarity, raising her eyebrows as if to question what was going on.

James continued, “And, for most of the . . . Never mind,” his voice drifting down to a smaller vocal register.

“Huh?” Miss Alexander asked, again, cupping one ear, leaning forward on her thigh as she was now sitting on top of a desk, “You gave a what for focus?”

“Well, James clarified, after dipping his head slightly and rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“Ok, great. Tell us about focus, Ashton.”

Ashton continued, uninterrupted and heard. As he concluded Miss Alexander asked, “How about Sophistication, how’d we do?”

Both James and Ashton began to answer at the same time, then both momentarily stalled until James suggested, “No, you go ahead, go ahead.”

Ashton finished presenting, and was followed by James, who was able to finish without any further interruptions.

Voice is the most conspicuous way that teachers and students interact with one another. Voice also serves as an ideal example for demonstrating how PRE allows educational researchers to newly consider classroom conditions. For instance, in approaching the dynamic between Ashton, James, and Miss Alexander I cannot simply focus on the words being spoken. As a method, PRE demands that research draws meaning from the intercorporeal condition of the moment. What this means is that speech is not merely the vocalized representation of an individual’s intended message. Voice is an embodied phenomenon; it is the act of speaking – whether it be through vocal projection, sign language, or augmentative and alternative communication. It is the body that “speaks” and expresses communication with compounding meanings attached to cadence, prosody, physical gesture, and comportment (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 203).

In this way, one’s voice is underwritten by the social meanings ascribed to the body – what Hortense Spillers (1987) calls the “hieroglyphics of the flesh” (p. 67) – which ultimately include race (Sekimoto & Brown, 2016). When a person speaks, their message is not simply propelled by objective intent, it fuses with the embodied social realities of the speaker (e.g. race, class, gender, and ability) (Sekimoto & Brown, 2016). Every speech-act (Schultz, 2010), or even moment of silence (Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004), is a reflection of how it is to be in the moment. So, to understand how race may have influenced this interaction between Ashton, James, and Miss Alexander, attention must be given to the ways that the experience of the classroom is curated by white humanity; and how the quality and condition of being in that space is informed by white supremacy.
Crafting PRE

The narrative of Ashton, James, and Miss Alexander is a small sample from a larger audio-video-based qualitative case study of how white humanity shapes the relational conditions of the classroom — I wanted to know what whiteness really looked like within mundane classroom relationships. The design of this study is fundamentally informed by PRE and the phenomenological tradition more broadly. Like other projects that put phenomenology to work in qualitative settings (see Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 2014), there was no prescribed set of tenets detailing how to bring the philosophies associated with PRE into the study of classroom relationships. Instead, those interested in drawing upon PRE must first consider the lived world in which they are striving to be immersed in (e.g. classroom, school bus, after-school program, etc.), and then excavate the locus of meaning-making that could be deployed in the study. In other words, what are the epistemological, ontological, and temporal variables of the study (see Seawright, 2018).

Mark Vagle (2014) considers this process a “craft”; as in, creating a phenomenological study, and specifically explicating the sources of meaning-making at play, is more of a creative endeavor than one that requires strict adherence to a set of methodological rules. As a philosophical discipline though, phenomenology does present a broad, frequently debated, set of methods for questioning and directly engaging the meaning-making of the lived world. Without diving too far into the nuances of these debates, the big takeaways can be categorized into general principles that apply to studies using PRE: meaning must be rooted in the phenomenal world, the lived-in and experienced aspects of life (what counts as a real phenomenon is one of those things up for debate; see Seawright, 2018), and explicitly conceptualizing how meaning is made within this context is part of the process. For instance, this study required an interrogation of the meaning (both epistemological and ontological) of voice vis-à-vis the social signification of race, embodiment, time, and social space.

Following from this method, and in keeping to my original question, the goal of this study was not positivistic. The goal was never to definitively prove that a certain subset of classroom behaviors operationalize whiteness. The purpose of the study was to illustrate and dive into the relational and existential variables associated with the social system of white supremacy. And, in turn, interrogate the enfolded ontological, epistemological, and temporal dynamics that constitute the everyday manifestations of this social system (Seawright, 2018).

In moving toward the goal of diving into the social world of Miss Alexander’s classroom I chose to utilize audio-visual recording as a way to revisit moments of observation. More important than the technical method of gathering data, though, is how that data is subsequently engaged and wrestled with. To this, I present the audio-visual data in the form of a phenomenological narrative (as seen earlier) intended to draw attention to the intercorporeal condition of Miss Alexander’s classroom. This process reflects one that is central to
any phenomenological analysis, which requires the gathering of “experiential accounts” stemming from observation, or other sources like narrative material, stories, anecdotes, or literary examples that may serve as a “resource for phenomenological reflection” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 311). Consistent with this, phenomenological narratives are thick, descriptive, semi-poetic (literary) recreations of classroom moments. Again, these narratives are not intended to serve as a veridical representation. Instead, like many case studies, the goal of the narratives is to promote reflection in the reader, opening up opportunities for the reader to connect and draw common meaning from the situation (Stake, 1995, p. 42). To this, the narrative serves as both a source of analysis, and a foil for phenomenological reflection in the reader, ideally encouraging the reader to identify with commonalities embedded in this unique interaction. In Ashton, James, and Miss Alexander’s narrative, the reader is being asked to consider the ways that student speech is an embodied act, and ultimately impacted by relational conditions that can create racialized barriers to fully being in the classroom.

**Voice and white humanity**

A student’s capacity to speak reflects the degree to which their social space is curated to embrace or diminish their being. For white students, as they step into a classroom there is an equilibrium between how they speak and the modes of speech most desirable, while students of color are faced with the tacit understanding that their modes of speech will be implicitly made suspect or less-than in contrast to those with white voices (Sekimoto & Brown, 2016). This remains true whether the grammar and enunciation of the student of color aligns with a language of power like Standard American English (SAE) or that of another like Black English Vernacular (Sekimoto & Brown, 2016). Even in cases when a student of color speaks in white ways (i.e. SAE) in white spaces they still are not fully afforded the assumptions affixed to embodied forms of whiteness; that is, the intelligence, truth, and credibility so typically given to white men (Sekimoto & Brown, 2016).

The racial disparity in voice becomes obvious in the interaction between Ashton, James, and Miss Alexander. Ashton and James were both standing in front of a quiet classroom presenting their assessment of a class conversation. During Ashton and James’s presentation Ashton was not once interrupted or asked to speak up. Ashton and James initially projected a similar volume during this interaction, with both registering comparable decibel levels in the audio-visual recording. But by the end of the presentation, after repeatedly being asked to be “a little louder,” James ended up speaking quieter than Ashton. It was as if the more James attempted to speak the more unwelcome his speech seemed to be. In this instance, James’s way of being in the classroom apparently did not match the mode of being necessary to be heard. James’s voice was preempted by white humanity.
A similar ontological dynamic was on display with Ashton and James’s respective levels of comfort. James demonstrated signs of physical discomfort during his exchanges with Miss Alexander: subtly keeping his head down, occasionally sighing, and rubbing the bridge of his nose. All the while, Ashton exhibited a comparative ease with speaking. The degree to which a student is made to feel at ease is racially influenced and can be understood in terms of what modes of being are most welcome within a particular space.

The social space of a classroom can develop an orientation through which racially privileged white bodies are made to feel in-place and welcome while students of color are made to feel out-of-place, and at times unwelcome. This sense of being in-place corresponds with a student’s capacity to extend the self into the social space of the classroom – it corresponds with a student’s level of comfort with being in a specific social world.

Shannon Sullivan (2006) suggests that “White people consider all spaces as rightfully available for their inhabitation of them” – a white person is generally free to act upon the world in a seamless, continuous fashion, while a Black person is a generally compelled to merely accept the few possibilities imposed upon them (p. 144). This ontological expansiveness does not mean that white folks can do whatever they please, but that under the social dynamics of a white world the mode of being a human unique to whiteness is the default for the dominant social world, thus making a white person’s movement through the world all the more seamless (i.e. the social conditions associated with white humanity).

The expansiveness of white humanity creates lived-in classroom conditions where mundane racial dehumanization exists as an acceptable – and unremarkable – aspect of school. In this way, it is simply a usual part of the classroom that students of color may exist in tension and unease with speaking. This unease, in turn, corresponds with a potential anxiety surrounding not being heard – think of James’s trailing off after repeated requests to speak up. This is not because Miss Alexander’s classroom is uniquely conditioned to whiteness. Quite the contrary, Miss Alexander works tirelessly to create a critical pedagogical space, but nonetheless must deal with the social weight of normativity that is brought into and enacted in her classrooms in ways beyond her immediate control.

Conclusion: opening up phenomenology of racial embodiment

Highlighting the way in which the racialization of voice is a coextensive with mundane moments of classroom interaction begs the practical question of, so what now – how would I, as a teacher, act differently in a similar scenario? Ultimately, this question forecasts the primary contribution that phenomenology of racial embodiment could have for whiteness studies in education. It demands that antiracist teachers and scholars come back to a critical
Phenomenology of racial embodiment

consideration of teaching as it unfolds in real time, and the problems/potential embedded therein.

For instance, let’s consider that maybe Miss Alexander actually did not hear her student in this moment. If she could not hear him, is it not her responsibility to ask James to speak up? If she does not ask him to speak up, and she indeed did not hear him, then a decision to not ask James to speak up would result in her actively participating in ignoring a student of color. I feel that it is fairly obvious to say that ignoring any of your students is bad practice, but particularly so with regard to students who have been historically silenced in schools (Cammarota & Romero, 2006). Though, through her consistent asking of James to speak up Miss Alexander reinforces relational conditions in which he is not fully welcome. As Miss Alexander struggles to hear James she is doing so with the intent of hearing him. Due to the way that the relationality of the classroom is conditioned though, this becomes a strained task that ultimately reinforces an orientation in which being Black is coextensive with being out-of-place.

This moment lives in a sort of pedagogical paradox. Moreover, this situation illustrates one of the central reasons that research methods must be expanded in whiteness studies, because there are times where there are no-win scenarios in classroom race relations, and a teacher must understand how to move on from that. In this way, the racialized conditions of voice reflect the motivating questions and potential contribution of using phenomenology of racial embodiment as method. Instead of being focused on pedagogical prescriptions for this particular type of situation a teacher must take responsibility for the situation (Lee, 2014). What this entails is reorienting the pedagogical concern towards a consistent endeavoring for a relational condition that may prevent similar scenarios. In other words, while you may not be able to fix these exact moments, a teacher can cultivate an awareness of such moments and use it as an impetus to cultivate a space in which voices of color can flourish instead of being diminished – a space where white ways of being do not hold total ontological sway.

An awareness of this type must be phenomenological in nature or risk being subsumed into cognitive-centric approaches to lesson-planning and classroom management. The awareness being suggested here is a visceral and reflexive awareness, a real-time attention to the body, interactive tempos, and relational habits that default to whiteness. The goal of such an awareness is to stall, breakdown, challenge, and over time choreograph new relational conditions.

This sort of awareness is assisted through experiential illustration, through bringing these paradoxes to life for teachers to wrestle with, and engage similar dynamics in their own classrooms. A strength of PRE is doing just this – capturing and engaging mundane lived moments that frequently go unseen and unacknowledged, which is absolutely needed as a bolster to educational research methods that so frequently draw upon cognitive-centric and reflective methods. With this in mind, the further implications of PRE are similarly
situated in that additional research could provide an in-depth level of illustration of exactly what white humanity looks like in everyday classrooms. It could illustrate further instances in which white bodies are given ontological privilege and identify the corresponding situational variables in order to suppress them. Keeping in mind that phenomenological research relies on cultivating a relationship with the reader, this research could help inspire a pedagogical phenomenology of practice in which teachers actively consider the relational state of things as they teach. What this practice and its corresponding research could additionally help reveal is what Alia Al-Saji (2014) calls phenomenological hesitation, those moments that force a teacher to pause and take responsibility for the situation, and start to facilitate what George Yancy (2014) calls the “breakdown” of habit (p. 62). As a method, phenomenology of racial embodiment offers the rare ability to question the racialization of educational experience on its own terms, while offering a glimpse into the mundanity of whiteness in classrooms.

Note

1 James self-identifies as a Black student, and I refer to him as such rather than an “African American” student or generalized “student of color.”

References


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