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Living Perception in Maurice Merleau-Ponty

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Theory and Criticism

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Abstract

This thesis examines the philosophical underpinnings of the possibility to perceive in different ways, with a particular attention to Merleau-Ponty's account of perception as inseparable from the wider arc of a person's embodied existence. Chapter 1 reflects on the relationship between Merleau-Ponty's description of the co-existence of the senses, and concrete ways that individual perceivers co-exist. Chapter 2 brings Merleau-Ponty's account of perception as a field of lived relationships, into conversation with the contingency of perceptual limits. Chapter 3 examines the significance of Merleau-Ponty's attention to experiences of synaesthesia and proposes concrete ways that a perceiver might move to shift perceptual structures, as opposed to remain complacent in their recreation.

Keywords

phenomenology, perception, the lived body, Merleau-Ponty, Deaf Studies

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Introduction

Orkid Sassouni's photographs capture the expressiveness of American Sign Language in motion. They present parts of signs only to emphasize the way that these signs move away from us. And yet, perhaps it is the very way that the specificity of these signs are lost, that the conversation in *Heated Conversation* (1998), for example, means. The signers' arms and mouths reach toward disagreement. Meaning seems to hang in the triangularity of their position, in the lights behind and overhead, and in the backdrop of the quiet street. The conversation is not given to us, but layers of meaning appear nonetheless.

Sassouni identifies her work as part of a genre of art called Deaf View/Image Art (De'VIA). Created in 1989 through the writing of a manifesto, De'VIA is art made with the intention to present aspects of “Deaf experience” (Miller 772). Of course, there is no singular or monolithic experience of being “deaf.” The assertion of *a* deaf experience might be read rather for the way that it positions itself against an insistence upon experience in general to be hearing experience.

The expression of deaf experience in De'VIA brings to the fore perceptual ways of being that are overlooked in the context of normative models of perception—models, for example, that privilege hearingness over deafness. As De'VIA explores connections such as those between deafness and culture, deafness and language, and deafness and identity, it clarifies how deaf ways of life exceed at every moment a conception of deafness as a purely audiological condition. In this way, we might locate in De'VIA a description of perception as intertwined with the wider existence of a person. What is more, we might interpret the genre's attention to deaf experience to be a more general

emphasis on *perceptions*, as opposed to a singular or monolithic account of Perception. An attention to the evocation of perceptions by De'VIA, of rich and exciting ways of being in the world as perceivers who are different from each other is, in part, the impetus behind this project. This thesis reflects on the conceptual underpinnings of a phenomenology of perceptions, the importance of the plurality of ways of being in the world as perceivers.

Merleau-Ponty's writings on perception play a key role in each chapter. Following from Merleau-Ponty, I understand perception to be fundamentally embodied. The embodiment of the perceiver is not the enclosure of perception within a body—perception does not leave my body “at rest” in itself (Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s” 155)—rather, in perceiving, I am intertwined with the lives of others. Embodied perception is my inherence in the world. That I am a body means that I cannot step outside of the world or evaluate it from the distance of a disembodied consciousness; toward the world, perception can never fully grasp the world. A key lesson from perceptual life is that there is always more to that which appears as perhaps most obvious.

Subsequently, each chapter reflects on concepts that complicate a notion of perception as an operation that features a given world and an equally given perceiver. I also hope that these concepts help to generate conversation about the way that perception is full of concrete ambiguities and complexities. Perception is not where I come to know the world exactly but rather where what I already know about the world comes to be questioned.

Merleau-Ponty tells us that the unclear parts of perception are not instances where I need doubt whether or not a world exists. In a different way, the ambiguity of

perceptual life in general marks an opportunity to reflect on the assurance that this ambiguity concedes: while the world far exceeds my grasp, I will always find meaning in it. As my perception is co-constituted through my situated relationships with other perceivers, there is always a plenitude of world beyond my perceptions. Perception never exhausts the world. In fact, Merleau-Ponty tells us that “[n]othing is more difficult than knowing precisely what we *see*” (*PhP* 59). To know what one sees is so challenging because the perceived is neither given, nor is any perceiver all-seeing. In a way, each of the chapters that follow reflect on how the concrete limits of my knowing what I perceive inform the possibility to perceive in new ways.

Chapter one is concerned with the way that perception is a relation to the world beyond an anatomy of the senses. I reflect on what it might mean when Merleau-Ponty describes the perceiver as a *sensorium commune* (*PhP* 248). In doing so, I suggest that Merleau-Ponty's conception of the co-existence of the senses (taste, touch, smell, hearing, sight) through a body's movement in and toward the world makes the traditional philosophical problem of the unity of the senses a non-problem. Finally, I draw more practical connections between the co-existence of the senses and the existences of different perceptual ways of being in the world.

Chapter two addresses relationships that animate perceptual life and that contribute to the unity of experience, but that are often beyond my conscious awareness. I locate these relationships in affective attunement (as written about by Brian Massumi) and amodal perception (as written about by Daniel Stern). Both these concepts emphasize the body's general capacity to relate to things and others outside of itself. In this way, I aim to think about the limits of perception alongside a conception of the embodied

subject as a complex field of lived relationships. Limits from this perspective do not inhere in bodies as facts; rather, they shift according to the intentional structure of my existence and the environment that I find myself in at any given time.

Chapter three addresses everyday experiences of synaesthesia, and the way that the intermingling of the senses connects up with the intermingling of familiar and less familiar structures of perception. In this chapter I am particularly interested in how one might reflect on the ways that sensing becomes limited by normative habits of perception. Through an engagement with deaf artist Christine Sun Kim's *Face Opera ii* (2013), I locate concrete practices of perception that aim to better position perceivers to attend to parts of experience that have been covered over.

Each chapter refuses to locate perception as an operation inside an individual body. What is more, each chapter insists upon a conception of perception as a process that unfolds in contact with other perceivers. My reflections begin with inquiries into more familiar perceptual relationships, such as those between the senses. They arrive at concerns that are less obviously perceptual but that, I argue, are questions very much at stake in conceptualizing perception—relationships, for example, between sensory modalities and subjectivity, between the senses and language, and between different experiences of being in the world.

My attention to different ways of being in the world dovetails with the reality that the senses are managed in concrete ways by the particular social and cultural milieus that we as perceivers find ourselves in. Throughout, as I describe perception as a relationship to the world beyond its givenness, perception is also the site at which we might perceive otherwise from that which appears as most given.

In sum, the aim of this thesis is to reflect on the importance of different ways of perceiving. Through thinking about *sensorium commune*, affective attunement, amodal perception, and synaesthesia, I emphasize the way that perception is part of the total existence of a person and aim to bring out some of the implications of this living structure.

Chapter 1

1 *Sensorium Commune* and the Co-Existences of Perception

Deaf Gain is a key concept in contemporary Deaf Studies. It aims at a reconceptualization of “deaf” wherein “being deaf is not automatically defined simply by *loss* but could also be defined by difference, and in some cases gain” (Bauman and Murray xv). H-Dirksen Bauman and Joseph Murray, editors of the recent *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes of Human Diversity* (2014), qualify that this reconceptualization is neither the suggestion that deafness is better than hearingness (xxiv), nor the suggestion that hearing folks should intentionally become deaf. Deaf Gain is, however, a refusal of the pretension that deaf people should become like hearing people (xxvii). As opposed to a new definition of what deafness *is*, Deaf Gain addresses attitudes that delimit deafness to be an unfavourable and strictly audiological condition. Deaf Gain perspectives bring to the fore the particularity of deaf ways of being in the world. As such, Deaf Gain takes as its starting point the fact that perception unfolds *through existence*. The extent to which this notion differs from a model of perception as attached to specific organs cannot be understated.

This chapter brings the concept Deaf Gain into conversation with the concept *sensorium commune*. Provisionally, *sensorium commune* is a Latin term that refers to an organ of general sense. Classically, the organ indexes the philosophical problem of the unity of the senses within the human body. In the “Sensing” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) Merleau-Ponty tells us that “man is a *sensorium commune*” (248). This description of the total person as an organ of general sense connects perception with

the outwardness of an individual's relationship to the world; in articulating perception in this way, sensing is understood not as something inside a body but rather as a body's gearing into the world. Similar to the way that Deaf Gain refuses to locate deafness *in* an individual person, *sensorium commune* refuses to locate perception strictly *in* a body. Further, in the same way that Deaf Gain emphasizes the value of embodied difference, *sensorium commune*, as we will see, guards against a conceptualization of Perception (a singular way to perceive). Overall, I suggest that *sensorium commune* locates perception as the site of multiple co-existences—the co-existence of the senses, as well as the co-existence of perceivers.

First, I present a brief history of *sensorium commune*. My consideration of its historical-philosophical iterations locates a trajectory of perception that begins with the synthesis of isolated sense impressions, shifts to sensing that occurs within a more generally sensing body, and culminates in perception as sense that moves in-between and across the supposed boundary of the inside and outside of a body. This reconceptualization of perception as not pointed at the world but rather as intentionally geared into the world, ushers a new set of questions about perception. These questions exceed the confines of the inside of a body.

The historical survey includes reflections on Aristotle's common sense, Herder's evocation of the organ in his "Essay on the Origins of Language" (1772), and Herman Boerhaave's eighteenth-century nervous physiological *sensorium commune*. Next, I present an explication of the concept as it appears in Merleau-Ponty. Third, I bring the concept into conversation with contemporary research on perception by way of three

specific Deaf Gain perspectives. I argue that to locate perception inside of the body is to overlook the relationships of co-existence that are the very stuff of perception.

1.1 A Selective History of *Sensorium Commune*

To reflect on the history of *sensorium commune* is a challenge of a particular brand. Among other reasons, the organ's very generality requires us to make decisions about how it relates to other iterations of general sense that pepper the history of philosophy. For example, what is the relationship between *sensorium commune* and Kant's communal sense, *sensus communis*? In fact, in order to delineate the scope of my interest in the former, a comparison with the latter is an instructive place to begin. *Sensus communis* appears in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), in the context of his description of the structuring of experience by faculties of intuition located in the mind (space and time).¹ Drawing from this context, *sensus communis* relates to judgments that occur at a distance from the sensuousness of embodied life. *Sensorium commune*, on the other hand, should be read as a general sense that is in a body and therefore inseparable from said sensuousness. *Sensorium commune* is not located in a mind; as an organ it is of the body (of course, Merleau-Ponty's use of the concept moves beyond this familiar mind/body dualism). Aristotle's common sense is an ancient Greek iteration of this organ.

Aristotle's *koinon aistherion*, common sense, is a sense that organizes. It synthesizes information from the senses and then relays that information to an awaiting intellect. Aristotle speculates on the existence of the organ in response to the observation that a body perceives parts of experience that do not clearly index one of the five senses

¹ I am grateful to my colleague Dylan Vaughan who took time to conversationally clarify for me some of the nuances of this Kantian common sense.

(smell, touch, taste, hearing, sight). If knowledge follows from sense perception, where does my knowledge of things such as speed and intensity come from? Aristotle names these qualities that do not clearly index sense organs, “common sensibles” (Rée 332). Common sensibles are perceived by a *koinon aistherion* which resides in the body.

Perhaps surprisingly, energetic debates about the nature and function of *koinon aistherion* persist today. With the hope to avoid the nuances of these debates (as I am not a scholar of Aristotle), I will restrict current reflections on the sense to a couple of what Pavel Gregoric conveniently describes as “uncontroversial points” about it. First, the common sense “allows Aristotle to say that the five senses are not mutually independent capacities, but form some sort of unity;” second, the common sense “is in charge of certain functions that, in Aristotle’s view, go beyond the five senses taken individually” (Gregoric 13). That the senses need an especial sense to unite them suggests that they themselves are not animated. In sum, the senses cannot relate themselves, rather, they need to be unified from without.

Turning to a different historical iteration, *sensorium commune* notably appears in Johann Gottfried Herder’s famous “Essay on the Origin of Language” (1772). Here *sensorium commune* is part of Herder’s answer to questions about the location and formation of language. His announcement that “man is a single thinking *sensorium commune*” (yes, Merleau-Ponty’s use of the term is an explicit allusion to Herder’s) takes place in two important contexts (Herder 106). First, the organ plays a key role in Herder’s wider project that is to describe the affective dimensions of language. In patent opposition to theories of language popular in his time, decidedly theo-logocentric theories, Herder develops a “quasi-empiricist theory of meanings and concepts according

to which all our meanings of concepts are of their nature based in (perceptual or affective) sensation” (Forster 351). The affective dimensions of language are significant for theorizing *sensorium commune* because they point toward an understanding of perception as a process that unfolds somehow beyond the operations of individual sense organs. We might read the almost linguistic nature of the senses as their involvement in meaning beyond a body as given.

The second important context to note is Herder's interest in the relationship between sense perception and *Aufklärung* (enlightenment). Herder's evocation of *sensorium commune* is embedded in a wider narrative about the progressive development of the human subject. What is notable about Herder's “spin” on this narrative is that he claims that in the course of the cultivation of the individual, “the process of perception operates naturally, via forces of the human soul and their unfolding, rather than via the individual's rational knowledge and conscious following of a principle of perception” (DeSouza 235). In other words, in place of enlightenment by way of the path of Reason, Herder writes of perfection as something that unfolds within the body. *Sensorium commune* is important to this progression as it sets the soul “in search of characteristic marks by which to order” sensory data (230). For Herder, then, *sensorium commune* is the organization of impressions that collect and, over time, come to inform human reflection. Again, perception here seems to be involved in more than the simple relay of sense impressions.

While there are dimensions of Herder's evocation of *sensorium commune* that are original for his time, specifically his thoughts on the affective as opposed to divine origins of language, there is a marked sense in which the concept rings as a quite

conservative force within the body. Part of this conservatism can be located in the association of the organ with the maturation of human reason. Similarly, Aristotle's common sense juggles information between the allegedly animal and intellectual parts of the human. In Herder, perception is part of the enlightenment project to become maximally reasonable. In Aristotle, perception is part of the great project to know the world. In a further way, more interestingly, both Aristotle and Herder note that there is something about perception that extends beyond the givenness of the senses. While neither concedes a direct relationship between ordinary sense organs, both posit an organizing and especial organ that unifies sense impressions and directs perception beyond the givenness of an object body. This especial organ is the guarantee that neither thinker needs to conceptualize a more interactive relationship between the five senses themselves. Accordingly, both thinkers also avoid the challenge to reconceptualise perception in general. Before a consideration of *sensorium commune* as described by Merleau-Ponty, I want to look at one more historical iteration—this time in a more patently physiological context.

Here I am interested in Dutch physician Herman Boerhaave's (1668-1738) writing on *sensorium commune*, in particular his later work where he associates the organ with the translation of nervous energies into motoric energies. It is worth noting that *sensorium commune* has been variously interpreted and located in the context of eighteenth-century nervous physiology.² Boerhaave's interest in the concept links up with his conviction that the nervous system, as opposed to the heart, is at the centre of the

² The final chapter of George Prochaska's dissertation *On the Functions of the Nervous System* (1851) gives a detailed overview of the historical and theoretical constellations surrounding *sensorium commune* in this very context.

living body. Writing post-Harvey theories of circulation—at a time when circulation is very much on the lips of scientists and physicians of the day—Boerhaave is interested in the way that a body is constituted by a network of parts more minute and myriad than any anatomy might even pretend toward (Knoeff 205). Accordingly, distinct from both anatomies as well as physiologies of the time that identify *sensorium commune* as a discrete organ of the nervous system, Boerhaave locates it “in the endless number of points in the brain and spinal cord where sensorial nerve fibres enter and motor nerves depart” (204). There is something unsettling about the corporeal omnipresence of Boerhaave's *sensorium commune*. Perhaps part of what is unsettling about this common physiological sense, this organ that is dispersed across the body, is that while it is imperative for the preservation of the organism's functioning, it also plays a key role in the organism's undoing.

Boerhaave locates the origin of nervous diseases in the breakdown of *sensorium commune*. Because the nervous system is so integral to the order of the living body, its malfunction leads to the collapse of the body at large, literally. For Boerhaave,

a nervous disorder could disclose itself *per consensum* in another place in the body. For instance, he attached great value to the opinion that a mental disorder could show itself in the stomach. He believed that a delirium accompanying a pneumonia could be understood as a disease of the brain caused *per consensum* by a malfunctioning of the lungs. (Knoeff 207)

Here disorder lies in the disjoining of formerly held together parts. The malfunction of the *sensorium commune* not only has nervous implications, it also seems to lead to the collapse of the body's more static structures. Again, we have an iteration of *sensorium*

commune that involves a body that senses in ways that go beyond the givenness of its parts. In Boerhaave, while *sensorium commune* is less explicitly about perception (in that it addresses nervous and motoric energy), it still functions in the same especial way that we see in Aristotle and Herder. It is worth appreciating, further, that there is something markedly different about this last iteration.

While in Aristotle and Herder *sensorium commune* contributes to the smooth functioning of the “higher” functions of life—the intellectual soul and mature reason, respectively; in Boerhaave, at the site of head-achey stomachs and pneumatic brains, the corporeal stakes of life are dramatically higher. The recession of Aristotle's well-ordered body deep into the fluid interior of Boerhaave's gut evokes at once both a kind of fascination, as well as perhaps horror. There seems to be—to borrow terms from Catherine Malabou—something both generative as well as destructive about the fluidity of this generally sensing body. The order of this general sensing is coordinated by a mysteriously omnipresent and dispersed, as well as minute and highly specialized body part. The physiological body's undercurrent communication system and its ability to qualitatively transform nervous energies is a far reach from the body of the tidy syntheses of familiar sense organs.

Sensorium commune in Aristotle, Herder, and Boerhaave, respectively, sense in different contexts and organize in different ways. While I have stressed how each *sensorium commune* begins to sense beyond the givenness of isolate sense organs, it is important that these “beyonds” are always in the end still contained within a body. More clearly, each *sensorium commune* is concerned with the unity of parts inside of a single body. They organize internally. In Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, *sensorium*

commune is part of a wider reconceptualization of the perceiving body in relation to the unity of a world outside of it. According to Merleau-Ponty the senses do not need to be unified from without. The senses themselves, rather, *co-exist*. Perception is unified through the intentional existence of the subject. Intentionality here should be understood as an embodied relationship toward the world, not a relationship to the world mediated by a pure consciousness.

1.2 A Phenomenology of Perception

The concept *sensorium commune* is part of Merleau-Ponty's original description of what it means to be related to the world as a perceiver. More specifically, that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception is a *phenomenology* means that for him, the foundation of perception is not an unquestioned belief in an empirical world but rather is an attendance to the appearances of world by a subject who is fundamentally situated in the world. As situated, my attendance is not principally reflective. I relate to the world through my taking it up in existence. In touch with the phenomenal parts of experience, I do not read or interpret meanings inscribed in an outside. Meaning, rather, shows forth in "the spontaneous arrangement of parts" (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 58). The squares of the sidewalk, for example, mean for me not in the way that I observe their curvature, the density of their concrete. The sidewalk means as I step onto it, as I move my legs across it. *Sensorium commune* here is not an organ that mediates the sensuous relationship between an isolated subject and an empirical world.

The situated-ness of the subject of *sensorium commune* is markedly different from the distance from the world implied in classical empirical and intellectualist accounts of world. Indeed, for the empiricist, there is an objective world that is observed through acts

of direct perception. Merleau-Ponty notes the way that in describing sensations, the empiricist conveniently forgets that “he himself also perceives” (*PhP* 214). The world is directly accessible to the empiricist by virtue of the way they can step back and observe it at a distance. Merleau-Ponty juxtaposes the empiricist at a distance with the evocative image of the “perpetual rooting” of a situated perceiver: “the world ceaselessly bombards and besieges subjectivity just as waves surround a shipwreck on the beach” (215). In other words, the perceiver is not just in touch with the world; they are also rocked and swayed by the world. In the same way that a shipwreck cannot sail back out to sea, a perceiver cannot ascend out of the world.

Like the empiricist, intellectualists also struggle in a kind of long-distance relationship with the world. In the same way that the directly perceiving empiricist philosopher is not moved by the world, there is a curious way in which the intellectualist does not feel the world at all. More precisely, in its Cartesian iteration, the touch of the world is wholly secondary to thought about the world. In a different way, for the Kantian intellectualist, the world only exists in reflection. On this count, “the world becomes the correlate of thought about the world and no longer exists except for a constituting [Ego]” (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 215). Contrary to these accounts of knowing that posit either an empirical outside world or a world constituted entirely in the mind, Merleau-Ponty insists on the constitution of meaning in experiences of perception.

An example helps to clarify the nature of the difference between these worlds. Merleau-Ponty comments on a scattering of papers on his desk. Some pages are illuminated by light from the window, others cast with shadow. He notes, “[i]f I do not analyze my perception, and if I hold myself to the overall spectacle, I will say that all the

sheets of paper are equally white” (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 234). Within the context of his desk and his room in general, neither the shadows nor the tint of the lights affect the color that appears in the pages. He sees white paper on the desk, as it was there earlier that morning in the light of day. At the same time, if he looks at the papers through a box of matches, an act which has the effect of isolating the pages from their wider field, the appearance of the pages shifts: “I notice that the sheets covered in shadow were not and had never been identical to the illuminated sheets, nor for that matter objectively different” (235). In other words, the appearance of the very color of the paper shifts according to whether or not the colors are in, or isolated from, a wider relational field. The color of the paper hangs with the rest of the room in a way that makes a sheet of paper white, even in the shadows. The shiftiness of appearance points to the way that the world is not accessible to me through objective observation but rather through an engagement with sensations that are always more than objectively given.

Without the constancy of an objective world peppered with objective impressions, it is unclear what a *sensorium commune* that expertly orders might get up to. The location of perception in phenomenal *experience* requires us to think about relationships both within the perceiver, as well as between perceiver and perceived, in a more dynamic way.

1.3 The Co-Existence of the Senses

While the isolated five senses of the object-body require an especial sense to guarantee their relation, Merleau-Ponty tells us that in living perception the senses co-exist. Co-existence here describes the way that the senses themselves interact and communicate. The senses form a system. This system is not closed in on itself; rather, in the same way that I come to know the sidewalk as I stroll across its surface, my senses

perceive as they sense toward the world. The unity of the senses addresses sensuous relationships that are not confined to the inside of a body.

Merleau-Ponty offers a practical exercise that helps to illustrate a more unmediated relationship between the senses. He suggests that I hold a finger close to my face, between my eyes. If I focus on the finger it appears as singular, if I cast my gaze ahead it becomes two (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 240). Merleau-Ponty emphasizes how rather than the product of a “superimposition” of the two images, the single finger is somehow “incomparably more solid.” He clarifies:

One passes from double vision to the unique object not through an inspection of the mind, but when the two eyes cease to function in isolation and are used as *a single organ* by a unique gaze. The synthesis is not accomplished by the epistemological subject, but rather by the body when it tears itself away from its dispersion, gathers itself together, and carries itself through all of its resources toward a single term of its movement, and when a single intention is conceived within it through the phenomenon of synergy. (241, emphasis mine)

This body that collects itself as it perceives, is the perceiver as *sensorium commune*. *Sensorium commune* is perception across a generally unified body. That this organ has a “unique gaze” is the qualification that the generality of the perceiver is not totalizing but rather is a structure that is somehow particular to the perceiver, particular to situations of perception. While the epistemological subject is a “specialized self” who is “familiar with a single sector of being” (224), the perceiver as *sensorium commune* directs itself

outward and in doing so collects into a synergetic one. How else might we conceptualize co-existence at the site of perception?

In an ordinary way, we might locate an understanding of co-existence through a comparison with relationships of simultaneity. Simultaneity can be understood as a temporal term that signals the way that two or more things happen at the same time. To use an example, we might say that my basil plant grows simultaneously with my thesis getting written. While these two things happen at the same time, they are not too related in any other way. Simultaneity here, that is, does not index a further relationship of contact. Outside of shared time, the germination of my basil plant does not come in direct contact with the germination of my thesis. In a different way, consider the way that I might co-exist with a roommate. To co-exist is not only to live at the same time, nor is it simply to live in the same place. To co-exist involves a commitment of sorts, an agreement to live in contact. We make decisions together: for example, we might cook meals, share dishes, foster a cat. As roommates we co-exist in the same space at the same time. Co-existence is an existential structure. It refers to the wider circumstances of my life. The co-existence of the senses, then, is not only the way that they intend toward the world; it is also tied up with the wider life and material world of particular perceivers. The senses are not isolate objective organs but rather parts of a more systematic and intentional whole that is the existence of the embodied perceiver. In order to take the co-existence of the senses seriously, one needs to give up a number of more familiar assumptions about the nature of perception.

In fact, to think about the perceiving subject as *sensorium commune* requires one to deny “everything that he [they] says about perception in general” and to take seriously what the body as a general organ of perception shows up about the world (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 214). To give up old categories of perception means in a very real way to de-center the subject who is both self-contained and consistent in their relationship with the world. Recall the consistency with which the empiricist philosopher, for example, directly accesses sensations around them. In the same way that there are no third person processes that unify experience, there is no autonomous subject who stands behind or above perception. Perception is not the exercise of human powers to discern and unpack the world. Perception, rather, along the lines of *sensorium commune*, is a subject's complicated relationship with—in—the world. What is more, perception is also part of a perceiver's complicated relationship to themselves. A body is not an object in general, a body surveyed by a mind; in perception, rather, “between sensation and myself, there is always the thickness of an *originary acquisition* that prevents my experience from being clear to itself” (224). The fundamental opaqueness of experience clarifies that neither perceiver nor perceived are simply given in the sensings of *sensorium commune*.

Need we be nervous about this “body that knows more than we do about the world” (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 248)? At the juncture of perceiving *selves*, is subjectivity not fundamentally fractured? What is to be made of the way that “sensory experience” seems to have become “unstable” (234)? While *sensorium commune* marks relationships that are qualitatively different from the unity of the classical organ of general sense, it does not usher in a chaotic or disorganized conception of the body. The co-existence of the senses of *sensorium commune* is a particular structure of the senses. What is key here

is that this structure is living. These perceptual structures unfold in space and time, in the context of the wider intentional existence of a perceiver. These structures are not imposed from without the living body, nor are they guaranteed by an especial separate organ inside of a body.

The only person who need feel nervous about the relationships that constitute *sensorium commune* is perhaps the subject who presumes to be everywhere and all-knowing at once. Indeed, *sensorium commune* in Merleau-Ponty signals a shift from the problem of the unity of the senses to the “problem of sensoriality, or of finite subjectivity” (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 250). Merleau-Ponty nods to the nature of this new problem in the “Preface” of *Phenomenology* when he tells us that the human subject is “condemned to sense” (lxxxiv). The problem of sensoriality is that I can neither step outside of sense or claim sense as my own: I am, rather, always sensing. The finitude of my subjectivity attests to a world outside of myself. This finitude, we might say, is only a problem for the subject who has not yet learned that he “is not the author of the world” (224).

A further key relationship that constitutes *sensorium commune* is the co-existence of perceiver and perceived. The existence of sense outside of the human subject—the churning of an “inexhaustible” world (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* lxxx)—requires one to conceptualize perception as an on-going contact between perceiver and perceived. In contradistinction to a conception of perception as between the poles of perceiving-subject and perceived-object, Merleau-Ponty unequivocally tells us that “every perception is a communication or a communion, the taking up or the achievement by us of an alien intention or inversely the accomplishment beyond our perceptual powers and as a

coupling of our body with the things” (334). At the crossroads of the body’s coupling with the world, we need perhaps wonder how literally we should read Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of perception as living. Is *sensorium commune* an obscure and passing metaphor, little more? As Merleau-Ponty aims to describe perception outside of the worn-out vocabularies of classical philosophies of perception, his descriptions become richly existential, the perceiver becomes uneasily “ensnared in the sensible” (221). When Merleau-Ponty describes perception as ambiguous, challenging, and unpredictable, I think that it is important that we take him for his word. The ambiguity of perception is attendant to the fact that the world is not given, and neither is perception itself. Perception as such, perception as positively autonomous and operational, is impossible at the site of the co-existences that constitute perceptual life.

1.4 Deaf Gain and Sensorium Commune

It is not immediately clear how *sensorium commune* and Deaf Gain might be brought into relation in a thoughtful way. Such a relation, however, can deepen how we understand the generally sensing body. It also locates some more concrete implications of this description of the perceiver. On one level, *sensorium commune* might be used as a tool that is useful to generate questions about how perceivers literally co-exist with each other. Along these lines we might ask: How does a space impose upon a perceiver a particular manner of perceiving? In what way might a physical space open up perceptual possibilities for some bodies and close down possibilities for others? A classroom with dim lighting and desks arranged in rows, for example, makes the use of visual languages

such as American Sign Language, challenging.³ A more sign language friendly space might have good lighting and furniture arranged in a way that allows for all faces to be seen by everyone at once. In this context, *sensorium commune* touches on the relationship between perceivers and spaces of perception. It prompts pursuing spaces that open out to *existences*, as opposed space designed for a single manner of being in the world. Co-existence here poses perception alongside questions about the lives of perceivers, as opposed to the reduction of perception to a set of operations at the site of a body in general. The description of the perceiver as *sensorium commune* emphasizes the fact that perceivers co-exist. Deaf Gain perspectives bring further dimensions of the co-existences of perception into appearance.

Robert Sirvage's research on "Deaf Walkers" strikes me as a perfect example of a perspective that holds perception and questions about co-existence—living together—together.⁴ Sirvage notes the way that signers, when walking, take on a set of eyes for their conversation partner. Signers navigate the space together. In a more conscious posture, signers may explicitly point out obstacles in the path ahead. What is more, walking signers less consciously guide their partner along what Sirvage calls an "imaginary axis." Sirvage's close attention to the proxemics of signing walkers shows:

³ As American Sign Language is a recurring subject of reflection in this thesis, it is worth clarifying what it is. Only one of hundreds of signed languages in the world, all of which are "mutually unintelligible," American Sign Language (ASL) is "a language in which the shapes, positions, and movements of the hands are combined with complex uses of non-manual signs such as facial expressions and movements of the head and body, to create a variety of linguistic possibilities as diverse as the combinations of sounds used in oral languages. It is neither an invented nor a universal language but rather has evolved within a linguistic community, like any spoken language, over many years" (Bayton 12).

⁴ I also write about Sirvage's and Petitto's research in "Re-framing Language Through Signed Signs and Deaf Gain" (2015). There I take up Deaf Gain in the context of re-thinking language. Here I think through these examples with an attention to the plurality of perception.

If one person moves over, the other will by default move in the same direction yet maintain the same distance in space . . . Studies show that Deaf people typically navigate together, effortlessly avoiding hazards, without any need to disrupt conversation, as a result of that imaginary axis between them with which they intuitively guide each other along the way. (Bahan 241)⁵

The intuitiveness of this axis, the dovetailing of walking, communicating, and tending to another's immediate environment, is a great snapshot of perception in the context of complex, situated co-existence with others. Perception here concerns the general location of one's body in relation to another. The situatedness of perception is not the location of specific sense impressions at specific locations in a body; rather, situation is the perceiver's inherence in a shared social and cultural world.

In addition to the generation of thought about co-existence with others, *sensorium commune* might further be used to directly address false assumptions about the nature of perception. Cognitive neuroscientist Laura-Ann Petitto and team's research on language acquisition and development comes to mind here.⁶ Specifically interested in questions of linguistic modality, Petitto frames her research on signed languages as indicative of a "third revolution" in the conceptualization of language more generally. Petitto locates the

⁵ Sirvage compiled his research on Deaf Walkers for his master's thesis, "Navigational Proxemics of Walking Signers: A Paradigm Shift in Methodology." It is not published in English, but is available on video (in ASL) in the Spring 2012 edition of the *Deaf Studies Digital Journal*.

⁶ My knowledge of Herder is very limited and so I do not want to stress this point too much, but it is worth at least flagging how his "Essay on the Origins of Language" links up with Petitto's work in an interesting way. In his "Essay," contrary to a long tradition of what Jonathan Rée calls the "ordinary folk metaphysics" of the time, Herder denied the line of thinking that equated speech with language. Citing examples of vocalicity that are not familiarly linguistic, Herder suggests that language is more properly *thought* (language, that is, is thought not voice) (Rée 66).

first revolution in William Stokoe's famous "Sign Language Structure: An Outline of the Visual Communication Systems of the American Deaf" (1960). Mapping out structural and morphological parallels between signed and spoken languages, Stokoe's essay was a turning point in the history of ASL as the language went from an evaluation as less complex than spoken language, to the recognition of it as a full language in and of itself. Petitto names the second revolution as the flourishing of social and cultural movements associated with Deaf identity which peppered North America in the latter part of the twentieth century and saw increasing awareness about signed languages and deaf cultures.⁷ The third revolution, of which Petitto and her team are the heralds, consists of the "biological decoupling" of speech and language. Petitto names her research as the final nail in the coffin of hearing-centered (audist) views that insist that at the end of the day, somehow, there must be something empirically better about speech than sign language (Petitto calls this audist assumption the "yes but" mindset: "yes but isn't speech better than sign?"). Citing her extensive empirical findings, Petitto quells suspicions that gather at the site of this visible difference:

The *production* of language—be it either by the tongue or the hands—is distinct from the knowledge of language. Knowledge of language is in our brains. The tongue is one means by which the brain can 'out' human language—but only one . . . the human brain does not discriminate between speech and sign but processes them identically, with *biological equivalence*. (73)

⁷ Deaf View/Image Art (De'VIA) can very well be located as part of the flourishing of deaf cultural activities associated with this "second revolution."

By holding the production of language apart from its knowledge, Petitto loosens the threads between language and specific parts of the body in the same way that *sensorium commune* loosens the threads between sense perception and sense organs. Petitto's revolution in thinking about language is inseparable from a broader reconceptualization of the body. Petitto locates generally linguistic "brain tissue" as the site of language (70). Rather than a location of language in mouths or particular sections of a brain, the corporeal layers of language make any sort of top-down or bottom-up structure of the body impossible.

Petitto is unflinching in her connection between the reconceptualization of language and the body, and the lived realities of sign language users—wider still, the relationship between anatomies of language and the audist establishment. She frames the stakes in the following way: "How irregular it would be to have a human brain that does not discriminate between speech and sign, yet to live in a society that, flying in the face of biological fact, makes laws to discriminate" (Petitto 73). At this juncture, *sensorium commune* might be used as a tool to hold underlying assumptions about the body in contact with new research on the body, to hold these layers of "body"—body by way of contemporary neuroscience and body by way of a popular hearing imagination—in contact. Again, Petitto is absolutely clear here on what it means to hold these bodies in contact. Crucially, she concludes:

As a cognitive neuroscientist who has studied the biological foundations of human languages for decades, I believe that it is indefensible to implement public, medical, and educational practices that deny individuals

who are deaf a basic human right—the right to early-life exposure to a natural signed language. (73)

Petitto's demand here is that social and institutional practices be brought into meaningful relationship with the benefits of exposure to signed language for young deaf people.

Hearing languages must not be taken as a universal model of communication.

“Language” need be understood with a view to existences.

Finally, perhaps *sensorium commune* is the general challenge to refuse any single model of embodied life. In the specific context of Deaf Gain, this refusal of a model of course includes a refusal of any kind of singular conception of deafness. In her thoughtful piece “Armchairs and Stares: On the Privation of Deafness” (2014), philosopher Theresa Blankmeyer Burke emphasizes how a Deaf Gain framework needs to take seriously the challenge to locate the gain in all ways of being deaf.⁸ Blankmeyer Burke points to differences of experiences such as those who are born deaf and those who lose their hearing over the course of time, or unexpectedly all at once. She points to the difference of experiences of deaf folks who do not know sign language and communicate orally, and deaf folks who communicate principally with sign but also orally, deaf folks who live in hearing communities and deaf folks who live in both deaf and hearing communities.

These distinctions are of course by no means exhaustive: the point, worth iterating even if it seems obvious, is that there is no single way of being deaf.⁹ Accordingly, Blankmeyer

⁸ Theresa Blankmeyer Burke is a philosophy professor at the University of Gallaudet, in Washington D.C. (a fully Bilingual—ASL and English—liberal arts university). Some of her present work examines what it means to do philosophy in the context of deaf cultures and perspectives, and in signed languages. Further, Blankmeyer Burke “is the first signing Deaf woman in the world to receive a Ph.D. in philosophy, having accessed her graduate education through American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, and occasionally through realtime captioning (CART)” (Teresa Blankmeyer Burke, PhD).

⁹ One common strategy for locating difference in discussions about deafness is the convention of distinguishing between deaf and Deaf (lower-case or upper-case d-deaf). The former is often used to refer

Burke is interested in the experiences of deaf folks who speech-read. The existence of speech-readers who do not sign and who operate principally if not entirely in hearing worlds, is often overlooked by theory that emphasizes deafness as a cultural and linguistic affiliation.

Speech-reading “encompasses the ability to comprehend human speech visually.” It requires attendance to the shape of the mouth, inflections on the face as a whole, as well as stresses in the neck. It requires extensive knowledge of the language spoken, knowledge of the “social context and settings,” and a prior familiarity with the speaker always helps too (Blankmeyer Burke 14). Burke emphasizes the immense amount of work and energy that speech-reading requires. It involves concerted attention to the speaker, as well as a patent “cognitive load on working memory” (20). Added to this is the social and emotional work of navigating assumptions and misunderstandings made by hearing interlocutors. Indeed, Blankmeyer Burke tells us how the focused gaze required of the speech-reader is often confused with things such as romantic interest or an especial interest in the subject matter (when in fact “this could be far from the truth” (15)). All of these considerations, for Blankmeyer Burke, inhere in “the gaze” of the speech-reader, in the way that they navigate communication through a particular manner of perceiving their interlocutor. The complexity of the speech-reader’s gaze makes a reduction of seeing-ness to a mechanical operation, an operation like any other eye’s, simply untenable. The untenability of the reduction of perception to a familiar pre-figured model prompts an alternative way to address the speech-reader’s gaze. Blankmeyer Burke reflects:

to “the audiological condition of hearing variation typically characterized as hearing loss,” the latter refers to “the sociolinguistic community of signed-language users” (Blankmeyer Burke 21).

I am interested in the speech-reader's experience: When a person's engagement with other people always involves this intense gaze, what does this do to the speech-reader? How does it affect that person's notions of intimacy? What can a speech-reader tell us about the interactions between intimacy, eye gaze, and bonding after infancy and outside of relationships such as those with lovers and family members? (15)

Blankmeyer Burke's call for attention to experiences of speech-reading is her location of perception in the wider field of relations of which the perceiving subject is a part. It can also be read as the co-existence of perception with other dimensions of embodied life in general—the intermingling of seeing, for example, with a sense of feeling close to another person. We might say that in the same way that *sensorium commune* requires one to think about the plurality of perceptions within a body, the experiences of speech-readers brings us to consider a plurality of gazes, a plurality of ways to listen, to touch, and so on.

1.5 Conclusion

In a curious way, while *sensorium commune* is a description of the perceiving subject prior to abstract discussions of perception at the level of “seeing” or “hearing,” my reflections on the concept have led to an attention to more familiar pictures of perception—perception in the ordinary way that we co-exist with others, in the context of more everyday activities like having a conversation and going for a walk. The personal as opposed to pre-personal, it seems, has re-entered the imaginative field of this chapter rather quickly. That considerations of more familiar experiences of perception have surfaced in this study of *sensorium commune* does not suggest that the concept itself is

not worth pursuing or that in testing it out it has somehow failed. Quite the contrary, I would like to suggest. In thinking alongside *sensorium commune* we have moved beyond a reduction of perception as an organization of sense impressions, we have dumped an all-knowing perceiver, and we have taken seriously questions about what it means to be a perceiver living in contact with other perceivers. My above reflections on Deaf Gain do not repeat familiar tropes of perception such as hearingness + sound, or speech + language but rather bring out rich textures of perceptual experience that involve different perspectives on space, the location of language, and intimacy. The above reflections emphasize textures of experience that are made invisible by normative hearing conceptions of how to perceive and move in the world. The conversation opened up between Deaf Gain and *sensorium commune* makes clear how in perceiving, one always exceeds an anatomy of the five senses as well as an object-body in general.

And yet, *sensorium commune* should not be proffered as more than what it is. It does not describe the positive content of any kind of universal experience, nor would I like to suggest that it offers some kind of map to understand embodied life in general. More positively, it seems that *sensorium commune* is helpful for projects that aim to complicate thought about perception. How does *sensorium commune* encourage conceptualizing the plurality of perception? It makes perception as isolated from the complexities of embodied interpersonal life and the specificities of various socio-cultural matrices of power, un-imaginable.

Chapter 2

2 Affective Attunement and the Limits of Perception

Merleau-Ponty writes that to love another person is “necessarily an alienating” experience—to love “tears me away from my lone self and creates instead a mixture of myself and other” (“The Child's” 154-5). However, one need not even bother falling in love in order to come face to face with the way that existence is inescapably a kind of mixing with other people. At all times, I exist *in relation*. At stake in the reality that no one is a lone self is the extent to which in shared existence I am still different from, and in a relationship of limit with, others.

For Merleau-Ponty, the key to navigating this relation lies in part through insight into the very structure of perception. In the same way that my existence is in contingency with the lives of other people, perception is in contingency with other parts of the “intentional fabric of life” (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 53). This fabric is the intertwining of affect, perception, motricity, and reflection (137). My perception is not an operation in isolation with itself—a lone sensing—it is constituted, rather, by things such as the particular questions that I bring to the world. The intertwinement of perception and other parts of a body’s life complicates the way that I might locate the precise limits of my perception. Here I aim to reflect on the nature of the limits of perception through a sustained engagement with the social relational concept of affective attunement.

The attunement of affect might first be located in Daniel Stern’s *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (1985). Attunement for Stern relates to the traverse of affects across bodies in the context of an infant-guardian relationship. Brian Massumi and

Erin Manning are two contemporary theorists who draw from Stern, but who take up attunement in further contexts. In this chapter I engage with Massumi's description of the concept, in particular as found in *Power at the End of the Economy* (2015) and in the collection *Politics of Affect* (2015). Massumi emphasizes the importance of attunement across collective fields.

I begin with an examination of affectivity in both Merleau-Ponty's 1960 lecture, "The Child's Relations with Others," and Stern's writing on affect attunement. Merleau-Ponty and Stern stress how affect and perception are in relation through the very contingency of existence. Second, I present a different account of the relationship between affect and perception through reflection on some of Erin Manning's critiques of the limits of Merleau-Ponty's conception of embodied relation. Third, I present Massumi's concept of affective attunement alongside his account of affective politics. My engagement with both Manning and Massumi pivots atop their description of affect as excess. I use the excess of affect as a foil for further thinking about the limits of perception. Finally, in order to clarify differences between the limits of perception and the delimitation of particular perceivers, I look to Daniel Stern's account of amodality. Stern's description of amodal sensing points to the way that the limits of my perception are not solely a product of the functional capacities of individual senses but rather emerge through the structure of my existence as relational, my contingency with both other perceivers as well as other worlds.

Attunement is the curious site of both un-limits and limits. In attuning with others I exceed a lone self. At the same time, I never get outside of the particular body and the particular situation that I find myself in. The upshot of this chapter's tangled web of

affect and perception is that, through attendance to the limits of my perception, the contingency of my own world reveals itself as the very fact that I might perceive and be in the world in new ways.

2.1 Affectivity in Merleau-Ponty and Stern

Merleau-Ponty's interest in experiences of transitivity indexes his wider interest in the way that a subject's very access to the world is made possible through perception. Transitivity, he tells us, is the projection of one's own experience onto another. Merleau-Ponty gives the example of "the hypochondriac" who looks and finds "signs of ill-health in the faces of others" ("Child's" 148). Key in this transitive phenomenon for Merleau-Ponty is the way that the individual's own feeling unwell manifests itself in the very appearance of the world. The individual *sees* illness in the face of another person. For Merleau-Ponty, this example of a self who is somehow literally in front of themselves shows forth the precise condition of being a perceiver: that is, the fundamental inherence of person and world. Contrary to notions of world as observed from above or constituted through reflection, my transitive relationship with the world is the way that I am literally caught up in it—I am not simply in or simply outside of the world. The mixing of self and world is also the fundamental situatedness of the subject.

My being situated is at once both my access to a world, my existence as moving through it, as well as the material way that I am limited to a particular point of view. Merleau-Ponty tells us that "the subject that I am, understood concretely, is inseparable from this particular body and this particular world" (*PhP* 431). Because I am in this particular world, *my* world, I cannot be—nor grasp—*the* world. That I am not the world may appear to be an obvious point. But as the erasure of a sense of the limit of individual

experience is in part what is at stake, as we will see, this point is worth stressing. Experiences of the “dizzying proximity of others” disclose the way that I am not a lone self but a self who is in relation. That these experiences are “limiting situations” discloses the way that, as an embodied subject who is *in relation*, my existence is one of limits (Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s” 154). Daniel Stern’s concept of affective attunement provides key details on the affective textures of relational existence.

Attunement in Stern refers to the magic-like movement of affects from one body to another. For example, he tells us, notice the way that as an infant “opens her face” up and then closes it down, her guardian “responds by intoning ‘Yeah,’ with the pitch line that rises and falls as the volume crescendos and decrescendos” (Stern 140). Attunement is the simultaneous movement of the infant’s face and the change of intonation and volume in the guardian’s voice. In a further example, Stern tells us of an infant who reaches for his toy. Simultaneous to the extension of his arm, the guardian sounds “uuuuuh . . . uuuuuh!”—the volume of the guardian’s exclamations as well as the intensity “matches the infant’s accelerating physical effort” (140). What is marvellous for Stern about both of these examples of attunement is that they are snapshots of interpersonal communion.

Interpersonal communion, like limiting situations, bring to the fore our contingency (our contact) with others. Interpersonal communion, Stern tells us, “means to share in another’s experience with no attempt to change what that person is doing or believing” (148).¹⁰ Attunement, in other words, is neither a mirroring of behaviour nor a

¹⁰ Communion is in contradistinction to communication. Stern tells us that communication “generally means to exchange or transmit information with the attempt to alter another’s belief or action system” (148).

concentrated attempt to adjust another's behaviour. It is a pre-reflective openness of relation with another. This relation is punctuated with the particularities of the bodies involved. It is significant that the guardian does not respond with verbal praise to the infant's playing a tune on the trumpet. That the infant cannot play a trumpet but rather expresses themselves in other ways is precisely what makes these experiences of attunement clearly appear. To attune is to be in contact with the limits I share with another. To attune is to share a limit.

Affective attunement indexes parts of interpersonal experience that, while not confined to infant-guardian relationships, are very difficult to locate in the experiences of, for example, adults. For Stern, the non-appearance of attunement in everyday life is attributable to the way that in the advent of language, interpersonal experience becomes mediated by defined senses of self, others, and the articulable parts of shared experience in general. It is not surprising, then, that in Stern's developmental psychology the acquisition of language coincides with the acquisition of notions of self as separate from other selves. He notes that language is a kind of "double edged sword" that, while it facilitates discussion about the ostensible parts of experience, "also makes some parts of experience less shareable with ourselves and with others." Language marks out two kinds of life with others, one "as it is lived" and the other "as it is verbally represented" (Stern 162). This distinction, Stern points out further, maps out into a kind of hierarchy of experience. In this model, experiences associated with verbal representation come to be regarded as "what really happened," while experiences that fall outside of the gamut of shareable representations become alienated, "[t]hey become the nether domains of experience" (163). Affective attunement addresses the nature of interpersonal

relationships in this very nether domain.

Affectivity in Merleau-Ponty and affective attunement in Stern both locate how questions about the limits of perception do not address the factual nature of a body but rather the reality that I am always in relation with a world and others outside of me. This conception of limit as relational rests atop a subject understood as field (a subject in relation with the world as opposed to fundamentally separate from it). As we will see, Massumi's elaboration of affective attunement takes place in the foreground of a conception of affect that self-consciously distances itself from phenomenology in general, as well as the embodied existence in a particular subject. Both Manning and Massumi suggest that the subject of phenomenology is a disembodied one: the phenomenological subject is a consciousness. As my reading of Merleau-Ponty takes as its starting point that his phenomenology exactly thinks beyond such a habit of thought—subject as disembodied and monadic—there is a sense in which my engagement with Manning and Massumi here is somewhat of an awkward one. Nevertheless, what I hope to do below is (1) set up a tension between the excess of affect and the limits of embodied perception; (2) use this tension to argue that attunement *can* be located at the site of embodied perceivers. This latter point is in direct response to Manning and Massumi's suggestion that in order to relate to the new, in order to re-order experience as opposed to re-create it over and over, one needs to leave the phenomenological subject behind. My suggestion is that when we understand a phenomenological subject precisely as a field of relation—an in-mixing of self and world—the possibility to perceive differently persists.

2.2 The “Infinitely More” of Affect

Brian Massumi locates affective attunement as a site of difference. He is interested in the way that a group of bodies can be affected variously by a set of the same affects. An example (though, the following example is my own and not Massumi's) helps to illustrate some of the tenets of his concept of attunement. Affective attunement occurs in the collective field that is a punk show where, as 30 people are gathered and subject to the same volume and vibes, the affectings of these bodies are not uniform. Massumi might point out that while a body comes to be affected in a particular way, it is also the case that it might have been affected in myriad other ways: there are 30 affectings at any given moment and there might have been 30 times a million other affectings. His emphasis on the different ways that a body takes up a relationship with its environment strikes me as markedly phenomenological in tone. Notably, however, affective attunement by way of affect theory insists upon embodied relations that exceed individual experience.

A defining feature of affect is its excess. Manning suggests that affect addresses a relational field that is “infinitely more” than an embodied subject. Affect is the site of a body's being more than itself (Manning 182). Massumi adds that the nature of this *more* is one of “perpetual bodily remainder” (PA 8). A body is not more in the sense that its organs push against its skin; rather, this more is the way that there are myriad possibilities in every affectation. Further, affect is autonomous. It is autonomous “to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is” (“Autonomy” 96). Uncontained, affect is “vaguely but directly experienced, as something more, a more to come, a life overspilling as it gathers itself up

to move on (*PA* 8). The overflow of affect is the way that each action, situation, and feeling teems with the possibility to be reordered or reorganized. A closer examination of what it means to reorder is instructive here.

In “Wondering at the World Directly – or, How Movement Outruns the Subject” (2014) Manning tells us that *Gestalt* is the closest Merleau-Ponty comes to defining “the body as a field of relations” (182). She tells us that Merleau-Ponty was right to emphasize relationship in general; he was wrong, however, to confine all of experience to the whole or parts that *Gestalten* make appear. More specifically, Manning suggests that *Gestalt* in Merleau-Ponty is the structuration of the world from a transcendental position. A different reading of Merleau-Ponty's texts, however, suggests that there is more going on in his description of structure. Manning tells us that a “body is always infinitely more than one [*Gestalt*]” (182). For Manning, a body's excess beyond any single *Gestalt* is its excess of any sort of structure imposed from without. As Manning reads the phenomenological subject to be at a distance from the world, the excess of affect beyond *Gestalt* is also the excess of affect beyond “a certain” “subjectivity or situatedness” (179). To move beyond *Gestalt* for Manning is to move beyond the structure of an individual subject. It is not clear, however, that situated subjectivity cannot also be the site of abiding possibility. It will also be helpful to clarify with a view to Merleau-Ponty what the “individual” nature of an embodied subject might be.

Yes, there is a subject for Merleau-Ponty and this subject is fundamentally situated. What is more, to be a subject is not simply to have a situation—it is to *be* one's situation.¹¹ There is no subject 'of' experience here because I am not a lone subject who is

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty iterates, apparently citing Goethe here: “for each of our circle of friends is what we ourselves are” (“Child's” 148).

somehow inserted into an empirical world. Rather, I am tied up in the world with no hope of getting loose: even in sleep I “can no longer cease 'having it out' with the world” (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 431). If there is no detached consciousness, what is to be concluded about the nature of *Gestalt*? In place of an emphasis on how the body exceeds a *Gestalt*, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the excess of the world beyond the perception of a particular subject. The excess of the world on this count is most importantly its inexhaustibility.¹² This excess is not so much a mark of the empirical limit of my grasp, it is more the fact that the world might appear in innumerable ways.

Gestalt is a spontaneous structure. For Merleau-Ponty *Gestalt* is the way that the world appears as full of meaningful relations prior to the reflections of a subject. The structures of *Gestalten* do not persist outside of time or space; they are constituted, rather, according to the specificities of particular situations and perceivers. The insight of *Gestalt* for Merleau-Ponty is that experience as a whole is not made up of fundamentally individual parts that need unification through consciousness; experience finds wholes already in the world. In this sense, it is not I who overfills the world but rather the world that overfills me. This excess of the world is the very contingency of my situation. In having a situation, I am not confined to a single perspective. I am free to engage new points of view.

The embodied subject in this way is not a self-contained consciousness, they are a field. Merleau-Ponty’s description, “I am a field,” is the guarantee that my being situated is the very possibility of taking up new relations to the world and others (*PhP* 429). That I am a field means that I do not overflow a particular point of view but rather my point of

¹² “I am open to the world, I unquestionably communicate with it, but I do not possess it, it is inexhaustible” (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* lxxx-lxxxi).

view has material limits. This later point, the enmeshing of the limits of my perception with a particular situation, is key. A consideration of reflections on the limitation of field in early twentieth-century German psychology circles is further instructive here.

In the earlier part of the last century there was a percolation of interest in gestalt theory around the observation that different scientific disciplines have radically different ways of literally seeing and accounting for the world. Astronomy, for example, wields telescopes to trace causation in the stars, physics wields mathematics to study forces that move the universe, and biology peers through lenses to study cells far beyond the scope of a naked eye. Is knowledge the stuff of skies or microscope slides? Can it be all of the above, and if so, where is the explanatory muscle that allows for such epistemo-ocular syntheses? The *Gestalt* concept of field in this context addresses the way that each field embodies a different account of world. Recall Wertheimer's famous conclusion that,

to explain and to understand are not different forms of dealing with knowledge but fundamentally identical. And this means: a causal connection is not a mere factual sequence to be memorized like the connection between a name and a telephone number, but is intelligible.

(Koffka 20)

In other words, a subject has no direct or un-mediated access to the world. My explanations of world are always only particular ways of understanding a world that is beyond that which appears as given to me. Field, in this way, is the insight that a knower only knows from a particular point of view. Fields are not objective in the sense that they open out onto an objective world. Fields, rather, are full of contingency.

The contingency of a field is its contact with an inexhaustible world. When

Merleau-Ponty identifies a self as a field, he clarifies that as an embodied subject I too am always beyond total grasp (I cannot, for example, fully grasp myself in reflection). While the subject cannot step outside of experience, it can—through its outward existence and inherence in the world—transcend the givenness of sense organs, as well as the givenness of a world immediately available in the natural attitude. My perception is not prescribed by anatomical or transcendental structures from without. The structure of my existence as field is the possibility to perceive my world in many different ways.

At this juncture, a tension between the infinitely more of an affect that exceeds a situation, and the contingency of an inexhaustible world, appears. Before looking to Stern for ideas about how these tensions contribute to insight into the nature of the limits of embodied perception, it is helpful to reflect on how an emphasis on the more of affect informs Massumi's particular conception of a politics of attunement.

2.3 Affective Attunement, More, Affective Politics

Massumi is clear that affective attunement is not the collapse of difference between bodies. He notes that works associated with what we now might call the “affective turn”—works that take up affect through movements of contagion or imitation, for example—emphasize uniformity across bodies (Massumi, *PA* 56). Affective attunement is theorized in patent contradistinction to this turn to uniformity. It locates the body as a site of potential for different affectings, for difference across a collective field. It is in this conception of the body as a site of potential that Massumi grounds his hope for an affective politics. For Massumi, attunement discloses the way that to be a body is precisely not to be a part of a condition that is “homogenizing;” nor is it to be first and foremost a self by way of a “positioning the individual” (*Power* 115-6). Affective

politics, rather, is a body's tending to less tended to tendencies. For Massumi, it is constituted by gestures of both resistance as well as creativity. While an environment may be full of affects that seek to control a collection of bodies in a homogenizing way, affect churns undercurrent and across bodies as a kind of pure potential. Bodies themselves are the very site at which new ways of being are possible.

Massumi's account of the dynamism of bodies is compelling and exciting. For all his emphasis on difference, however, the extent to which his concept of affective attunement attends to the material ways that particular bodies are affected by particular environments, differently, is unclear. An attention to the environment that a body finds itself in is key to a picture of embodied perception because, as embodied, I am both affected by and affecting *within a particular situation*.¹³ That I am in contingency with my milieu, that I cannot overflow it, means that my world and the possibilities that present themselves to me are mediated by the material difference of my body in relation to others' bodies.

Part of what is at stake in my problematizing the overflow of affect is precisely the relationship between the potential to be in the world in different ways, and the way that what appears as possible to a particular individual is inseparable from the situation that a body finds itself in. In one way, Massumi seems to suggest that the overflow of affect is its excess of any single experience. The "more" of affect is the fact that its potential cannot be located within a particular situation. But if we take Merleau-Ponty's description of the subject as field seriously, the contingency of my experience suggests limits that are not so easily overflowed. Limit here should not be understood as a

¹³ This is a qualification of Massumi's conceptualization of the body as, following Spinoza, a "capacity for affecting or being affected" (PA 3).

determination of an inert body. Limit need be understood, rather, with a view to limiting situations. To be sure, some environments delimit particular bodies more than others. How might we account for this difference, but also attend to the body as a site of creativity and potential?

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of misfitting helps to clarify the way that the limits of a body do not necessarily abide over time but rather are in contingency with the particular environments that bodies find themselves in. Garland-Thomson explains:

fitting is a comfortable and unremarkable majority experience of material anonymity, an unmarked subject position that most of us occupy at some point in life and that often goes unnoticed. When we fit harmoniously and properly into the world, we forget the truth of contingency because the world sustains us. When we experience misfitting and recognize that disjuncture for its political potential, we expose the relational component and the fragility of fitting. Any of us can fit here today and misfit there tomorrow. (597)

That a body might fit into one environment and misfit in another shows up the contingency of the environment itself, the way that the environment is only one iteration of numerous possible environments: environments can be re-ordered. This limit of self and environment, their relationship as a site of both delimitation and possibility, discloses how one's way of gearing into the world is not *the* way. One's way of perceiving is not *the* way to perceive.

In part, what is at issue in my reading of affective attunement is the extent to which perception is intertwined with the wider arc of existence, affect being one part of

this arc. While Manning and Massumi associate the individual with the recreation of experience, the stifling of possible new experience, Garland-Thomson locates in the individual the contingency of all experiences. And yet, while affective attunement requires a conception of the overflowing of the individual, there is also a clear sense in which the kind of politics that Massumi has in mind is the very stuff of embodied subjects being in relation in ordinary ways.

Affective politics rests atop the potential for the new in ordinary gestures.

Massumi clarifies what he has in mind here when he describes how in “a situation of a disaster,” while a “collective rush to safety may block a trajectory,” it might also be the case that “someone may be already spontaneously offering a helping hand, setting up an example to others that works like a kind of propaganda of the deed” (*PA* 120). The reaching out of a hand here is not ideological or calculated, it is political in the “intensely modest way” that the ordinary things that a person does can tie up with new possibilities (*Power* 94). The point here is that these deeds take place in particular situations and in particular bodies; a subject’s inherence in situations is what I have suggested risks getting lost in the emphasis on overflow. A return to Daniel Stern’s chapter on attunement provides further insight into the contingency of affect and embodied perception.

2.4 The Contingency of Attunement

While affective attunement has only been developed in detail in Massumi and Manning more recently, a general interest in Daniel Stern can be traced to as early as 1995 when, in a footnote in “The Autonomy of Affect,” Massumi tells us to “see Stern” for “a brilliant analysis of affect in terms of intensity, vitality, synaesthesia (“amodal perception”), and nonconscious sense of self” (108). In a perhaps interesting way,

between 1995 and affective attunement as Massumi writes about it today, Stern's analysis of vitality affect has been emphasized and amodal perception has shifted to the background. Provisionally, amodal perception is the overlapping of sensory modalities. As we will see, by hovering over amodality, affect and embodied perception explicitly intertwine in interpersonal experience. Affect here does not exceed experience but rather is caught up in its contingency.

As vitality affects are myriad and unbound to any single part of a body, or any particular body for that matter, it is not surprising that Massumi is drawn to them. In contradistinction to the way that an infant might mirror or mimic the gestures of its guardian, Stern emphasizes that affect attunement does not refer to “behavior *per se*, but rather to some aspect of the behavior that reflects the person’s feeling *state*” (142). Stern coins vitality affect to describe feelings that he observes to be patently operative, but which are not adequately addressed by familiar conceptions of affect. He observes that beyond the limits of our “existing lexicon or taxonomy of affects. These elusive qualities [vitality affects] are better captured by dynamic, kinetic terms, such as 'surging,' 'fading away,' 'fleeting,' 'explosive,' 'crescendo,' 'decrescendo,' 'bursting,' 'drawn out,' and so on.” (54). Vitality affects are named in distinction from categorical affects; the latter of which include familiar emotions such as anger, sadness, and joy. Categorical affects are distinct in that they are *outwardly expressed*. Stern’s contention is that this domain of outwardly expressed emotions leaves out a whole gamut of “feeling qualities” that are important to life (55).

Vitality affects are feeling qualities that animate bodies in a more general way. Stern uses the example of a puppet show to describe the generality of these affects. He

points out that while a puppet's body is not expressive in the same way as a human face, it does, all the same, have a particular manner of moving about energetically or lethargically, gracefully or clumsily. The puppet projects a general feeling or way of moving in the world. This manner of comportment, a body's undercurrent feelingness, is an instance of vitality affect (Stern 56). It is important to distinguish between vitality affects and monolithic or all-encompassing feelings (with regard to the latter we might consider, for example, the feeling of being overcome with worry). Vitality affects are myriad and dynamic. They run rampant and are oftentimes difficult to notice at all, let alone effectively describe. Stern observes: "There are a thousand smiles, a thousand getting-out-of-chairs, a thousand variations of performance of any and all behaviors, and each one presents a different vitality affect" (56). While vitality affects may not collect at specific locations in the body, their inhering in outward existence is apparent. Stern's analysis of amodal perception clarifies how this fabric is not the enclosure of an individual but rather the unity of an individual and their milieu.

Amodal perception is the body's capacity to sense across sensory modalities, as well as beyond the body itself. That is, amodal perception is not just an intermingling of the senses, it is also an intermingling of body and world. Stern quotes a passage from Baudelaire's *Correspondences* as illustrative of the connective muscle of perception:

These odors are fresh as the skin of an infant,
Sweet as flutes, green as any grass,
And others, corrupt, rich and triumphant. (155)

Above, amodal perception is the weaving of the taste of sweet sounding odours into a single experience. The green of corruption and the odour of wealth locates the mixture of

a sensing body with a particular social and cultural milieu. In a different instance, Stern cites the operation of amodal perception in parlour games wherein, for example, I might compare a famous person to a dish of food (156). With the dovetailing of the taste of casserole and the personality of a movie star, the extent to which amodal perception is the possibility to sense beyond individual sense organs is clear. The sensory connections featured in parlour games attend to concepts, symbols, and culture. These connections are not the excess of an individual experience; they bring into appearance the relational field that is the embodied subject.

Stern makes it clear that the contingency of perception is inseparable from the contingency of interpersonal experience. In fact, he tells us that the relations of amodal perception are made up of the same *stuff* as affective attunement. Without a doubt: “the capacities for identifying the cross-modal equivalences that make for a perceptually unified world are the same capacities that permit mother and infant to engage in affect attunement and to achieve affective intersubjectivity” (Stern 156). Recall that affectively attuned experience for Stern is part of what he notes as the “nether domains of experience” (163). The contingency of perception and attunement suggests that perception can play a key role in attending to these nether domains.

The limits of my perception are in part informed by my shared existence with other perceivers. Stern tells us that “[t]he range of attunement has some limitations in the contingent world of interpersonal reality” (60). In other words, one’s general feelings and perceptions are delimited by the particularities of shared interpersonal existence. Affective attunement unfolds in relation to particular shared situations. While attunement exceeds a subject as contained (a subject that is not in-mixed with the world but rather

separate from it), it does not exceed a situation nor the way that experiences are mediated by various layers of contingency. Stern's emphasis on limitation in the context of shared existence prompts us to attend to the relationship between the limits of perception and the contingency of perceptual worlds.

2.5 Limits and Worlds

Recently, two students in California won a technology competition for their invention of motion censored gloves that translate ASL into English by way of a computer program. Among other things, these gloves point to a common misunderstanding about the relationship between ASL and English. While the two languages are distinct, the gloves only translate from ASL to English. They leave out, that is, an entire other half of a conversation: the translation of English into ASL which is necessary, for example, for a deaf person who might not know English. Deaf student and activist Alex Lu clarifies some of what is at stake when existential worlds are mediated by narrow assumptions about what it means to communicate with others.

In "Deaf People Don't Need New Communication Tools—Everyone Else Does" (2016) Lu tells us exactly this, that these gloves are not a solution to challenges that non-oral language users face; rather, they are an example of the way that a single way of being in the world is taken as *the* way, as universal. He notes: "From my perspective, it is very strange that so many hearing people willingly overlook the vast and myriad ways through which human beings connect with each other." Here Lu is concerned with the poverty of conceptions of what it means for people to be together. Indeed, an unsettling conclusion we might draw from these gloves is that to be able to speak—specifically, here, to speak English—is what it means to be with other people. At the same time, Lu's

evocation of other ways of being together assures that while environments tend toward the delimitation of the existence of particular bodies, there are also concrete ways in which these limits can be challenged. Lu offers a very simple example of conduct that tends toward more ways instead of a single way of being: hearing people should not expect signers to learn English and wear gloves, they might, rather, consider learning ASL.

Lu further clarifies that there is more at stake here than a lack of interest in ASL. What is baffling is the way that hearing models of language and living are forced onto folks whose ways of being in the world are different in concrete and material ways. The actual contingency of the hearing world is supplanted with a conviction that a hearing world is the world. Lu suggests that to fail to attend to the contingency of one's world is to fail to acknowledge that there are other worlds beyond one's own. He tells us that to re-center the contingency of hearingness and a hearing world "requires acknowledging as a hearing person, you are not the absolute center of the world, and that there are experiences outside of your own that are equally valid" (Lu). To attend to the contingency of my world might take the form of reflection on the way that I find myself fitting and misfitting in different environments. That I fit easily into a conversation because of its very spoken-ness is not indexical of the authority of speech, nor is it the location of speech at the center of all interpersonal relationships. In fitting, rather, I might be critical of the way that my milieu discourages other modalities of language. Every fit is a site of contingency in the sense that it shows up the limits of my world—my relation with others' worlds as well as the socio-cultural milieus and physical environments that I find myself in. This relational structure of contingency discounts the possibility to

overspill my situation. It is also the place where my existence opens up to being affected by the existence of others.

2.6 Conclusion

While it took some leg work to get there, Stern's analysis of amodal perception offers an account of contingency that is sympathetic to the intertwinings that constitute the "intentional fabric" of embodied life as described by Merleau-Ponty (*PhP* 53). An upshot of this puzzle is that affect is a site of possibility and difference precisely because of its contingency in embodied existence. When we understand perception as a structure of relation with world and others, the limits of perception do not abide across situations or time; rather, they shift and adjust according to details such as the places I go, the people I find myself with, or the general tenor of the day. The limits of perception are constituted by the intentional structure of my life as mixed with world and others. While I do not overspill my situation, through being in relation with other ways of being—in attending to ways of being that are not our own, for example—the limits of my own world might shift.

Chapter 3

3 Synaesthesia and the Many Ways of Singing the World

Similar perhaps to the way that to love other people might involve experiences that are both delimiting and full of possibility, there is a curious way in which my very being a body, a situated perceiver, presents itself as a kind of double bind. On the one hand, my being a body is the promise that my existence is here, at this moment, and not inconveniently somewhere else. As a being in the world, there is always meaning literally within reach. On the other hand, it is exactly because I am an embodied perceiver that I cannot step outside of my world. That I cannot escape to a nowhere is significant precisely because in every somewhere, there are material ways in which my situation shapes both the way the world appears to me as well as the possibilities that open up to me there. More clearly, among other things, that I am a body means that I am a body in a particular social and cultural milieu. As my milieu is peppered with normative ideas and habits of perception, part of life as an embodied perceiver is to navigate the ways in which my perception is managed from without.

Critical reflection is an important part of situated perceptual life. While my reflection is of course limited in that it too cannot escape to a nowhere, it does seem to be the case that I can still be thoughtful about particular practices of perception. It seems that through reflection on the limits of my own perception, I might aim to exist in a way that engages further depths of sensuous life—to live in creative relationship to my world, as opposed to in a way that recreates my experience over and over. Indeed, while I cannot transcend *out* of experience, perhaps it is possible to transcend particular habits of

perception. In this chapter I reflect on the possibility for sensuous transcendence at the site of synaesthesia.

Synaesthesia is an intermingling of exteroceptive senses (hearing, taste, touch, smell, sight). My present interest in more everyday instances of synaesthesia is importantly separate from what we might know to be an experience of synaesthesia as a condition wherein one's senses are constantly intermingled. A phenomenological view of the experiences of people who, for example, regularly hear colors or taste sounds, while very important, is beyond the scope of this chapter. Here, rather, I am interested in a more broad construal of synaesthesia. In particular, I hope to address a conceptualization of the communication of the senses beyond the site of a single body. Following from Merleau-Ponty's description of synaesthesia in *Phenomenology of Perception* (specifically in the "Sensing" chapter), I take synaesthesia to be perception that attends to the way that the senses *transcend* their given or apparently static relationship. Merleau-Ponty observes that there is a particular manner in which synesthetic experience brings to the fore everyday-like sensory phenomena that are made invisible by models of sense perception according to, for example, scientific worldviews or classical philosophies of perception. Indeed, he tells us that "[s]ynesthetic perception is the rule, and if we do not notice it, it is because scientific knowledge displaces experience and we have unlearned seeing, hearing, and sensing in general in order to deduce what we ought to see, hear, or sense" (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 238). A conception of synaesthesia as attendance to that which is not given, is key in what follows. Synaesthesia, that is, is of interest to me precisely because it is disclosive of less obvious or emphasized dimensions of a person's experience. In the context of normative models of perception, I am particularly interested

in how I might reflect on the limits of my own sensuous life and pursue practices that put my perception in relation to different ways of being to the world.

I begin with an explication of synaesthesia as found in Merleau-Ponty, with an especial emphasis on synaesthesia as the transcendence of the given-ness of both my senses and a natural attitude toward the world. I then look to his reflections on the habitual body in order to clarify the relationship between transcendence and practice. Next, I engage deaf artist Christine Sun Kim's performance piece *Face Opera ii* (2013), with an attention to what it reveals about the relationship between synesthetic perception and normative perception. I gather insights from the conversation staged between Merleau-Ponty and Kim, and argue that synesthetic perception can be usefully thought alongside more conscious practices of perception, practices that encourage my body's openness to meanings that are not given in my immediate world. The practices that I suggest here are very simple. They include things like attending to the experiences of people who perceive differently than oneself, and seeking out environments where one's perceptual assumptions are made unfamiliar.

3.1 An Explication: Synaesthesia

In addition to his interest in the way that experiences of synaesthesia disclose the manner in which scientific models prescribe sensuous life, Merleau-Ponty is interested in the way that an attention to experiences of synaesthesia make a strict distinction between a given inside-body and a given outside-world, untenable. To be sure, at the heart of the displacement of perceptual experience by the structures of science is a determination to attach sensations from an outside world to discrete organs inside a perceiver. Synesthetic perception makes clear that these operations—the impetus of a kind of morality of

sensing that says “this is what you should be sensing!”—are inadequate to the complexities of a perceiver’s intertwinement with the perceived. The intertwining of perceiver and perceived is a site of synesthetic unity.

The unity of my perceptual experience for Merleau-Ponty is in response to the unity of the perceived. Merleau-Ponty tells us that the “form of a fold in a fabric of linen or of cotton shows us the softness or the dryness of the fiber, and the coolness of the warmth of the fabric” (*PhP* 238). In other words, my senses communicate according to the way that the object appears to hang together as a whole: the sight of the linen touches on its warmth, its folds disclose the give of the material. I do not relate to the object from a position of disembodied thought. Rather, always in relation, my senses reach out of the confines of specific organs and take up forms that they find in the world.

That the senses are related beyond themselves, toward a world that is not fundamentally separate from the subject, indexes the antecedence of an embodied subject to a thinking subject. The challenge posed to overly empirical accounts of perception is to account for the fact that in experiences of synaesthesia “*the subject tells us that he has a sound and a color at the same time: it is the sound itself that he sees, at the place where colors form*” (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 238). Synaesthesia washes over any static model of the senses and requires an attention to the way that the perceptual body exceeds the givenness of individual sense organs and sense impressions. That the senses are not at rest in themselves is both their very coming alive in perception, as well as their making it very difficult to pen a precise account of how and what a body will perceive.

While the disclosive nature of individual experience may strike one as an obvious point, a consideration of a non-phenomenological account of synaesthesia clarifies the

extent to which experience is displaced in overly empirical accounts of perception. Consider, for example, the following definition of synaesthesia from neuroscientist Richard Cytowic's popular science book on the topic. Note, in particular, the way that reality is something that unfolds outside the perceiving subject. Cytowic tells us that synaesthesia is:

an *involuntary* joining in which the real information of one sense is accompanied by a perception in another sense. In addition to being involuntary, this additional perception is regarded by the synesthete as real, often outside the body, instead of imagined in the mind's eye . . . It's *reality* and *vividness* are what make synaesthesia so interesting in its violation of conventional perception. (1)

Cytowic's interest in synaesthesia as framed above pivots atop the distinction between an outside empirical world and the inwardness of a perceiver. More specifically, his interest is piqued by the way in which, while synaesthesia is (apparently) *actually* a product of the mind's eye, its sensations pose as if they were representative of an actual world. Cytowic implies here that conventional perception is the channeling of "real information" to its appropriate sense location inside the body. Conventional perception lays out how one *ought* to perceive (according to a specific anatomy of the senses, for example), and dismisses other instances of perception as not only anomalous but, further, somehow detached from reality. For Cytowic, synaesthesia indexes something about the "mind's eye" of a subject. While it may be an interesting aberration, it does not actually show up anything about a subject's world. For Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, synaesthesia is the product of a subject's perceptual comportment as toward the world. Perception is

precisely a taking up of the world, as opposed to observation of the world from a distance (or through an eye in the mind). One lives in a world.

Merleau-Ponty's distinction between the communication of the senses and a more general unity of the senses is notable. Sensuous communication flags the participation of the senses in relationships of signification. Merleau-Ponty understands sensuous signification to be the way that the senses themselves relate to the world beyond relationships that appear as given. My ocular relationship to the world, for example, extends beyond the stimulation of the ocular nerve by particular sight-impressions. The world is meaningful for me the moment that it refers beyond that which is immediately given. To be clear, meaning for Merleau-Ponty consists in the way that things mean beyond themselves. When I point in a particular direction, my gesture is not merely a contraction of muscles and the pulling together of ligaments and tissues but, more broadly, it is my body's relationship to something outside of itself.

In a further example, Merleau-Ponty reflects on the significance of colors for my body. Blue is not a "self-enclosed" state or "indescribable" quality but rather "is what solicits a certain way of looking from me, it is what allows itself to be palpated by a specific movement of my gaze" (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 218). Blue is a provocation; it draws me into a world. In drawing me in, it also draws my vision outside of itself. In its materiality, in its appearance in my world, blue is significant for me. As a particular red might at once be the red of "the tiles of roof tops," "certain terrains near Aix or in Madagascar," "the robes of professors" (VI 132), colors also intertwine with cultural, social, and other significations. Colors can ring with ideas, customs, desires.

Synesthetic perception is a particular transcendence of the body at the site of the

sensible. More specifically, synaesthesia challenges us to not just reconfigure the relationship between the senses, to locate the way my eyes *see* beyond what is given but, further, it requires us to conceptualize the way in which my body as a whole is always beyond itself. Recourse to Jessica Wiskus' description of an experience of synaesthesia, detailed in her recent book *Rhythm of Thought* (2013), is instructive here.

Wiskus recalls standing in the middle of Michaelerplatz, Vienna. She looks up at an effusion of sense:

I could not take my eyes off the colors in the sky; I felt to be immersed within the waves of the sound and color . . . The colors were magnificent, like sonorous gemstones, and I felt that if I were to extend my arm toward them I might catch a bit of their substance. But I could not move; I felt myself to have become nothing other than a second bell tower—the excess of waves from the tones and colors transposed to an excess of emotion, an ecstatic expression. (114-5)

Between the two bells, a third “phantom tone” both appears and resonates (115). The third bell is not the product of an exact synthesis but rather it floats precariously between the two steeples. The synaesthesia of this third tone lies in a felt plenitude, it is a sonorous transcendence of the two given bells. As Wiskus herself becomes steeple-like, she is overtaken, her senses transcend themselves and the objects of her perception move in to haunt her. This haunting is emotional, ecstatic, expressive. It is beautiful, not terrifying. Wiskus’ synesthetic experience in the square is the site of the sensuous transcendences of bells, steeples, sky, and a sensing body. She clarifies: the transcendence of synaesthesia is “neither far away from nor above the sensible, but works

according to a membrane—a fold” (120). Indeed, as Wiskus becomes steeple-like, her body transcends itself through its becoming enfolded with the objects of her perception. Her sensuous transcendence is not that of an escape, it is rather a gearing into folds of her world that do not readily appear.

The above descriptions of synaesthesia—(1) synaesthesia as experience prior to and in excess of the imposition of cognitive structures, (2) as the communication of perceiver and perceived, (3) as the senses' participation in signification, (4) and as instances of transcendence—make clear that the relationships between the senses are precisely communicative in a situational as opposed to an abiding structural way. There are dimensions of synaesthesia that remain to be clarified. In particular: What is the relationship between the significations of sensuous experience, and general ways of sensing that my body has sedimented over time? Merleau-Ponty's discussion of habit helps to unpack the nuance of the relationship between transcendent and historical textures of my body. A view to habit elucidates the relationship between synesthetic perception and perceptual pasts.

3.2 Bodily Transcendences

Habit indexes the capacity of my pre-reflective body to understand the world through structures that it embodies over time. My habitual body understands structures that it has “sedimented;” that is, structures that it has pre-reflectively taken up in its corporeal textures. The know-how of the habitual body precedes all understanding by way of “mental operations” (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 131). Merleau-Ponty qualifies that sedimentation of a world is only possible “if a multitude of intentional threads run out toward it from my body” (132). Habit, we can conclude, is constituted through my

intentional existence toward the world. Habit is the product of my body's gearing into the world. In this way, habits are an example of familiarity held “in my hand” or “in my legs” (131). Habit is the way that my hands and legs gear into the world without my direction or conscious willing.

The intentional structure of habit is evident in the movements of the typist. Their ability to type is not the product of something *inside* of their body but rather as they type the keyboard becomes part of their motor and sensory reach: “[t]he subject who learns to type literally incorporates the space of the keyboard into his [their] bodily space” (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 146). Their knowledge of the keyboard is neither the result of concentrated measurements of the length of fingers and the spacing of the keys, nor the imposition of a cognitive structure. In fact, it is the typist’s very fingers that know the keyboard. The typist does not need to think in order to type. The habitual acquisition of the keyboard’s structure means that pinkies and pointers are knowers that reach for particular keys without the intervention of conscious thought. In a similar way, I can walk to school without meditating on how to get there. My body arrives at school not because I have memorized a map of the route or because I have calculated the distance between each turn. I can walk to school without need to think about it because my body knows the landscape. My legs gear into the turns and my body interprets, without the direction of my mind, a path that familiarly unfolds before me.

A second key feature of habit is the way that my body understands beyond my *de facto* situation. The understanding-ness of my habitual body lies in precisely its capacity to carry know-how across different situations. For example, it is because my body knows how to skateboard that when I step onto a friend's board I not need to re-learn the craft

but rather, I need simply step, feel out its particularities, and proceed to coast. My body will feel out the give of the board's bearings, the larger width of the deck, and the smoother glide of its wheels. My legs take up these differences and my stance shifts accordingly. My habitual body's ability to adjust to new situations is its ability to move beyond the given situation wherein I first learned to stand on a board. Each time I skate my body carries with it a know-how that exceeds that particular board, that particular patch of pavement.

Crucially, of course, the histories that our habits embody are not determinative. Not only might I choose to ride a skateboard with my right foot forward instead of my left, I might otherwise decide to ride crouched as low as I can, or with my eyes closed. I can sediment new skateboarding structures if I practice these new stances over time. The point here is that habits do not close down the possible number of ways I might throw myself onto a skateboard. Nor do habits close down the possibility to imagine new ways to skateboard in general. They do, however, make possible my ability to skate without having to assess and calculate how exactly to go about skating each time I step on a board. I know how to skate when I can ride without thinking about it. In sum, while habits open out onto a future, they can also change and shift.

The above reflections on habit present a clear picture of how, as an embodied subject, I am able to move and sense in a way that transcends the given-ness of my situation. In the same way that my fingers or my legs become sedimented to practices of typing and skateboarding, there are ways in which my eyes and ears become sedimented to particular practices of seeing and hearing.

My openness to everyday experiences of synaesthesia—experiences wherein the

intermingling of my senses appears to me in an especial way—seems to correlate with my being willing to take up a distance from perceptions that seem the most familiar to me. What is more, the imposition of cognitive structures might itself be understood as a habit that need be sedimented otherwise from—a habit that I can reflect upon, and aim to perceive beyond. The possibility of taking up a distance from the sensuous familiar lies in the fact that perception itself is not an operation in isolation from other sensuous parts of my life but rather is part of a larger configuration of sensings held together in the “intentional arc” of the subject (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 137). Indeed, synaesthesia prompts us to think about what else perception is in communication with. Merleau-Ponty tells us that as being toward the world, my intentional structure is constituted by an arc that interweaves perceptions, affects, motricity, and reflection (137). Existence is constituted by the communication of these intentional fields, and this is what is meant in his suggestion that “sensorial functions by themselves do not make me exist in the world” (168). Perception, that is, is only living when it is in communication with other valences of intentional existence. In the same way that my sight of an object is not limited to sight sense impressions but rather is informed by a larger dialogue between the senses, perception itself is not an isolated operation.

The intertwinings of intentional existence disclose themselves in very ordinary ways. I know from experience that the velvet of the chesterfield only feels velvety when I run my hands over it. The softness of a loaf of bread only feels soft when I meet it with a squeeze and the question: How fresh are you? At this juncture it does not seem too far a stretch to suggest that at the same time that synaesthesia indexes the communication of senses which together animate my perception, it also discloses the communication of

these intentional structures that together animate my existence.

I am particularly interested in synesthetic communication at the site of sensuous life and the reflections that I bring to said life. It seems to be the case that through the communication of perception and reflection, it is possible to be thoughtful about practices of perception that do not simply recreate my perceptual experience but rather push the very limits of my experiential world. It also seems to be the case that it is through attuning to the know-how of my habitual body, that the very content of my reflections may be transformed. To be sure, a chiasmic relationship between perception and reflection is what is at stake here. The challenge is to locate this chiasmic relationship with specific social practices that inevitably shape my perceptual life. While I may elect to take up a different set of beliefs about the world, a unique feature of my sensuous existence is precisely that I cannot will my perceptions to be different (Dreyfus and Dreyfus xi). If my perception cannot be willed otherwise, how does it come to shift over time? The sedimentation of new structures of perception requires a kind of practice in the same way that, for example, to learn to walk in a different way requires practice. What kind of conscious practices are linked with perceiving in a different way? What does a kind of *critical perception* look like—a perception that becomes aware of its limits and positions itself to transcend those very limits?

3.3 Learning from other Perceivers

It is important to emphasize that the intertwining of the senses in experiences of synaesthesia is not the collapse of all difference between the senses. Merleau-Ponty reflects that “[t]he blind person's world and the world of the normal person differ not merely in the quantity of matter available to them, but moreover in the *structure* of the

whole” (*PhP* 233). Of course, the problems of Merleau-Ponty's equation of seeing-ness with normality should not be lost on us here. What is more, in one way, Merleau-Ponty's point is that the structure of experience is determined by “the sensory itself.” structure appears to the subject, it is not endowed by a subject's intellect (234). In a further way, he suggests that while we can live in existentially shared worlds, and communicate with and share our lives with others, every perceiver gears into the world in a distinct way. A quantitative comparison of perception, a comparison with a view to *how many* senses one has, for example, covers over how to perceive is always to perceive as a whole. The whole of perception here should be understood as a particular person's ways of gearing into the world. Blindness on Merleau-Ponty's count guarantees access to a world through a particular perceptual structure. And, of course, this perceptual structure is also constituted by a communication of the senses.

A clear upshot of this assurance of perceptual difference is that while my deaf friend may describe their experiences to me and I may reflect on the way that sound appears to them in their world, I can only get at an “apparent communication between [our] different experience” (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 234). I can think about, for example, what it might be like to be most sensuously aware of loud sound through my organ of skin. However, as my relationship here is confined to thought, I cannot *experience* my friend's world in the same way that they experience it. Crucially, and this is key, this is not to say that I cannot be moved by reflective experiences upon others' sensory worlds. Indeed, it is through conversations with my friend about our respective worlds, that my own opens up in new ways. Another person's sensory world can enliven my own sensuous life with new questions and reflections.

The following description by deaf multi-disciplinary artist Jon Savage on collaborative filmmaking with his hearing filmmaker father, illustrates in a more concrete way the dovetailing of differences between worlds, and practices of perception that take seriously the challenge to push the limits of what appears as most given about one's world. Note the way that Savage prompts his father to literally see past what appears to the latter as foreground, as the givenness of a scene:

I see some of his film with dull colors and asked him, 'Why not make it more vivid?' In a wide-shot scene with a lot of people walking around, I suggested, why not put stronger colors around the key character to draw out the audience's eyes to that character? His answer was, 'I never thought of that.' The reason is he was so busy balancing the sounds and the pictures within the film and figuring how to make the audience follow the key character in the film. (Witteborg 489)

Savage notes that his father has had much longer experience in the trade, and subsequently is surprised that the latter had not thought about the suggestions he points out. Such expertise is of little matter here, however, as the key to the difference between Savage's and his father's techniques, Savage later notes, is precisely in the way that their respective perceptual orientations take up the world on the screen—wider, the lived world—in different ways. Savage is drawn to the way that colors hang together in the frame, while his father looks for the meshing together of sound and movement. Deaf filmmaker Wayne Betts Jr. iterates these types of perceptual differences when he says Deaf filmmakers “make visual music for the eyes to carry viewers softly and smoothly through the film. We do not need sounds—we know how to work for the eyes”

(Witteborg 479). The father heeds Savage's insights and the givenness of the film's foreground shifts for a moment in a way that, without Savage's cue, it might never have. We can call this attendance to different appearances of world, prompted through conversations with other perceivers, a particular practice of being open to new foregrounds and backgrounds. The shiftiness of appearances here is inseparable from experiences of the transcendence of a given world as exemplified in experiences of synaesthesia.

In a further example, the following reflections from artist Christine Sun Kim (whose *Face Opera ii* I will address in detail below) shows up a different set of social practices that link up with perceptual life. Kim, who was born deaf, spends a lot of time posing questions about, and making art around, sound. In particular, Kim is interested in the way that sound is managed in hearing cultures and languages. Commenting on her experiences of studying sound as a fine arts student at Stony Brook University (SUNY), Kim tells us:

In graduate school some classmates from the sound department gave me a lot of shit. And I think the perception was they'd been working on music and sound for years and years and here I am, you know, I just kind of show up, and so people were kind of looking at me like, 'What are you bringing to this?' and I have to deserve and earn their respect. (qtd. in Auld)

Similar to the assumption that underpins Savage's initial surprise at his father's comment, here the way that cognitive knowledge of sound tends to be elevated above perceptual experiences of sound is clear. Of course, crucially, a further layer to this hierarchy of

knowledge emerges in Kim's case as the elevation of hearing experiences of sound over deaf experiences is undoubtedly in the background of the “shit” that her hearing peers give her. In commenting on the significance of Kim's work on sound at Stony Brook, Deaf artist Monique Holt comments that “[t]he department chair was stunned and didn’t know what to do with her” (Witteborg 487). That the department didn’t know what to do with Kim in part indexes the way that knowledge of sound is institutionalized according to normative relationships to sound (for example, strictly audiological relationships to sound). What is more, that Kim caused bafflement indexes the way that her work brings the contingency of hearing relationships to sound to the fore. Kim's work shows the unfoundedness of the ear’s authority over sound; further, the unfoundedness of hearing folk’s purchase on sound. The synesthetic perceptions prompted by Kim’s artwork attend to experiences of sound that are made invisible by hearing structures of perception.

3.4 Synesthetic Perception & Christine Sun Kim

Christine Sun Kim is a deaf, Asian-American multi-disciplinary artist whose practice includes visual, experimental sound, and performance art. Contrary to hearing assumptions that mark deafness as a lack of relationship to sound, as a life in “silence,” Kim’s work brings to the fore the way that she has always had a relationship to sound. Her art is not about life without sound but rather is an expression of her lived experiences of sound.

Kim's *Face Opera ii* was performed at an all-day event in May 2013 hosted by the Calder Foundation at The High Line Hotel in New York City.¹⁴ *Face Opera ii* is a choral

¹⁴ The performance was recorded by video camera and the footage, edited by Kim, can be found on the artist's website: www.christinesunkim.com.

performance by nine pre-lingually deaf individuals: Christine Sun Kim, Andrew Fisher, Darren Fudenske, Alexandria Wailes, Douglas Ridloff, Lauren Ridloff, Patricia Ordonez, Christopher Tester and Carmen King.¹⁵ In the piece, the actors “take turns in acting as a choir ‘singer’ or conductor through the use of face markers or visual nuances (eyebrows, mouth, cheeks, eyes) to ‘sing’ without actually using their hands” (Face Opera ii). The piece consists of five acts: my engagement here is limited to the first act only.

Attending to the piece, it strikes me that I am not able to take in the words on Kim’s screen and the faces of the singers at once. The two do not fit into a single foreground of my field of vision; I find myself almost comically rushing to read the word and then to read the word in the actors’ faces. The gesturing faces, shoulders, and necks themselves catch my eyes. But I also feel my eyes slipping back to the words, to make sure that I ‘get’ the gestures. Have I missed the song?

To take my eyes off the choir is to miss the facility with which the performers shift from pose to pose. It is to try and connect the words and the gestures by way of a second order reflection as opposed to taking up the gestures for what they are. The gestures are remarkable in their unison. While I am familiar with the auditory sounding of voices in unison, the unison of the faces strikes me as unfamiliar. The unison has the effect of a kind of corporeal amplification. The postures are louder precisely because they are embodied seven times over. Each singer responds to the conductor in a way that is practiced and choreographed, but that is also reactive and somewhat improvisational. There is structure to the choir’s performance, but also literal flexibility.

¹⁵ “Pre-lingually deaf” means that these individuals were either born deaf, or they became deaf prior to learning a language.

Very quickly my gaze seems to shift from an awkward back and forth between word and faces, to a more general understanding or comprehension of the choir's rhythms. I worry less about the words and notice the movement of eyebrows, the shapes of their mouths, the way that necks and shoulders effortlessly throw themselves. A rhythm collects in the singers' torsos and in the bounce of their stance. The more I watch, the more the choreography appears as less practised and somehow more conversational. As words repeat and gestures repeat, I do not need to connect the two so much as the gestures seem to embody the words. VOID takes up shape in oval-shaped mouths and wide eyes, SICK is a tongue-out-of-mouth exhaustion. A kind of "communicational current" appears on stage as the words take on patently embodied and situated meanings (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 193). This current resonates with Merleau-Ponty's more general observations about how gestures mean.

Citing the example of an angry friend, Merleau-Ponty points out how I *see* the anger in their face and hand gestures, anger is a conduct toward the world and not something inside the subject to be interpreted from without (Merleau-Ponty must not have had very many passive aggressive friends). My body perceives the meaning of these gestures precisely because my body knows anger, my body knows happiness. Importantly, my recognition of anger in a face does not follow from a kind of universality of the angry face, an innate knowledge, but rather according to the way that I have learned angry faces in my particular social and cultural milieu (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 194-5). What is more, I know the way that the particular faces of friends are angry in their particular ways. To see anger on a face is to locate meaning in its current. The learnedness of gestures, as well as the appearance of meaning in particular contexts,

comes to the fore in Kim's opera.

The faces of this opera strike me as full of tongue and cheek. At the site of the transcendence of singing beyond the given-ness of voiced singing, Kim's choir clarifies how we might think about synaesthesia in a way that makes trouble for normative models of sensing. This opera put on by a group of deaf folks who sing without even using their hands, who embody the meaning of words without even lifting a finger, is a blow to the hierarchical structure that assumes spoken and written language to be better or more expressive than signed languages. The perception of meaning and rhythm in the facial and body movements of the singers shows up the absurdity of a notion that says that to speak is the only way to sing the world. As the audience makes sense of the words in the gestures, less obvious features of ASL (its non-manual components, for example) become the center of an opera about the constitution of meaning not at the sound of words but rather in the movement of faces and bodies in rhythm. As the opera makes sense before my eyes, I see a grammar that is precisely one way to sing the world in the same way that, as Merleau-Ponty observes, "words, vowels, and phonemes are so many ways of singing the world" (*PhP* 193).

The proliferation of ways to sing the world is a product of the fact that meaning is in the world and not outside of it. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty tells us that language, "in the end, says nothing other than itself . . . its sense is . . . not separable from it" (*PhP* 194). Gesture in general is an excellent example of the appearance of this materiality of language. When Kim makes a relationship between words and faces appear, she Kim severs audist assumptions about the nature of language: the assumption, for example, that signed languages are less expressive than spoken words. What is more, she emphasizes a

field of expressiveness that, to an oral language user, does not appear in the foreground. At the sight of a face singing I reflect on the way that the sounds of singing are often what draw my attention. Here, the many-ness of ways to sing the world opens a space for pause on how I have sedimented certain manners of singing, certain ways of attending to singing, and that through my body's ability to transcend that which appears as given to me, I might gear into new songs.

My interest in the limits of one's perceptual world, the plurality of modes of singing and the possibility to be in the world in different ways, hinges atop a faith in the possibility of practices of perception that attend to “phenomena that have previously been passed over, silenced, or made invisible within imposed discursive and meaning making structures” (Fielding, “Open Future” np). What does synaesthesia have to do with the project of attending to that which is outside of my perceptual world, that which does not appear, that which falls into the background?¹⁶ While synaesthesia is the site of pre-reflective knowing, what does it mean for the way that I reflect on perception, the way that I address the “intentional threads” of the normative structures and environments that I find myself in (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* lxxvii)? When Kim reminds us that “it’s not something that hearing people even think about,” that there are “rules” that one follows with regard to sound (qtd. in Song), it is clear that while one cannot see outside of their own perceptual world, they can heed what other perceivers note about the appearances of

¹⁶ The overlooked and un-sensed parts of one’s experience have been written about in a number of different contemporary theoretical contexts. In *Sonic Possible Worlds* (2014), for example, Salomé Voegelin writes about “the inaudible,” parts of experience that are “seemingly inaccessible, because for various reasons we are not equipped or willing to reach and experience them” (158). A second relevant example here is Steve Goodman’s concept of “unsound,” articulated in his *Sonic Warfare* (2010). Unsound “denotes sonic virtuality, the nexus of imperceptible vibration masked due to limitations on not just the deficient physiology of the auditory system, but also the policing of the sensible enacted by groups defined by their affective affinities determined by taste, expertise, or other audiosocial predeterminations such as class, race, gender, and age” (Goodman 191).

world. This is the social practice of perception that is key: to heed to the ways that others' worlds do not iterate my own but rather show up its contingency.

3.5 Worlds and Ways

The existence of sensory *worlds* paired with my ability to sediment new structures of perception raises questions such as: Should I be complacent in my own sensory world? What does it mean to be sensuously open to worlds beyond the world that appears as most given to me? The location of perception within the wider arc of my existence makes clear the way that my sensuous life is not just inflected with particular habits or styles of seeing, hearing and so on but, more broadly, perception is also inflected with the details of my life such as the neighbourhood that I spend the most time, if I live in a place with air-conditioning, what kinds of groceries I can afford, how often I have access to the internet, and what language is my first. The assorted-ness of these factors makes clear that my sensory milieu is inextricable from the wider milieu of my life. Factors such as my class, race, and sexual orientation are complexly tied up with the way that I move through the world, the way that certain spaces might open up to me as a perceiver and embodied subject, while other spaces close down. The communication of the senses is not an interior monologue but rather a key part of the wider arc of my existence toward the world.

The existential structure of perception pushes us to reflect on the intertwining of intentional structures and the structures that manage one's sensuous life from without. The social practices that I have proposed in this chapter are perceptual in that they require a posture of openness to the possibility of the emergence of new foregrounds, an openness to creative sedimentations. What is more, they link up with conscious attention

to ways of being that do not recreate one's experiences of the world but rather make that which seems most given, unfamiliar. The effort to take for granted that there are "many ways of singing the world" requires not just the cognitive recognition of difference but an engagement with manifold ways of being sensuously in the world. Difference can be engaged with perceptually through concrete social practices that attend to the existence of worlds outside of one's own.

The synesthetic moment of transcending one's own world, of experiencing the world in a different way, indexes the potential of synaesthesia as a concept that troubles "the rules" of normative perception. Kim specifically shows us that one way to cause trouble for the rules is to make these rules apparent—to make them visible and open to critique. The differences that show up between worlds are proof of the changeable nature of the present sensible order, and the unfoundedness of its authority. In this way, the significance of these social practices of perception very clearly extends beyond the project of enriching one's individual life and gears into a patently political effort. As well, bringing out the plurality of ways of singing and being in the world challenges the imposition of any kind of singular world. The difference between seeing that which has been calculated to be invisible, and seeing that which is positioned as given, is what is at stake in practicing perception in ways that cause trouble. Synaesthesia as the transcendence of the givenness of a managed sensory world seems to rest atop communication between worlds.

3.6 Conclusion

Kim's embodiment of the insight that there are "so many ways of singing the world" is in part the lesson that we need to be vigilant about the limits of our own world,

and the possibility to engage the world in different ways. The plurality of worlds strikes me as the simultaneous reality that “[t]here is always more to what you are, and to what you are involved in, than you can know. So you try to keep vigilant, seeking the possibilities without scorning the realities” (May 531). The reality of my embodiment as a subject is that my perception always comes up short. I am “condemned” to sense-full experience, but the meanings that appear to me are always only partial and perspectival, never total or comprehensive (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* lxxxiv). My perception is ambiguous, opaque, full of lacunae and textures that are more confusing and unfamiliar than clear and distinct. To be vigilant in relation to the contingency of my own perception is to attend to the way that, as a perceiver who is “open,” I “unquestionably communicate with” a plenitudinous world (lxxx-lxxxix). To be vigilant is to attend to how in living the world, I can gear into it in many different ways.

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