



Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*: A Phenomenology of Racialized Conflict

ABSTRACT: *This article investigates the structure of racialized conflict experience. Embarking from a conflict event in Ta-Nehisi Coates's autobiography Between the World and Me and contrasting the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Alfred Schutz with insights from Black phenomenology, I argue that Coates's experience discloses conflictual, but intertwined, modes of being-in-the-world. Further, it presents an instantiation of a particular kind of conflict, i.e., corporeal conflict. Corporeal conflict applies whenever the body is politicized, i.e., when it becomes the marker for traits representative of a rival political group. Understood this way, racialized conflict is always political. I conclude the article with some remarks on the shortcomings of two dominant conflict theories in political philosophy and the potential for an alternative, phenomenological approach that enables new ways of engaging the other in conflict. The analysis is preceded by a meditation on the role of the White researcher in critical philosophy of race.*

KEYWORDS: conflict, phenomenology, political philosophy, critical philosophy of race

Introduction

In May 2020, White dog owner Amy Cooper called the police over a minor argument she was having with Christian Cooper (not related), a Black birdwatcher, at Central Park in New York City. During the call, Amy Cooper asked for help, because ‘an African-American man’ was ‘threatening [her] life’ (Nir 2020). Subsequently, Chris Cooper’s sister published the video her brother had made of the scene. It sparked uproar and added to the already heightened tensions on racialized injustice of 2020, due to the Louisville Metro Police killing Breonna Taylor and the many similar events in the past. Shortly after the quarrel between Amy Cooper and Chris Cooper, the tensions would erupt after the police killing of George Floyd.

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The video clip from the scene at Central Park is so powerful, Black TV host Trevor Noah comments, because it shows how Amy Cooper ‘blatantly knew how to use the power of her whiteness to threaten the life of another man and his blackness’, and because the video ‘tells you how she perceives the police; it tells you how she perceives . . . her relationship with the police as a white woman; it shows you how she perceives a black man’s relationship with the police, and the police’s relationship with him’ (Noah 2020).

Noah’s remarks point to an important facet of conflict experience: perception and action in conflict are charged with meanings that transcend singular events. And more, they are often charged with structural power asymmetries. Hence, conflict events are not isolated occurrences, but manifestations of the conflicted yet interwoven ways in which citizens of a pluralistic society relate to each other and the world that they share. Crucially, these ways of relating to and interacting with the world are a corporeal enterprise: a person’s body is the junction at which one gears into the world, but it is also where the world moves onto the person, especially in the form of the other.

This essay expands on this emerging phenomenology of racialized conflict by drawing on another instance that resembles the case of Chris Cooper and Amy Cooper. In his autobiographical *Between the World and Me* (2015), Black writer Ta-Nehisi Coates remembers a moment in a movie theater at which his son is physically attacked by a White woman. Understanding Coates’s essay to offer key phenomenological and genealogical insights to racialized conflict, my article begins with introducing the clash in more detail (section 1). In section 2 I then introduce Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of being-toward-the-world and carve out its social dimension to prepare it for a critical reading through the lens of Black phenomenology. I argue that there is a difference between White being-toward-the-world and Black being-toward-the-world, but that these modes of existence are dependent on one another, mediated through the Black body. Further, in section 3 I critically engage with Alfred Schutz’s concept of typification in order to bring out the perceptual patterns of Coates’s conflict event. I reinterpret Schutz’s concept politically: a conflict event is political when typification involves perceiving one’s opponent as representative of a rival or enemy group. Finally, I argue that Coates’s racialized conflict event presents an instantiation of a particular type of conflict that I call ‘corporeal conflict’. Though any conflict involves the body, this type of conflict more narrowly applies whenever the body takes center stage. In corporeal conflict, the body becomes the marker for traits that ‘lie bone-deep’, that is, it functions as a marker for other features of the person that supposedly apply to them ‘naturally’ *qua* membership to a political group. Hence, racialized conflict is always political. I end with some brief remarks on two dominant conflict theories in political philosophy and the potential for a phenomenological approach to conflict.

Before I start, let me mention a couple of important caveats: by investigating a particular person’s conflict experience, one must be careful not to overgeneralize. Coates’s experience of racialized conflict may deviate from the experience of other Black persons. Further, there may be cultural variations of anti-Black racism, as stressed by Frantz Fanon in the case of the United States and France (2008: 172);

there are also crucial distinctions between anti-Black racism, racism against Latinx people, anti-Semitism, and so on. Finally, there are differences between racism and other forms of discrimination, such as sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and their manifold intersections. Keeping all of this in mind, I ask to take the undoubtedly provocative terminology of White and Black being-toward-the-world *cum grano salis*. Yet, I am confident that Coates's experience and thoughts are mirrored in those of other people who are similarly situated and thus illuminate a more general discussion on racialized conflict and, maybe, beyond.

Further, I believe it is important to disclose that it is a White philosopher who is writing this essay. My working on this topic raises a metaphilosophical and ethical question: how to philosophize from a privileged position about the lives of people whose experience is fundamentally different from mine without distorting their experience and without patronizing them? Black philosophers such as Lewis R. Gordon or George Yancy regard it as problematic when the emphatically Black experience of a person is investigated through the lens of a White philosopher: 'The implication—insidious, patronizing, and yet so familiar and presumed—has achieved the force of an axiom: *White intellectuals provide theory; black intellectuals provide experience*' (Gordon 2000: 29, emphasis in original; see also Yancy 2017: 52). In the worst case, this article is guilty of this dualism in not one, but two ways: I, a White philosopher, take it up as my task to *explain* Ta-Nehisi Coates's experience as a Black person, claiming that I know what it is like to be Black in the United States. But even more than that, I draw on ideas from Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Alfred Schutz, White philosophers themselves, to 'make sense' of Black experience.

Gordon urges the academic community to abandon the aforementioned dualism 'for the recognition that black reflections also are theoretical and informative of the human condition' (Gordon 2000: 36). Instead of 'locking' Black authors such as Coates or Fanon in the biographical moment through which they appear as mere providers of data ready for White interpretation, Gordon insists that we take their contribution to philosophy as such seriously (Gordon 2000: 26–29).

This article is an attempt to honor this insight, by learning from Coates, Fanon, Gordon, Yancy, and a number of other authors about the phenomenology of conflict in general and the phenomenology of racialized conflict in particular. My intention is not to let Merleau-Ponty and Schutz 'drown out' these voices, but to use their seminal works on the lived body and social cognition, respectively, as my jumping-off points. Subsequently, I critically interrogate their works, drawing on Black phenomenology to bring out existential differences between Blackness and Whiteness. I am, therefore, not engaged here in what one could call classical phenomenology that *only* attempts to reveal, in a quasi-Husserlian manner, the transcendental structures of conflict impervious to sociohistorical contingency. Rather, my project is one of *critical* phenomenology that also takes into account the quasi-transcendental structures of the contextual (and changeable) social world that have meaningful bearings on experience.¹ Hence, while classical or

¹ At the time of writing this article, the status of critical phenomenology within the philosophical landscape is still hotly debated. In my view, there are four interpretations currently available, which one finds often in entangled

transcendental phenomenology presents a point of departure, disclosing the invariant, existential structures of *any* person's life-world, the job is further to see how these structures manifest in various modulations, established, *inter alia*, by imbalances of power. Here, classical phenomenology engages with other philosophical traditions, most notably critical theory (widely construed). One of the core tenets of critical theory is self-reflexivity (Freyenhagen 2018); this includes reflexively engaging with one's own situatedness and the potential for reformulating key insights of one's theoretical background, which here is classical phenomenology. I hope that this reflexivity becomes visible throughout the article, but especially in the conclusion.

1. The Conflict Event

Ta-Nehisi Coates's book *Between the World and Me* is written as an open letter to his son Samori, published the year after the St. Louis County grand jury had decided not to indict the killer of Michael Brown. In the book, Coates recalls an incident of his son's childhood: Coates goes to the movies with Samori (2015: 93–94). Leaving the theater, Samori slacks a little behind his father and is subsequently pushed by an impatient White woman behind him. Coates notes three aspects of the scene: (1) there is the woman laying 'a hand on the body' of his child; (2) there is his insecurity about his ability to protect his son's 'black body'; (3) and there is the perception of the White woman 'pulling rank', that is, of her expressing her felt superiority as a White person over Coates's child (and Coates himself). Coates reacts with an angry outburst, he yells at the woman with words that are 'hot with all of the moment and all of my history'. She, in turn, shrinks back in shock. Then

form. The first two interpretations are discussed in Guenther (2022): The *abolitionist* reading argues for critical phenomenology as doing away with the methods and key concepts of 'classical' phenomenology, such as the transcendental and eidetic reduction. In this reading, critical phenomenology is decidedly *post*-phenomenological. The *reparative* reading considers critical phenomenology a continuation and update of classical phenomenology, rethinking 'the purpose and practice' of its methods to render them applicable to a new set of sociopolitical research questions (Guenther 2021: 8). Here, phenomenology is not left behind, but modified (see also Davis 2020; Depraz 2022; Guenther 2020; Oksala 2022). The *conservative* reading, unsurprisingly formulated by *some* of the classical phenomenologists, considers critical phenomenology to be superfluous, as these phenomenologists believe its classical 'ancestor' already incorporates all that is 'critical' about critical phenomenology (e.g., Pugliese 2022; Rodemeyer 2022; Steinbock 2022). Without defending my understanding at length in this article, I champion a fourth, *collaborative* reading, of critical phenomenology. This regards the practice in question as an interdisciplinary project between transcendental phenomenology and other forms of inquiry, most notably critical theory (e.g., Guenther 2018: 49; 2021: 8, 10, 20; Heinämaa 2022: 129; Rodemeyer 2022: 105–6; Salamon 2018). This allows for harnessing the strengths of multiple approaches that, indeed, would not be able to grasp and *change* on their own higher-order phenomena of power such as White supremacy or heteronormativity. As truly interdisciplinary, the parties to this collaboration mutually inform and challenge one another, effecting changes in their respective concepts and methods, without thereby questioning the *raison d'être* of either side. This renders critical phenomenology a politically motivated form of *applied* phenomenology (Burch 2021). One question the collaborative reading will have to answer is whether the quasi-transcendental analysis of particular life-worlds, emphatically declared a core tenet of critical phenomenology, is indeed a new creation or was already employed by scholars in the past. While I believe the latter to be the case—e.g., Simone de Beauvoir, Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, and the later Jean-Paul Sartre come to mind—it is not my intention to defend this thesis in this article.

a White man steps in to defend the woman and, supported by a gathering crowd, threatens Coates with calling the police to have him arrested.

To appreciate the racialized *and* political character of Coates's conflict experience, it is necessary to shed light on Coates's observations (2) and (3). Why is the White woman's behavior an expression of 'pulling rank'? And why does Coates feel insecure about his inability to protect his son? Certainly, nobody can protect their child from all dangers of the world. While a certain level of insecurity or uneasiness in light of this fact can be assumed to prevail for any parent, Coates marks his insecurity as particularly significant. As Coates's choice of the book title foreshadows, the conflict event at the movie theater is not merely a singular dispute that could be resolved and forgotten—instead, it is paradigmatic for a generally problematic relationship between Coates and his world. It is a relationship that leaves him with a feeling of powerlessness. And further, this relation to the world crystallizes in the experience of having a Black body—modern US-American racism revolves around it. Body and world, these are the central themes in Coates's book.

2. Black and White Being-toward-the-World

One can frame this relationship between black body and world in terms of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'being-toward-the-world'. As described in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012), being-toward- or being-in-the-world is the pre-objective, action-guided relation between a person and their environment. (Though I use both formulations interchangeably, being-toward-the-world captures more appropriately the ontological difference between a person and an inanimate object as envisioned by Martin Heidegger [2006: §12]: a person [or *Dasein*] is not in the world like an object in a container, but inhabits it and acts toward it in pursuit of a project.) Existence is not about idle observation; in Merleau-Ponty's terms, it is not a matter of 'I think that'. Rather, it is about 'I can' (2012: 139); a person is invested in projects, situated in a milieu in which they encounter challenges to master (84, 103). A person's being-toward-the-world structures the range of their possible actions and experiences; it determines the ways they can perceive of an occurrence and act toward it (2012: 81).

The body is the 'vehicle' (2012: 84) through which one gears into the world. Perceiving a situation and acting in it are concerted bodily operations, directed at the task at hand. Over time, persons learn how typically to solve problems. In short, persons develop *habits*, sedimented meanings that function as a register (Halák 2018: 41) of 'appropriate' moto-perceptual acts. Merleau-Ponty calls this the 'body schema', a prereflective awareness of one's present bodily positions as well as the infinite number of equivalent positions suitable to deal with a given situation (2012: 142; see also Halák 2018: 41–42). For instance, when the phone rings (and provided that I want to answer the call), I have at my disposal a series of bodily comportments: 'I could remain leaning back in my chair provided that I extend my arm further, I could lean forward, or I could even partly stand up' (2012: 150). Similar bodily movements acquire their sense from the task at hand, which links them to similar situations to which they correspond (143).

Yet, remaining at this 'natural' level of the 'purely corporeal' will not bring out the specificities of racialized conflict. Coates is unapologetic that there is a marked difference between Black and White being-toward-the-world. This begins in childhood when, for instance, White children are taught that the world is theirs to command (2015: 89–91), open for their exploration. A Black child, on the other hand, learns to be 'twice as good', to 'accept half as much' (90–91), which is to say not to raise suspicion or even attention, for this could mean the destruction, eradication, of their Black body (2015: 71, 90, 103). To speak with Frantz Fanon, the Black child 'encounters difficulties *in the development of his bodily schema*' (Fanon 2008: 83, my emphasis). Hence, White body and Black body are separated by their respective *social* situation.

Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* accounts for sociality; from birth on, being-in-the-world is being-with-others (2012: 363). This sociality modifies the body schema (147–48). It is a process of 'dilating our being-in-the-world' (145) that begins with appropriating tools and language. For example, hats, automobiles, and canes over time become 'appendages' of the body (144–45). Similarly, acquiring language is tantamount to possessing 'its articulatory and sonorous essence as one of the modulations or one of the possible uses of my body' (186). By extending, adjusting, and enriching their body schema, a person incorporates and carries a whole social world. At the same time, this social world, as Merleau-Ponty writes, 'fall[s] back into being' (2012: 203), that is, the world irrevocably and irreducibly takes on social meaning (see also Alcoff 2006: 184; Al-Saji 2010: 884–85, 2014: 138; Waldenfels 1985: 21, 24f.). We immediately perceive challenges as culturally, politically, religiously, and/or morally meaningful.

Differences between social situations constitute different ways of being-in-the-world (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 55, 62, 110, 125, 141, 482; Spurling 2014: 91, 102), all offering varying scopes of possible action and experience. (Although this point will only come to more explicit fruition in Merleau-Ponty's later works [e.g., 1968, 1995], Watson [2007: 534] argues that traces of these quasi-transcendental influences of sociality on ego can already be found in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty speaks of ego as having '*historical thickness*' and taking up 'a perceptual *tradition*' [2012: 248, my emphasis]; ego is 'a psychological and *historical* structure' [482] and cannot cease to 'think with the cultural instruments *that were provided by my upbringing, my previous efforts, and my history*' [62, all my emphases].) Hence, sociality directly bears on what meaning one is able to find in the world and on how one will act toward it. It is here where one needs to go beyond transcendental phenomenology. As has long been argued by Black phenomenology, it is necessary to interrogate the 'sociogenic' level (Fanon 2008: 4), that is, the *quasi-transcendental* and relatively inert institutions and relations of power that shape experience and coordinate behavior (e.g., Guenther 2021). In the case of racialized conflict, this necessitates understanding the racialized character of the being-toward-the-world of those involved in the conflict: their sociomaterial and historical dimension (Gordon 2000: 10; Haile 2017: 495–96).

Though this insight can be found scattered throughout his *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty focuses on 'triangulating' from pathological cases (most notably

that of Schneider) to the ‘normal’ structures of embodied action (Jackson 2018: 766). The so-called normal body is both able to project unto the world a situation in accordance with their current goals and overarching project, but also to respond adequately to the concrete situation and its demands. Further, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the open-endedness of the relationship between body and world; he stresses the ‘normal’ subject’s ability to break out of habit, to create and play freely (e.g., 2012: 107, 203).

This dynamic of projection and solicitation, however, is decisively what Coates finds to be thwarted in the Black body. Coates urges his son not to think of racism in abstract concepts—not of racial chasm, racial justice, or White supremacy—but in the ‘visceral experience’ that is racism. Racism ‘dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth’ (2015: 10). Hence, the story of the Black body is a story of violence and violability. The world encroaches upon the Black body: it is not a place to roam free, but to be wary in. Space becomes confined and narrows down on the Black body, exemplified in Coates’s citation of Malcolm X’s ‘The Ballot or the Bullet’ speech: ‘If you’re black, you were born in jail’ (Malcolm X quoted in Coates 2015: 36). Further, the ever-present possibility of the Black body being broken shrinks the future to a horizon of imminent threats.

Therefore, Merleau-Ponty is not sufficiently taking into account a misfit between body and world not due to the pathological circumstances of a person, but as a matter of the *sociomaterial* conditions of their situatedness. Although phenomenology rightly observes that *everyone’s* projects are constrained by their concrete situation (2012: 476; see also Heidegger 2006: §38), there are racialized *empirical* (or ontic) particularities the content of which transcendental phenomenology cannot account for: (a) a Black person encounters constraints on their projects and the development of their body schema to a higher degree than White existence (Ahmed 2007; Wieseler 2019). And (b) there *can be no adequate response* to the Black situation to the extent that the Black person can fully master it. Even avoiding potential dangers—for example, by being ‘twice as good’ toward police—is no guarantee that the Black body is safe. As a consequence, a Black person is always rendered aware of their bodiliness. Merleau-Ponty’s key lesson in *Phenomenology* of the central role of the body as the hinge between subject and world is mostly news to a White audience.

Yet, Black and White existence share these quasi-transcendental structures; the latter are intricately interwoven through them. Both share a common history that once again crystallizes in the Black body: through enslavement, the Middle Passage, and slave labor, segregation, lynching, poverty, incarceration and police violence, sickness, and chronic disease, the White person has shown (and still shows to this day) to the Black person that their body is vulnerable, breakable, lesser. But further, White being-toward-the-world is built on and with the Black body; the wealth of the White population in the United States stems from the labor of Black slaves. Coates writes unambiguously:

The spirit and soul are the body and brain, which are destructible . . .
The soul was the body that fed the tobacco, and the spirit the blood

that watered the cotton, and these created the first fruits of the American garden. And the fruits were secured through the bashing of children with stovewood, through hot iron peeling skin away like husk from corn. (2015: 103–4)

In order to reap the fruits of this labor, White plantation owners denied Black persons 'the right to secure and govern [their] own bodies' (2015: 8). They treated the Black body as nothing but 'an object in the midst of other objects' (Fanon 2008: 81), as fixed capital they invested in for returns in sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold (2015: 71). In an important but limited sense, the scope of White being-toward-the-world is entangled with the restriction of the scope of Black being-toward-the-world. (White 'I can' does not translate neatly into Black 'I cannot'. In Heideggerian terms, White and Black existence are not ontological opposites but different modifications of the same being-toward-the-world. This difference is vital because the latter accounts for the common ground between Black and White existence. Only then is change possible.) To put it bluntly, White 'I can' depends and is built on Black 'I cannot'. Hence, commanding, harming, even erasing, the Black body is not transgression, but 'correctly interpreting [White] heritage and legacy' (2015: 10).

This takes us back to the conflict event at the cinema: when the White woman pushes Coates's son Samori at the movie theater, her action is for Coates not a mere act of impatience, but a reenactment of the decisively asymmetrical relationship between Black and White existence. We also see this in the White man's behavior: his exclamation that *he* could have Coates arrested, signals that he is aware of Coates's relationship as a Black man with the police as well as that he knows that he as a White man thereby holds control over Coates.

Further, Coates's insecurity about his inability to protect his son stems from this relationship to the Black body's vulnerability. It creates a looming fear, an *existential* fear (Ratcliffe 2015: 51), that reduces the scope of possible action for the Black person. This fear changes its shape in parenthood: the existential fear of a permanent threat against one's own body is transformed and accompanied by the fear for the child's body. Coates remembers this fear in his father's eyes who scolded and beat his son 'as if someone might steal me away' (2015: 15; see the same phenomenon described by Baldwin [1990] and Whitehead [2017: 8]). It is the same fear Coates feels for his son, whom he would not be able to save from the whims of the police (2015: 90).

It is this particular being-in-the-world, shaped by history and power, that informs Coates's conflict experience at the movie theater. His body carries the whole weight of the conflictual past of racism in the United States. It is Coates's prereflective awareness that he and his son are exposed to the temper of other persons who hold power over them. In the terms of Merleau-Ponty (2012), what is dominant for Coates in the situation at the theater is his body's 'I cannot', and not an 'I can'. (This projection of an 'I cannot', however, is accompanied by projecting an 'I can' of a generic, that is, White, male, heterosexual, and able body [e.g., see Young 1980; Salamon 2012; Al-Saji 2014; Weiss 2017].)

3. Political Typification and Corporeal Conflict

In the previous section, I argued that Coates's conflict event displays historically grown, interrelated, but clashing, ways of relating to the world; these shape the conflict participants' scope of perception and action. Now it is time to gain further access to the structure of the socioperceptual patterns involved in the event. Conflict perception is irreducibly social; it is structured by social meanings falling back onto the world of the body. In the case of Coates's conflict event, the White woman does not push Samori for the individual he is, but because he represents something or somebody. The same holds for Coates's perception of the White woman whose *Whiteness* is key for him to understand the occurrence. *Mutatis mutandis*, Alfred Schutz's notion of *typification* (Schutz 1967; Schutz and Luckmann 1973) proves helpful to illustrate the perceptual role of Whiteness and Blackness.

Before I introduce the concept of typification and its relevance for political conflict in more detail, I should note that Schutz did not develop the political dimension of his social phenomenology (see Gordon 1998), nor did he explicitly work in a normative register (Barber 1991). However, Schutz's ideas have also previously been applied to politically relevant subjects, for instance, to racism and racialization (e.g., see Bernasconi 2000; Embree 2000, 2009; see also a brief discussion in Weiss 2018). More recently, Gros (2020) provides what one can call a prolegomenon to a Schutzian critical phenomenology. I will take a different direction than these authors. For instance, while Bernasconi (2000) and Embree (2000) work with the notion of discrimination that Schutz develops in his essay 'Equality and the Meaning Structure of the Social World' (1976), I emphasize the perspective of Black scholars on the matter. Further, my phenomenological approach to conflict as put forth in my conclusion is arguably more ambitious than Schutz's modest reliance on a 'slow and patient modification' of those socio-perceptual patterns that guide the dominant groups in power (1976: 262).

Returning to the matter at hand, *types* are sedimented subjective experiences of a person's or a group's characteristic body features, motives, actions, speech, and gestures (Schutz and Luckmann 1973: 66–67). Types are, so to speak, abstractions and generalizations—one could also say stereotypes—and typification is the process by which these types fall back on the complex world and simplify experience. They consist of a nexus or web of features (Schutz and Luckmann 1973: 230) that are assumed to appear simultaneously. A phenomenon is meaningful and familiar to me insofar as its features correspond to a type. I then assume (or apperceive) the features that are not yet present in my experience, without any conscious effort (Schutz 1967: 140; see also Taipale 2016: 150). For instance, if I see a dog, the potential of it biting me is apperceived, even if the dog is currently not hostile towards me. The subjective experiences that become types through sedimentation can be made personally, or they can be socially transmitted, for example, from one generation to another (Schutz and Luckmann 1973: 243–44). Therefore, they take part in a shared, transgenerational stock of knowledge.

Corresponding to Merleau-Ponty's idea of moto-perceptual entanglement, types carry practical significance. Schutz argues that types structure face-to-face encounters (Schutz 1967: 167, 169, 185; Schutz and Luckmann 1973: 77), render

social life predictable, and provide routine solutions to everyday problems and situations (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 45; Schutz and Luckmann 1973: 9, 14–15; Zahavi 2014: 146). This renders types also politically relevant: am I debating with a socialist, a liberal, a conservative, an environmentalist, or a Nazi? My perception of the other as a token of a type will influence my attitudes, expectations, and actions toward them.

Schutz insists that types are only of secondary importance and ‘are arranged and subordinated to the living reality’ of the other’s uniqueness in face-to-face encounters (Schutz and Luckmann: 77; see also Schutz 1967: 169). But there are many social situations in which type trumps uniqueness. It is not always necessary to know the other in their entire individuality; often, it suffices to have a ‘vague and approximate grasp’ of the other because one is ‘not even interested in getting to know them more closely and personally’ (Taipale 2016: 144). Gordon calls these moments ‘epistemic closure’; they occur whenever one presumes to have complete knowledge about the phenomenon at hand and thereby close off any effort of further inquiry (2015: 49).

Epistemic closure is a structural feature of political conflict events. People regard themselves as part of a community that shapes their sense of identity (Drummond 2000: 35). This creates a sense of insiders and outsiders (Steinbock 1995: 222–25; Waldenfels 2011: 75–76). A conflict event with these outsiders turns political when they are perceived as representatives of a rival or even enemy group with whom one’s group competes or struggles for power to order and shape the shared world.² This competition for power can proceed along mutually agreeable guardrails (e.g., in the form of fair elections) or *de-rail* into a fight for domination (or even annihilation) of the other.

In a political context, both I and the other in conflict are stand-ins or representatives for our respective groups (see also Waldenfels 2011: 79). Our respective individualities tend to be of secondary concern. (Friendships across political parties provide a curious case that seems to contradict my point. But insofar as the other appears as a friend, they are not perceived of as a political rival. And as long as the other appears as a political rival, they are not a friend—at least for the time being. A conflict event between friends [or lovers], in this sense, does not necessarily start out to be political. However, it always *can* turn

² This conception of the political builds on a phenomenological reappraisal of Ricœur’s political paradox that I cannot fully elaborate here. In short, Ricœur’s approach, as has been noted by Marchart (2008: 38), can be interpreted as an ecumenical fusion of the two mainstream opposing camps in this debate, i.e., the Arendtian and the Schmittian camp. While the former places the political in the free space of public deliberation and joint action (Arendt 1998), the latter insists on the conflictual relation of friend and foe (Schmitt 1932; see also Mouffe 2005). Ricœur places both the moment of political concord in the pursuit of a common goal as well as the divisive fight for power in the autonomous sphere of the political (1998: 247–48, 250, 255). However, *pace* Ricœur, I argue against seeing the potential for agreement as a helpful *myth* in form of the social contract (Ricœur 1998: 252); rather, the event of common deliberation and action, albeit rare, is *one* modulation of the political next to its conflictual flipside. The ontological foundation of both moments is not to be thought of as myth, but to be phenomenologically, almost archaeologically, reconstructed. This reading traces the different political projects of opposing camps back to their origin of a shared world; engaging with it constitutes a shared project in need of further determination. Cooperation and conflict are modes of this process. Hence, a reappraisal of what Ricœur fittingly calls a ‘communal destiny’ (1998: 251) leads to a politicization of the late Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the flesh (Merleau-Ponty 1968).

political once perception of the other is dominated by their representative character.) The prominent feature is the other's (presumed) belongingness to a typified, opposing (or even enemy) collective that has certain features and for which courses of (re-)action are at one's disposal. Once a feature of the other that forms part of a political type comes to my attention, this very type informs my comportment toward that person. For instance, when it becomes clear that the other votes for the party diametrically opposed to mine, we 'know' that we will never agree on many matters, for example, on abortion laws. When two marches clash, one fighting for and the other against the right to abortion, nobody cares about the names or hobbies of members of the opposing camp. It suffices to *see* that they are 'the enemy' to resort to typical courses of action and reaction.

Coates warns his son of political typification when he teaches him that he 'must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies' (2015: 71). But racialized conflict involves a particular form of political typification, corresponding to a particular type of conflict. For while in other conflicts, a type may be activated with an utterance, a gesture, a uniform, epistemic closure in racialized conflict is reached fairly quickly the body already provides enough information for 'appropriate' conflict behavior. There is no need for debate, for exchange of arguments—it is enough to see the other's body to see them as representative. *The body is politicized*. Analogous to Sara Ahmed's observation that the racialized body is the site of social stress (Ahmed 2007: 161), we can say that *racialized conflict is corporeal*—which is to say that the conflict revolves around and manifests in the body.

What types are at play in racialized conflict? According to Black phenomenology, White people 'learn' to see a Black body as representative of 'putative danger, crime, and poverty' (Anderson 2015: 13; see also Yancy 2017: xxxiv, 53). In this way, the Black body becomes a signal for traits that pervade and transcend the individual person, applying to all those the Black body represents and that legitimize an ordering of Black and White existence. This racialized perceptual pattern is also at play in the conflict event at the movie theater. Coates appears to the White woman and the White man as 'criminality itself' (Yancy 2017: xxx).

To interrogate the origin of racialized types, it is necessary to go once again beyond phenomenology and toward genealogy: Coates showed above that Black being-toward-the-world and White being-toward-the-world are interwoven through the treatment of the Black body. To be justified to treat the Black body as an object, to subjugate it, the White person developed a 'new idea'. This is 'the belief in the pre-eminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can correctly organize a society and that they signify deeper attributes, which are indelible' (2015: 7). Hence, basic bodily features were turned into markers. Fanon observes how the children's magazines of his time depict the Black person as 'the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage' (Fanon 2008: 113; see also Yancy 2017: 63). With time, these racialized types shed their historicity and become part of the very fabric of the world: the White person begins to perceive, experience, and live 'the historical, cultural meanings of race as biological, materially real, and natural' (Lee 2014: 7).

Analogous to the types about the Black body, there are types about the White body, for Whiteness stands in for a system that has subjugated, oppressed, and

destroyed Black existence. Regardless of whether a White person is racist, their acts can present an oppressive system. Hence, when Coates sees the White woman pushing his son, he does not see one body mechanically interacting with another. Coates sees racism in action.

However, as with the awareness of one's embodiment (see section 2), there seems to be a difference in awareness of Black and White types. Coates writes that he 'experienced [the White man's stepping in] as his attempt to rescue the damsel *from the beast*' (2015: 94, my emphasis). The semantic proximity to Fanon's quote above is not a coincidence: Coates is well aware of the historically formed types in which he is perceived. Further, as argued earlier, the Black body encounters obstacles to a higher degree than the White body does. George Yancy, drawing on W. E. B. Du Bois, highlights that the incessant bombardment of the Black body with racialized types, the being treated like an object, provokes an inner tension in the Black person, a split between how they see themselves and how they perceive they are seen, a split between experiencing subject and experienced object (Yancy 2017: 79–80; Schutz makes a similar observation when he characterizes discrimination as an alienating imposition of types on the dominated group by the dominating group [1976: 256–57]). This fragmentation is primordial, it occurs within the everyday life-world, prior to any theorization. Hence, an explicit knowledge of racialized types is preceded by an awareness *in statu nascendi*.

A White person, on the other hand, may not be aware that their acts are racist or perceived as such. Coates describes this ignorance in the form of 'the Dream': the Dream, that is the (White) American way of life, a success story of economic affluence, thriving families, and of a functioning and just democracy (2015: 10–11). Coates shows how this narrative covers and omits the traces of systemic racism (2015: 33). For instance, the narrative around the Civil War 'made enslavement into benevolence, white knights of body snatchers, and the mass slaughter of the war into a kind of sport in which one could conclude that both sides conducted their affairs with courage, honor, and élan' (2015: 102).

It is through distortions like these that racialized types become innocuous or even invisible. One can say that a White child learns to dwell within 'the world of white racist practices in such a way that the practices qua racist practices have become invisible' (Yancy 2017: 64). This affects how a White person perceives themselves in a racialized conflict event. For if the White person does not register their racially motivated behavior and reasoning, *qua* covered, as stemming from a particular (and distorted) perspective (see also Ahmed 2007: 156), they believe to speak with universal reason. White superiority comes with moral authority (Anderson 2015: 15–16): putting a Black person 'in their place' is not an act of racism, but morally justified by the 'right' way of life. *Whiteness becomes a disembodied universalist view from nowhere*.

Therefore, the White man's threat toward Coates to call the police is a threat toward a Black man to put him in his place. The White man does not only protect the woman; he protects Whiteness itself, and the police are his allies he can call for reinforcements. Crucially, the White man does not perceive himself as the avenger of Whiteness; instead, he represents the universal voice of reason and decency. To him, the conflict event presents an instance in which a Black man behaves 'out of line'.

4. Conclusion

Corporeal conflicts are conflicts in which the body is politicized; the body is a marker for membership in a rival or enemy group. There are other conflicts that are structurally similar to anti-Black racism. *Mutatis mutandis* (e.g., Alcoff 2006: 164ff.), conflict events involving women, transpersons, or persons with disabilities can always turn political because gendered conflict and conflicts on disability (also) revolve around and are lived through the body.

I do not mean to imply that corporeal conflicts are only about the body. For instance, anti-Black racism is a systemic issue that involves voting rights, political representation, housing, health, education, employment. It involves debates and arguments about facts of the world, about morality, politics, culture, and economics. Citizens may and do disagree on the validity claims to truth and rightness, and this gives individual conflict events the guise of isolated tractability. But Coates's experience of corporeal conflict shows that a conflict can begin prior to debate and disagreement.

Let me close with some (all-too) brief comments on philosophical conflict theory: what does political philosophy have to offer for corporeal conflict? It seems there is a need for improvement: consensus-oriented approaches such as the one developed in John Rawls's political theory (1971, 2001, 2005) need to posit sameness at the expense of difference. They usually do this by way of idealization, thereby discounting actual political experience. For instance, Rawls's famous thought experiment of the original position, designed to construct principles of justice and public—that is, shareable—reasons, abstracts from the worldly contingencies of social status, abilities, and history and places them behind a veil of ignorance (Rawls 1971: 136–32; 2005: 24, 79, 223–24). Once difference is out of the calculation, conflict can be resolved on the level of (reasonable) propositional discourse.

But 'taming' conflict in this way masks that prior to the propositional level of conflict, the experience of conflict is structured by embodied perception. And perception is structured by one's being-in-the-world and the types that form part of its perceptual patterns. Here, breaches and shifts between citizens may occur, and this fractures a presumed common understanding of a conflict's conditions and possible solutions. Neglecting the body and its particularities and focusing on singular propositional claims distorts the reality of conflict. Rawlsians thereby run the risk of entrenching the authority of Whiteness in political philosophy.

Compromise-oriented approaches such as *modus vivendi* theory, on the other hand, seem to fare better at first sight because their realistic outlook aims at bringing political theory 'closer to politics as it is experienced and practised' (Horton 2010: 445, my emphasis). But *modus vivendi* theory might lack the ambition necessary to master racialized conflict: first, it is content with bargaining and negotiation, discounting deeper forms of communication as too demanding (Horton 2006: 163). Second, it prefers peace over justice (e.g., Horton 2006: 162; 2010: 438). But the chant 'No justice, no peace!' is a reminder for White citizens that order alone is insufficient if it depends on neglecting the life-world of the

other. There is no reason to believe in easy solutions, established by old means—*White* means—to particularly pressing conflicts.

What could an alternative, phenomenologically informed, approach to conflict look like? First, it would do away with the often-heard liberal imperative to color blindness. This phenomenologically dubious demand (Alcoff 2006: 180, 185; Al-Saji 2014: 139; Lee 2014: 5ff.) needs to be met with the counter that we *need to see color* in order to get to the heart of the problem. It is through acknowledgment of difference and observation of what this difference elicits in me that I can become aware of the ways the cultural boundaries of my world render the other an enemy, an inferior, a danger to me. Thus, there is already a dialogue at play at the level of perception, a dialogue that needs to be continued at the level of speech (in the sense of Merleau-Ponty's *speaking* speech, [2012: 202]) that readjusts my understanding of a conflict.

Further, as seen with typification, what we call a conflict emerges from and sediments in conflict events. As representatives of our political camp, we hold responsibility for how the story of the conflict will be told once we part ways. What is needed, then, is an approach to conflict that informs an open, responsive, and responsible engagement with the other and their world to enable change.

Traces of such an approach can be found in the later Merleau-Ponty: instead of positing our own viewpoint as universal, he urges us to form a lateral universal with the other, in which self and other and their worlds are put to the test. Such a lateral universal is a general system of reference in which the perspective of myself, the perspective of the other, and 'the mistaken views each has of the other can all find a place' (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 120). Including the mistaken views is essential because only by making them truly *public* in the Arendtian sense of making them visible and audible (Arendt 1998: 50) can we overcome them and master conflict. Otherwise, we fall again into the trap of omitting history-laden parts of our worlds that ultimately inform our respective points of view.

One might argue that simply juxtaposing viewpoints in an all-inclusive system of reference will not help resolve conflict. This is true only if we think that juxtaposition is meant for idle observation. As Merleau-Ponty's later work underlines (1968, 1995), the communal inspection of difference elicits a process of self-transformation. This is captured in Iris Marion Young's conception of asymmetrical reciprocity (Young 1997). It is also at the center of Bernhard Waldenfels's phenomenology of the alien (Waldenfels 1985, 1997, 2011). Truly productive action takes place in an interspace of what is mine and what is other. Through letting the other speak, a fuller view of the shared world comes into being. Hence, the juxtaposition of viewpoints yields epistemic value. A conflict event, then, is an epistemically privileged social encounter because it invites us to suspend our own world and work communally at creating a new one.

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