PHENOMENOLOGIES OF RELATION:
RE-WORLDING GENDER WITH IRIS MARION YOUNG

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This essay reads Iris Marion Young’s foundational essay “Throwing Like a Girl” as one of the first serious attempts to mount a critique of phenomenology’s universal aspirations using its own methods, in order to show that its humanism was deeply, if unknowingly, inflected by gender. I show how Young’s use of Erwin Straus’s and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological methods both extend and challenge their claims, and her how assertions about the particularity of feminine existence call into question some of phenomenology’s deepest convictions about bodily existence in general. Her argument thus uses phenomenology to call into question the phenomenological foundation on which it rests, in a feminist reconsideration of motility, space, intentionality, and transcendence. I conclude by turning to “Throwing Like a Girl: Twenty Years Later” twenty years after its publication and consider the phenomenology of action and relation that Young gestures toward there.

Dans cet article, nous présenterons l’article révolutionnaire d’Iris Marion Young, « Lancer comme une fille », comme l’une des premières tentatives de critiquer les aspirations universelles de la phénoménologie en utilisant ses propres méthodes. Young démontre que l’humanisme de la phénoménologie est profondément (et malgré elle) influencé par le genre. Nous montrerons en quoi le recours par Young aux approches phénoménologiques d’Erwin Straus et de Maurice Merleau-Ponty permet de mettre à l’épreuve leurs thèses. Nous expliquerons ensuite comment son exploration de la spécificité de l’existence féminine met en question les convictions les plus profondes de la phénoménologie concernant l’existence corporelle en général. Ainsi, en examinant la motilité, l’intentionnalité et la transcendance dans une perspective féministe, Young fait appel à la phénoménologie pour questionner les fondements phénoménologiques sur lesquels il repose. Dans un deuxième temps, nous aborderons, vingt ans après sa publication, l’article « Throwing Like a Girl : Twenty Years Later » pour présenter la phénoménologie de l’action et de la relation qui y est esquissée.
It would be impossible to overstate the significance of Iris Marion Young’s 1980 essay “Throwing Like a Girl.”¹ For feminism, it was a scouting mission of sorts, a raiding of the philosophical stacks, one of the first feminist attempts to use phenomenology in a sustained description of feminine comportment to provide an extended account of the real and material consequences of misogyny and patriarchy. For phenomenology, it was one of the first serious attempts to mount a critique of phenomenology’s universal aspirations by using phenomenology’s own methods in order to show that its humanism was deeply, if unknowingly, inflected by gender. Simone de Beauvoir had offered a similar critique of philosophy in *The Second Sex*, unmasking the presumptive masculinity of the ostensibly neutral subject and its shadowy, feminine other. But as Young suggests, Beauvoir’s insistence that woman must be understood through her situation and not merely through her body meant that woman’s embodiment was never quite her focus, and she was often equivocal on both the female body and the phenomenological enterprise. In “Throwing Like a Girl,” Young draws on Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, and Erwin Straus to describe “feminine comportment” anew, and in doing so establishes the beachhead from which feminist phenomenology will launch itself. Young’s use of each of these figures is characterized by a difficult simultaneity, what she will eventually term a “contradictory modality.” She reads them thoroughly and patiently, even as she uses them to take her reader to places that those authors themselves will not venture.

I. Throwing...

Young begins her essay with this sentence: “In discussing the fundamental significance of lateral space, which is one of the unique spatial dimensions generated by the human upright posture, Erwin Straus pauses at ‘the remarkable difference in the manner of throwing of the two sexes.’” (TLG, 27) In Young’s estimation, Straus does not pause for quite long enough, and she wants to know why. If it is indeed true that this difference between the “two sexes” is remarkable, Young asks, ought it not change how we understand not only throwing but also space, relation, and sex itself? She notes the oddity

¹ Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality,” in *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27–45. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as TLG.
that “a perspective which takes body comportment and movement as definitive for the structure and meaning of human lived experience devotes no more than an incidental page to such a ‘remarkable difference’ between masculine and feminine body comportment and style of movement.” (TLG, 28) If men and women are so different, Young suggests, “this should generate for the existential phenomenologist a concern to specify such a differentiation of the modalities of the lived body.” (TLG, 28) Because Straus does not share this concern—he appears to be more interested in the difference of motility and comportment between men and nonhuman animals than between men and women—the task of that specification of differently gendered modalities, as well as articulating the significance of those differences, falls to Young herself. She is taking Straus seriously at the same time that she is taking him to task, for his unexamined presuppositions about gender and baseless claims about women. In particular, she points toward his insistence that a girl throws a ball differently than a man because of “a ‘feminine attitude’ in relation to the world and to space. The difference for him is biologically based, but he denies that it is specifically anatomical.” (TLG, 28)

How should we understand this surprising ambiguity in Straus, his invocation of a biological realm that is not anatomical? For Straus, it is properly an attitude, rather than anything strictly muscular or skeletal, that has dominion over a throw, a walk, or a movement. At some level, Young agrees conceding that “attitude” is paramount in defining movement, nebulous and difficult to define though the attitude may be. If there is a gap between the anatomical and the biological, we might be wary of the misogynist uses to which such a gap might be put. If woman is hampered or hindered in her bodily being by an attitude that describes an “essence,” an essence that is biological but not anatomical, then Straus need not specify in what that essence consists. He can merely assert it. This is the “mysterious essence of femininity” thesis that Beauvoir critiques in the opening lines of The Second Sex, as Young notes a few paragraphs later. However, this gap, this unlocatedness of gender, Young says, can also be read as a “virtue of Straus’s account” (TLG, 28) because it allows for a reading of sexual difference that is not biologically determinist.

But we might also read Young as offering a feminist reversal of Straus’s assessment of feminine movement. She will claim that the differences that characterize feminine motility are anatomical but not biological. That is, she will argue that feminine difference expresses itself anatomically, but that anatomical expression is a result of women’s socialization, rather than emerging from an innate bio-
logical difference. In this, she rejects a conception of biology that would equate it with what is determined, static, and unchanging. She follows Merleau-Ponty in reconfiguring biology as an openness and an aliveness rather than a determinism.

Young aims to attend to the “remarkable” difference that Straus names, that gap between the sexes, describing with specificity not only what it looks like but where it comes from and what its consequences are. Such description calls for a feminist phenomenology that did not quite yet exist at the time when Young was writing. Feminist phenomenology was, we might say, performatively brought into being in “Throwing Like a Girl,” which exists, in Young’s words, as a sort of “prolegomenon.” (TLG, 45) The feminist phenomenology of the kind that Young is doing has important antecedent in Beauvoir’s work, though Young’s concerns are slightly to the side of Beauvoir’s. For Beauvoir, Young contends, woman is defined not by her body but by her situation, and in Beauvoir’s discussions of the body she tends to treat it as a burden. As Young writes: “By largely ignoring the situatedness of the woman’s actual bodily movement and orientation to its surroundings and its world, Beauvoir tends to create the impression that it is woman’s anatomy and physiology as such that at least in part determine her unfree status.” (TLG, 29) In Young’s eyes, Beauvoir “fails to give a place to the status and orientation of the woman’s body as relating to its surroundings in living action.” (TLG, 29) Which makes some sense: whether it is woman’s situation or woman’s body that leads to her condition as unfree, the ideal of transcendence acts as the force that pulls Beauvoir’s analytical attention away from the material body and toward the context in which such a body finds itself. Bodily transcendence becomes both the supposition and the goal of Beauvoir’s descriptive efforts.

Young asks: what if we started from the presupposition that the body is significant as a ground of existence, and not merely something to be transcended or overcome? With her assertion that it is not only significant but indispensable, she “seeks to begin to fill a gap that thus exists both in existential phenomenology and feminist theory.” (TLG, 30) Existential phenomenology attends to the body but is blind about gender. Feminist theory recognizes the importance of gender but is arguing along categorical and programmatic lines in ways that cause it to lose sight of the specificities of bodily being. What would happen, Young asks, if these two methodologies were merged?

This gap between existential phenomenology and feminist theory is laid bare by the prior gap Straus diagnosed, that “remarkable difference” between men and women. To these two gaps Young adds
a third, the gap between woman and world. We will return to this
gap below, noting now only that of the three discontinuities, the gap
between feminine existence and the world is the only of the three
that is in part a product of will, the result of a bodily self-creation.

II. ...Like a Girl

The primary difference between masculine and feminine motility
according to both Straus and Young is that women and girls do not
engage the entirety of their bodies when they throw or when they
move. “When we attempt such tasks, we frequently fail to summon
the full possibilities of our muscular coordination, position, poise,
and bearing. Women tend not to put their whole bodies into en-
gagement in a physical task with the same ease and naturalness as
men.” (TLG, 33) Women do not move or engage their tasks in the
same way as men, but note that in Young’s formulation, this diffe-
rence is doubly removed from biology. Feminine motility is less a
matter of what the body is able to do and more a matter of what the
woman is able to ask of it. They “fail to summon” the full capacity of
their bodies, which remain untapped and thus unknown. And men’s
bodies are characterized by their “ease and naturalness,” in a de-
scription that significantly reverses the familiar equation of women
with nature. If masculine movement is characterized by an ease and
naturalness, a man’s relation to his world will also be one of ease and
naturalness. If feminine movement is hampered and constrained, her
relationship to the world will be too. But the force that constrains
her movement in the first place is her relationship to herself. Her
ability to place herself entirely in her body, and thus her body entire-
ly in the world, is dependent on a kind of projective identification
with herself as an efficacious being. Actual movement, as Young
describes it, is dependent on imaginative capacity. The restriction,
again, is neither anatomical nor biological, but the result of an inabil-
ity to imagine a space in which her movements could be free and
unconstrained: “For many women as they move in sport, a space
surrounds us in imagination that we are not free to move beyond;
the space available to our movement is a constricted space.” (TLG,
33) Imagination, in Young’s reading, becomes a structuring force
enabling bodily movement. Women are less sure that their bodies
are sufficient to the task they might orient toward, whether that be
work or play or sport or simply walking.

If it is a constricted imagination that leads to constricted feminine
movement, the next question might be: how does the feminine
imaginary become constricted in the first place? The answer to that,
Young suggests, is fear. They doubt their own capacity, and they fear getting hurt. As a result, a woman experiences her body, in Young’s evocative phrase, “as a fragile encumbrance.” (TLG, 34) Woman does not “trust the capacity of her body to engage itself in physical relation to things,” which causes her to experience her body as a “burden, which must be dragged and prodded along and at the same time protected.” (TLG, 36) In the remainder of the essay, Young “traces in a provisional way some of the basic modalities of feminine body comportment, manner of moving, and relation in space.” (TLG, 30) She explains that she follows Beauvoir in defining “femininity” as neither essence nor biology but situation:

In accordance with Beauvoir’s understanding, I take “femininity” to designate not a mysterious quality or essence that all women have by virtue of their being biologically female. It is, rather, a set of structures and conditions that delimit the typical situation of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves. Defined as such, it is not necessary that any women be “feminine.” (TLG, 30–31)

So Young sets out to describe the bodily specificities of feminine comportment, but defining femininity requires a significant zoom-out away from both body and place. If femininity names “a set of structures and conditions,” it cannot properly be said to be a characteristic of bodies, even though it may be expressed in bodily form.

Note that femininity emerges in lockstep with typicality, naming both a “typical situation” and the “typical way” such a typical situation would be lived. Indeed, femininity becomes inseparable from typicality, and since typicality exists only as an ideal, femininity finds itself still another step removed from the concrete or the actual. The second half of Young’s definition of femininity particularizes itself by invoking women themselves (though we might ask if it is possible for women to be simultaneously typical and actual). We are thus challenged to consider the relation between the typical and the actual, between structures and living women. If these relationships are not parallel but intermingled, how do they engage one another? Considering these questions “brings intelligibility and significance to certain observable and rather ordinary ways in which women in our society typically comport themselves.” (TLG, 30) But when we ask how it is that women typically comport themselves, the answer turns out to be “differently from the ways that men do.” (TLG, 30) And with this move, gender—or at least gender in the time and place that Young is writing—becomes both binary and oppositional. Women
move this way because they are different from men, who move in another way. At some level, this leaves man unchallenged as the subject for whom women is a differently embodied other. What saves the argument and the essay from falling into such inevitability is the centrality of women to her analysis. She is determined to describe exactly how women move, without assuming a masculine mode of movement, whatever that might be, as a yardstick. To unfold this description, Young calls on Merleau-Ponty’s theorization of the relation between body and world. His claims about this relation, in Young’s assessment, are important for understanding human existence in general. But because he is inattentive to gender, his phenomenology has little to disclose regarding feminine bodily existence. As she puts it: “At a more specific level, however, there is a particular style of bodily comportment that is typical of feminine existence, and this style consists of particular modalities of the structures and conditions of the body’s existence in the world.” (TLG, 31)

As she works to articulate those modalities, two dilemmas emerge. First: on its face, her project appears to be a description of a particular instance of the general principle that phenomenology articulates, elaborating rather than challenging the claims about bodily existence made by Strauss and Merleau-Ponty. But her invocation of “modalities” in describing feminine style, and her insistence that feminine style is disclosive of a relation between a body and its world, means that the very nature of bodily existence itself, in a general sense, is at stake in her claims, and her assertions about the particularity of feminine existence call into question some of phenomenology’s deepest convictions about bodily existence in general. 

Her argument thus uses phenomenology to call into question the phenomenological foundation on which it rests, a dilemma to which we will return below. The second dilemma: if the modalities she describes, and feminine comportment itself, are subject to change depending on the time and place of their expression, what are the consequences of this constant change? Does the contingency of femininity prevent one from drawing any durable claims about the nature of femininity, as well as foreclosing any universal observations about the structure of existence in general?

Young identifies three modalities exhibited by feminine movement: “ambiguous transcendence, an inhibited intentionality, and a discontinuous unity with its surroundings.” (TLG, 35) The female body is a transcendence because it is, as Merleau-Ponty says of the human body in general, a for-itself. It is the location of subjectivity. But the female body, says Young, is ambiguous because its transcendence is “laden with immanence.” (TLG, 36, 41) This is not the
ambiguity that names the condition of bodily existence in general, its necessarily compossible status as both subject and object, both active and passive. Feminine existence “remains in immanence or, better, is overlaid with immanence, even as it moves out toward the world in motions of grasping, manipulating, and so on.” (TLG, 36) If immanence is experienced differently by men and women, it behooves us to look more carefully at its structure. For the male subject, bodily being is rooted in immanence, and he breaks out of it as it moves toward the world. Immanence is the soil from which the embodied subject emerges, the condition of possibility of bodily being, and that condition exists in dialectical tension with the transcendence to which it gives birth. But feminine existence, Young insists, is “overlaid” with immanence. It is not the ground from which she emerges, but that which comes to intervene and hinder or thwart her bids toward transcendence. It is additive, rather than originary. It is not that she remains at the square one of immanence in which all embodied subjects participate, but rather that a kind of afterward immanence intercedes and covers over her, traps her underneath herself. We see evidence of this, Young says, in women’s limited range of motion and lack of full body engagement when performing some action, as compared with men. It is as if, for women, the arm that throws participates in transcendence, while the rest of the body remains in immanence.

Along with ambiguous transcendence, feminine comportment is characterized by inhibited intentionality. Intentionality as understood by phenomenology is the embodied subject’s stretching toward the world with and as an “I can.” In its particular feminine modality, intentionality takes on an inhibited form. She writes: “Feminine bodily existence is an inhibited intentionality, which simultaneously reaches toward a projected end with an ‘I can’ and withholds its full bodily commitment to that end in a self-imposed ‘I cannot.’” (TLG, 36) Of course, every lived body finds its intentionality beckoned by a horizon of possibilities that solicit its I can, and also finds that the world is full of blockages and limitations. Bodily existence realizes itself through moving over or around these instances of I cannot toward the I can, or, conversely, moves through its I can until it comes up against an I cannot. For feminine bodily existence, however, the inhibition consists in the ways in which those two modes are experienced: not sequentially, but simultaneously. As Young puts it, “the same set of possibilities that appears to be correlative to its intention also appears to be a system of frustrations correlative to its hesitancies.” (TLG, 37) It is that compossibility of the impossible and the possible that produces feminine inhibition.
The production of that inhibited feminine comportment at the level of the body emerges from a function of generalization at a more abstracted or idealized level. It is not, as we might expect, that feminine existence feels the particularity of her body as limited and thus understands herself to be so. Rather, the inability emerges from a generalizing and universalizing function. As Young writes: “When the woman enters a task with inhibited intentionality, she projects the possibilities of that task—thus projects an ‘I can’—but projects them merely as the possibilities of ‘someone,’ and not truly her possibilities—and thus projects an ‘I cannot.’” (TLG, 37) The woman facing her task posits the universal, but fails to put herself inside of it. She holds intentionality as a general fact of existence, but is unable to identify with that universality. She is thus, for Young, “overlaid by immanence.”

If we pair Young’s description of an overlaid immanence with her suggestion that it is feminine imagination that hinders feminine embodiment, what results is a picture of femininity hampered by an immanence that is not natural at all, but which overtakes a woman as a result of her imagination, constricted by fear. Such fears, and their cascading and amplifying psychic and bodily effects, are presumably unchosen, resulting in a constriction of feminine motility that is a product of situation rather than will. Yet at other points, Young invokes the language of volition to explain the constrictions of feminine embodiment. In her discussion of inhibited intentionality, she characterizes woman’s style of movement as willed: woman is inhibiting her own intentionality, she is “withholding” her full bodily commitment, she is “underusing” her body’s “real capacity.” Again we are faced with the vexing tangle of the relation between the imagined and the real: what makes that bodily capacity “real,” exactly, if the woman cannot find or access it? We might understand the volitional and the nonvolitional as an important if implicit dualism in Young’s essay, and see involuntary withholding as another of her structuring antinomies of femininity, right alongside ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality, and discontinuous unity. She writes that “women tend to have a latent and sometimes conscious fear of getting hurt, which we bring to a motion.” (TLG, 38) The withholding is both deliberate and reflexive, simultaneously a product of decision and the result of something like an unconscious, and the impossibility of reconciling these two into singularity—is a feminine style of comportment chosen or unchosen?—reflects the suspended conflict visible in the movement itself. The contradiction is legible at the level of motility: “[W]omen frequently move in a contradictory way. Their bodies project an aim to be enacted but at
the same time stiffen against the performance of the task." (TLG, 37)
That conflict is, once again, shown to be a product of the fear resulting from the bodily vulnerabilities particular to gender, a fear that becomes phenomenologically sedimented to the extent that its physical expression—fragility, delicateness, hesitation—is valorized as a positive feminine attribute.

Finally, feminine comportment is characterized by a “discontinuous unity with its surroundings.” (TLG, 35) Merleau-Ponty takes the transcendental subjectivity of the Kantian subject and bestows its “unifying and synthesizing function” on the body. Young reads Merleau-Ponty’s account of the unifying function of perception and intentionality from *Phenomenology of Perception* this way:

Merleau-Ponty gives to the body the unifying and synthesizing function that Kant locates in transcendental subjectivity. By projecting an aim toward which it moves, the body brings unity to and unites itself with its surroundings…. Within the same act in which the body synthesizes its surroundings, moreover, it synthesizes itself. The body synthesis is immediate and primordial. “I do not bring together one by one the parts of my body; this translation and this unification are performed once and for all within me: they are my body itself.” (TLG, 37–38)

Merleau-Ponty claims that the body is this unity, or better yet, this “unification,” as he puts it, neither a noun nor a verb deployed by a willing agent, but a description of the forces, centripetal and centrifugal, that bring the body into being at the edge between self and world. It is a remarkable claim for a number of reasons: the dematerialization of the body, its status as a constant becoming, its abandonment of subjectivity and will in favor of a more indeterminate intertwining, in which the synthetic acts that result in and from body and world are performed not by me but “within me.” Yet for feminine existence, says Young, this unity is discontinuous. Woman is unable to inhabit that unity because she cannot be a for-itself in the same way that a man might be. In her bodily being, she is always lapsing back into an in-itself.

Once again, feminine existence is comprised of an impossible simultaneity, an inhibitory compossibility. Merleau-Ponty understands the fundamental ambiguity of existence to be my struggle to be seen as a subject while I am seen by others as an object. For women, Young submerges this ambiguity still one layer deeper, not in a struggle between her own subjectivity and the object that she inevitably is for others, but in her own tendency to view herself as an object. Because of this struggle, Young calls women’s bodily exist-
ence “self-referred.” (TLG, 38–39, 41) “[T]he feminine subject posits her motion as the motion that is looked at.” (TLG, 39) She sees herself being seen, the process of self-objectification to which Beauvoir pays such close and careful attention in *The Second Sex* and that Young names as the source of the woman’s self-understanding and “bodily self-reference.” One of Young’s innovations is to extend Beauvoir’s phenomenology of self-objectification so that it describes not simply the static object that woman must make of herself, but also the way that she is capable of moving. Without the function of unification that comes from the projection of an aim out toward the world, “feminine existence experiences the body as a mere thing—a fragile thing, which must be picked up and coaxed into movement, a thing that exists as looked at and acted upon.” (TLG, 39)

The lack of unity resulting for feminine existence is a lack of unity between herself and her world, and also a lack of internal unity. She is a fundamental discontinuity between herself and the “fragile encumbrance” of her body. And this discontinuity widens with time, as she turns from girl to woman. As she describes it: “The more a girl assumes her status as feminine, the more she takes herself to be fragile and immobile and the more she actively enacts her own body inhibition.” (TLG, 44) Immediately following this sentence, a different voice emerges, markedly different from that which has characterized the rest of the essay, a narrative discontinuity in which Young’s authorial “I” is, for the first time, attached to a body: “When I was about thirteen, I spent hours practicing a ‘feminine’ walk, which was stiff and closed, and rotated from side to side.” (TLG, 44) Young emerges in this recollection as her younger self; she mobilizes her adolescent body as an object lesson to demonstrate and verify her argument. We have the briefest of glimpses of the younger Young absorbed in her moment of auto-pedagogy before the mirror, willing her footsteps to become more feminine, teaching herself the constricted movement that is the hallmark of normative femininity. By the beginning of the next sentence she has vanished, and the prose resumes the higher-altitude vantage of objective assessment—“[s]tudies that record observations of sex differences in spatial perception, spatial problem-solving, and motor skills have also found that these differences tend to increase with age...” (TLG, 44)—as if her description of her thirteen-year-old self had not happened, as if her moment of auto-theorizing had left no trace. The younger Young who flashes into the paper is oddly unincorporated, penned in by the objective moments that precede and follow her. She is “stiff and enclosed,” just like her newly fashioned walk.
Through being objectified by others, woman learns to objectify herself. This self-objectification also grants her a place, here figured in negative terms as a restriction and an enclosure:

The objectifying regard that “keeps her in her place” can also account for the spatial modality of being positioned and for why women frequently tend not to move openly, keeping their limbs closed around themselves. To open her body in free, active, open extension and bold outward-directedness is for a woman to invite objectification. (TLG, 44–45)

III. Space and Place

Part Three of Young’s essay builds on her observations that feminine existence inhabits the body and its movement in a particular way to suggest that because of this specifically feminine modality of bodily being, there must of necessity be a specifically feminine apprehension and experience of phenomenal space. Women’s experience of phenomenal space, she suggests, is threefold. Phenomenal space is: 1) enclosed, 2) dually structured, and 3) something in which woman is positioned like an object. To the first, she reads Eric Erikson’s studies with young children, outlining girls’ experience of space as enclosed. They not only experience space itself as inhibitory, Erikson observes, but also replicate that enclosure in their own play. Young takes up Erikson’s examples with deliberateness, though she thoroughly rejects his psychoanalytic interpretation of the reasons for the gendered differences in experiencing and creating phenomenal space. To Erikson’s contention that the girls’ depictions of enclosures, walls, and fortresses result from a homology between those creations and their own “enclosed” anatomy, Young responds that it is “far more plausible” that such gendered differences are “a reflection of the way members of each sex live and move their bodies in space.” (TLG, 40) As she did in her reading of Straus, she rejects the anatomical explanation, seeing these specifically feminine spatial relations as resulting from woman’s sedimented history, her living in the world as a gendered being.

These scenes of feminine bodily existence are characterized by incapacity, lack, failure, withdrawal. Woman fails to utilize all the space available to her. She keeps herself from moving fully. She withdraws from objects, she hesitates on the precipice of the world. And the etiology of these lacks and failures stems from still earlier lacks: Young argues that much of the specific style of feminine bodily existence can be traced back to how children play, and how boys and
girls are treated differently in that play. More is asked of boys, and expected of them, and allowed them, from an early age. The self-negation of feminine comportment may be traceable to girls’ lack of opportunities for rough-and-tumble play compared to boys, and adults’ lower expectations. If a body becomes its sedimented history, then lack and deprivation in childhood may become disinclination and incapacity in adulthood. As she puts it: “There is no inherent, mysterious connection between these sorts of typical comportments and being a female person. Many of them result...from lack of practice in using the body and performing tasks.” (TLG, 35)

But if we read Young’s carefully articulated account of feminine comportment and conclude that it is comprised only of absence and constriction, we miss the positive content, the willed labor, of the feminine’s construction of self and space. Consider this quotation:

Feminine existence appears to posit an existential enclosure between herself and the space surrounding her, in such a way that the space that belongs to her and is available to her grasp and manipulation is constricted and the space beyond is not available to her movement. (TLG, 40)

One way to read this passage is: feminine existence appears to believe that the surrounding space is not available to her grasp, even though it must be and therefore she must be mistaken. But what if we read the word “posit” differently? What if we took it to mean not that feminine existence is hallucinating an enclosure around herself that does not exist, but that she is creating that enclosure, spinning out an insulating layer between herself and the world? How might we understand the generative space-making of feminine existence in this moment, particularly when that generation results in the constriction of available space? If feminine existence is self-cocooning in its organization of the space through which it does and does not move, must we not understand this, too, as the manipulation and creation of a particular kind of space, even if that creation does not thrust projectively into the world? In short, Young here is not simply dividing feminine existence off from the world, but rather offering a re-worlding of embodiment that does not assume a simple dichotomy between transcendence and immanence, since the philosophical tradition’s emphasis on transcendence clearly does not exhaust all forms of worlding.

Feminine existence creates a gap between itself and the world, and maintains that gap through distinguishing between those spaces. As Young explains, for feminine existence, there is “[a] distinction between space that is ‘yonder’ and not linked with my body possibili-
ties and the enclosed space that is ‘here.’” (TLG, 40) This gap that is a physical fact of her comportment maintains the distinction between aim and capacity, between here and yonder. This would make feminine comportment an altogether different kind of existence than male bodily existence, which is where self and world necessarily meet at the surface of the body. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not in space; it is that which makes space possible, and the body is where self and world meet. There is no separation. But as Young describes it, the feminine inhabits the body and thus the world in an entirely different way from this. She grows herself a second skin, or surrounds herself with a baffle of space, even as she moves through the world. Because of this feminine fabrication of proximate space, her bodily existence looks quite different in kind from “general” existence, which is shown to have been masculine all along. If she is excluded, or excludes herself, from the world-creating and meaning-making possibilities of an undefended bodily existence in general, then the particularity of her comportment cannot be subsumed under “general” bodily existence. Feminine existence is no longer one variety or expression of general existence; it is characterized by quite different structures, which would necessitate throwing into question the generality of the phenomenological body. Feminine bodily existence is the particularity that reveals the general, also, to be particular.

If, for feminine existence, the link between body and world is not one of complete contiguity, as it is for general existence, then Young’s attention to the particularity of gender has called into question this fundamental phenomenological tenet. Her descriptions will do similarly destabilizing work in regard to an equally crucial phenomenological axiom, that of intentionality. She writes:

In its immanence and inhibition, feminine spatial existence is positioned by a system of coordinates that does not have its origin in a woman’s own intentional capacities. The tendency for the feminine body to remain partly immobile in the performance of a task that requires the movement of the whole body illustrates this characteristic of feminine bodily existence as rooted in place. (TLG, 41)

Free and uninhibited bodily movement, which is a means for achieving transcendence for general existence, is for feminine existence replaced by the buffer of space that she creates and in which she places herself. And intentionality, the mechanism of outward-directedness that is a subject’s relation to his world, is replaced with place. Place is where feminine existence is rooted, immanence,
stillness, fixity, naming an inability to reach the horizon, or even to reach toward it.

IV. Twenty-Years Later

What conclusions ought we draw about the situation of woman from Young’s argument? Young is careful with her caveats in “Throwing Like a Girl.” As she tells us from the outset, not all women are feminine, and not all femininity is female. The argument is limited by the place and time of its making, just as it argues that feminine embodiment is. If we approach this essay hoping for a universal theory of gendered embodiment, we are bound to be disappointed. I would suggest that there is another way to read her essay, one that takes its cue from Young’s own reading practices. In “Throwing Like a Girl: Twenty Years Later,” Young reflects on her earlier work, characterizing that writing as her “effort to use the tools and texts of existential phenomenology for feminist philosophy” in order to “theorize the effects of feminine socialization and sexual objectification on a woman’s world-making movements.” As she puts it, “the essay accepts the existential humanism Merleau-Ponty assumes.” (TYL, 286) Merleau-Ponty offers, in Young’s words, “a proper account of subjectivity” (TYL, 287) in his examinations of the significance of bodily movement and the importance of bodily comportment in developing one’s sense of spatiality. And his limitations, in her view, come from the fact that the level at which Merleau-Ponty is writing “abstracts from gender.” (TYL, 287) Consider how Young reads Straus and Merleau-Ponty. She observes that their philosophies aspired to be general accounts of human existence, but were actually describing just one modality of that existence. Rather than jettisoning them, Young looks at how their methods might be extended along the lines suggested in their own phenomenological orientations.

However, we might pause before entirely accepting Young’s assessment that she has left Merleau-Ponty’s humanism, and his phenomenology, unchallenged. Does the horizon of existential humanism indeed remain intact in the face of her critique? The consequences of the claims she advances in the essay do destabilize some of phenomenology’s most treasured axioms, as I have tried to show. Indeed, it is possible to read Young’s demurral as enacting at the

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conceptual level what she describes at the physical level: she hesitates before making too bold a claim for the significance of her work and its reach in the world. The afterward of “Twenty Years Later,” though, shows her to have become somewhat more equivocal on the viability of the distinction between the ideal and the real, the general and the particular, in the years since the initial writing of the essay. She notes that in her initial essay, she “assumes that there is a general level of theorizing where gender (or class or cultural) difference does not appear in a phenomenological ontology, and then more specific, less abstract accounts where they do.” (TYL, 287) This is a parsing that her own essay teaches us to view with some skepticism, and one that she will go on to squarely challenge in her later work.3

The autobiographical Young, of whom we caught the briefest flicker toward the end of “Throwing Like a Girl,” that adolescent girl alone in her room laboring to make her walk more feminine, makes a reappearance in “Twenty Years Later.” But she is grown now, an adult with a teenage daughter of her own. Young notes that the social context that her daughter has grown up in is so different than when she herself was growing up that much of what she wrote in 1980 no longer seems to have purchase on women’s present-day situation. I would argue, however, that although the temporal and geographical specificity of Young’s phenomenology may prevent us from taking it as a universal template for feminine existence, we can build on her observations in order to take the phenomenological analysis of gender to places where it itself does not venture. And those unexplored places are many.

If we take our cue from her, we might ask: what kinds of women are standing in for “women” in this account? If Young suggests that her phenomenology of feminine comportment is meant to describe “typical” rather than actual women, and “typicality” functions as a sorting mechanism that excludes women with nonnormative gender expression, and women who are not feminine, and women whose racial or ethnic or class identities read as insufficiently “feminine,” how do those excluded embodiments fit in with Young’s framework? If we take the body to be a “fragile encumbrance,” how can we incorporate the knowledge that “fragility” as a feminine norm has always been a racialized one? Is Young engaging in the same idealization she diagnoses in Merleau-Ponty, advancing a theory of bodily being that

is too general to account for the particularity of bodies as they are lived outside the narrow defile of normativity? Do descriptions of the formations and deformations of typical femininity inevitably end up reifying that typicality?

Young understands the scope of her inquiry to be quite narrowly restricted; she is not talking about all women here, only very particular kinds of women and perhaps other feminine others. How might we use phenomenology to think about the ways tomboys, butches, or transpeople move through the world and experience phenomenal space? Do the causal linkages Young draws between trauma, fear, and embodiment hold true for nonnormative as well as normative embodiment? How might disability studies teach us to approach what is perhaps the essay’s most contentious line: “Women in sexist society are physically handicapped”? (TLG, 65) And, to return to Young’s own examples: how might we be able to learn how to re-see the ways in which feminine existence may be expressing its own form of action, even if that action does not resemble the individuated and outwardly-directed modalities of masculine comportment that stand in universally for intentionality and transcendence?

In discussing the feminine forms of movement of the kind that she would like to phenomenologize, Young cites “an amazing passage” from one of Tillie Olsen’s short stories:

a kitchen dance in which a farm woman cans her tomatoes while mindful of the colicky baby she holds between her arm and her hip. The movement is plural and engaged, to and fro, here and yonder, rather than unified and singly directed. What might a phenomenology of action look like which started from the mundane fact that many of us, especially women, often do several things at once? (TYL, 289)

Young does not name the precise source, but I believe the passage to which she refers is from Tillie Olsen’s novel Yonnondio: From the Thirties. The passage reads:

Ben lies in sleep or in a sleep of swoon, his poor heaving chest laboring on at its breathing. Bess has subsided in her basket on a chair where, if she frets, Anna can sprinkle her with water or try to ease the heat rash by sponging. The last batch of jelly is on the stove. Between stirring and skimming, and changing the wet packs on Ben, Anna peels and cuts the canning peaches—two more lugs to go. If only all will sleep awhile. She begins to sing softly—*I saw a ship a-sailing, a-sailing on the sea*—it clears her head. The drone of fruit flies and Ben’s rusty breathing are very
loud in the unmoving, heavy air. Bess begins to fuss again. There, there, Bessie, there, there, stopping to sponge down the oozing sores on the tiny body. There. Skim, stir; sprinkle Bess; pit, peel and cut; sponge; skim, stir. Any second the jelly will be right and must not wait. Shall she wake up Jimmie and ask him to blow a feather to keep Bess quiet? No, he'll wake cranky, he's just a baby hisself, let him sleep. Skim, stir; sprinkle; change the wet packs on Ben; pit, peel and cut; sponge. This time it does not soothe—Bess stiffens her body, flails her fists, begins to scream in misery. Just then the jelly begins to boil. There is nothing for it but to take Bess up, jounce her on a hip (there, there) and with her one free hand frantically skim and ladle. There, there. The batch is poured and capped and sealed, all one-handed, jiggling-hipped. There, there, it is done.4

How might we consider this “philosophy of action” that Young invites us to contemplate?5 The philosophy of action that Young challenges us to think is first and foremost a philosophy of relation. This is true even for those more recognizable philosophical examples that she gleans from Straus and Merleau-Ponty: walking from here to there, climbing a fence, throwing a ball. Her intervention was to show how relations with unseen and even unknown others, absent in present time and space but remembered at the level of the body, are conjured up through movement to determine the mode and style of that movement. The magic of Young’s description works to disclose the relation that was there all along, even in these apparently solo and individualized encounters. By contrast, we see in this passage from Yonnondio that its action is a far cry from action as it is offered in classical phenomenological texts in which one body, alone, upright, is engaging an object or a goal in purposeful and singular movement. The scene from the novel offers a chaos of bodies and motion in its depiction of feminine action. There is not one body in this scene of action, not even two, but three, with a fourth nearby: Anna, her child Ben, baby Bess, and Jimmy, “just a baby hisself,” nearby. Anna’s movements are her efforts at managing all of the children simultaneously, keeping them soothed, comfortable, or asleep, all while making preserves over a hot stove. In this way,

4 Tillie Olsen, Yonnondio: from the thirties (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 185–86. I am grateful to Rebekah Edwards, Tillie Olsen’s granddaughter, for pointing me toward the correct citation.
neither subject nor action is singular, as Anna simultaneously stirs and skims the jelly boiling on the stove; sprinkles or sponges baby Bess with water to soothe her heat rash; changes the wet pack on her son’s chest to ease his cough; pits, peels, and cuts more peaches for the jelly; sings a lullaby to keep the children sleeping; ladles the jelly into jars as it boils, one handed, with the baby on her hip. The feminine action in this scene is characterized not by hesitance, lack, inhibition, or constriction but rather by decisiveness, multiplicity, many-directedness, simultaneity. This amounts to a re-worlding of feminine existence: her whole body is engaged in not one but many actions at once. Yet it is also undeniably domestic, enclosed, not outwardly directed, not set on conquering anything external to her reach. The woman is standing in place, which is not the same as rooting in fixity, and letting the myriad things realize themselves through her.

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