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The Situated Self And Utopian Thinking

GREG JOHNSON

This article takes up the call of feminist thinkers to reconsider the importance of the utopian. I offer a view of the utopian that is situated, critical, and relevant to transformative politics, a view that is structured by embodiment. To this end, I consider some epistemological and ontological connections of situated utopian thinking that enable us to think the utopian differently. Finally, I argue that this view of the utopian can be found in the political efforts of "integrative feminisms."

New utopias would have to derive their form from the shifting and dissolving movement of society that is gradually replacing the fixed locations of life. They would not be rational cities evolved by a philosopher's dialectic; they would be rooted in the body as well as in the mind, in the unconscious as well as the conscious, in forests and desert as well as highways and buildings, in bed as in the symposium.

—Northrop Frye, "Varieties of Literary Utopias"

In her influential book *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* Seyla Benhabib makes the surprising claim that utopian thinking is "a practical-moral imperative" (1992, 229). This declaration precedes an even longer passage in which she adamantly insists that the utopian should be central to feminist concerns and that a retreat from it is unnecessary. She writes:

What scares the opponents of utopia . . . is that in the name of such future utopia the present in its multiple ambiguity, plurality and contradiction will be reduced to a flat grand narrative.

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I share some of [these] concerns insofar as utopian thinking becomes an excuse either for the crassest instrumentalism in the present—the end justifies the means—or to the extent that the coming utopia exempts the undemocratic and authoritarian practices of the present from critique. Yet we *cannot* deal with these political concerns by rejecting the ethical impulse of utopia but only by articulating the normative principles of democratic action and organization in the present. Will the postmodernists join us in this task or will they be content with singing the swan-song of normative thinking in general? The retreat from utopia in feminist theory in the last decade has taken the form of debunking as “essentialist” any attempt to formulate a feminist ethic, a feminist politics, a feminist concept of autonomy and even a feminist aesthetic. The fact that the views of Gilligan or Chodorow or Sara Ruddick (or for that matter Julia Kristeva) only articulate the sensitivities of white, middle-class, affluent, first world, heterosexual women may be true (although I even have empirical doubts about this). Yet what are we ready to offer in their place: as a project of an ethics which should guide us in the future are we able to offer a better vision than the synthesis of autonomous justice thinking and empathetic care? As a vision of the autonomous personality to aspire to in the future, are we able to articulate a sense of self better than the model of autonomous individuality with fluid ego-boundaries and not threatened by otherness? As a vision of feminist politics are we able to articulate a better model for the future than a radically democratic polity which also furthers the values of ecology, non-militarism, and solidarity of peoples? Postmodernism can teach us the theoretical and political traps of why utopias and foundational thinking can go wrong, but it should not lead to a retreat from utopia altogether. *For we, as women, have much to lose by giving up the utopian hope in the wholly other.* (Benhabib 1992, 230; emphasis added)

This is a very direct passage, to be sure. Again, however, her claims here, to say the least, are startling insofar as she first states explicitly that “we” in general and feminists in particular *cannot* deal with pressing political concerns *by rejecting* the ethical impulse of utopian thought. Second, her statements are even more startling when we consider that the utopian is that which is often claimed to be diametrically opposed to the general concerns of feminist thought. After all, is utopian thought not the kind of thinking and practice that perpetrates totalization and violence by espousing uniformity over difference and other-

ness? When we see or hear the word “utopian” do we not almost automatically conjure up images of someone who is naïve, interested in unity over difference, sameness over otherness, and fixity and finality over movement? Is the utopian thinker, in this light, not one who is, at best, irrelevant and dangerous at worst? Thus, are most if not all feminists correct in rejecting any kind of thinking that moves in these directions?

Feminist theorists have every reason to be suspicious of utopian thought, especially the ways in which it tends to oppose and eradicate differences. First, if utopian thought were the great example of totalizing and homogenizing thinking, then feminist theorists’ adoption of utopian thinking would undermine their own efforts at situated critique by adopting a form of thought opposed to much if not all of feminist theory, which is generally concerned with theorizing difference as constitutive of our identity. Second, to embrace utopian thinking would ultimately mean ignoring and disregarding the present situations of women who have to encounter daily degradation and dehumanization. And if there is one thing feminist thinkers have consistently and rightly emphasized, it is the necessity of working *here and now* to eradicate these structures of domination instead of being preoccupied with a future that may or may not ever arrive. Why, then, would Benhabib adamantly call for a retrieval of the utopian and presume that such reconfiguration could resonate with the general concerns of feminists? How, in the end, can we make sense of Benhabib’s claim that the utopian is both a practical and moral imperative and essential to feminist struggles for transformation?

Inspired by Benhabib’s call, I argue in this essay for a view of the utopian that is not conventional and one that is, to borrow a part of the title of Benhabib’s book, “situated.” By developing the specifics of such a view I hope to present an understanding of the utopian that not only helps us to make sense of Benhabib’s claims, but also offers a view of the utopian that works with and not against feminist projects of transformation (of which Benhabib considers her work to be a part). The goal here, then, is to situate the utopian without diminishing its critical power. To accomplish this, I begin with Benhabib’s general framework for understanding how we can speak *simultaneously* of situatedness and universalism. In particular, I discuss her notion of “interactive universalism,” in which the claim about the utopian as a practical and moral imperative arises.

An important aspect of her work that will play a significant role in my argument that the utopian can be understood as situated is her reference to embodiment as a condition for understanding how universalism is interactive. I contend that the place and importance of embodiment is the central link from Benhabib’s framework of interactive universalism to that of the utopian as situated on the order of embodiment itself. This connection specifically allows us to see how embodiment can ground the utopian in a way that situates it, yet not to the exclusion of its ability to guide our transformative practices. To make this

argument, however, I suggest that we must augment Benhabib's work with an understanding of embodiment that both resonates with her own understanding, and most importantly, as one that supports a modified view of the utopian. Here I claim it is Maurice Merleau-Ponty who supplies us with an understanding of embodiment that enables us to make the move from Benhabib's call for the retrieval of the utopian back to an understanding of the context of this call—namely, that of interactive universalism—and to the place of embodiment in her proposal, and finally to the utopian as situated. This, I argue, is the narrative that situates the utopian, and the one for which I argue. As we will see, the work of Benhabib and Merleau-Ponty play equally important roles in reconfiguring the utopian as situated on the order of embodiment.

In general, Merleau-Ponty provides an account of the body that, as the condition for being situated, structures the utopian as the demand that things be otherwise. In particular, he allows us to see, first, that embodiment illuminates the most important quality of the utopian—its ability to interrupt or shatter that which degrades or dehumanizes. Second, his work shows how embodiment and embodiedness (terms I will distinguish later) reveal the site where unlimited and diverse realities, which have gone unnoticed, are brought into focus and are capable of constructing new alternatives. Thus, he provides us with a phenomenologically grounded account of the utopian that both enables us to describe the situation in which the utopian demand that things be better emerges and illuminates these potentials for new life possibilities in such a way that they normatively challenge oppressive structures that limit and demean.

To show how this situated understanding of the utopian is not simply a conceptual possibility but also a practical one, I conclude the essay by considering what I believe to be a paradigmatic instance of the utopian as both situated and still able to guide transformative practices. I discuss what has recently been labeled "integrative feminisms," a movement that demonstrates the following: First, it links the ideas of universalism and the utopian as grounded in lived bodily experience. That is to say, integrative feminisms model how these conceptual ideas (situatedness/universalism/utopian) affect our practices of transformative ethics and politics. Second, and as a result, the example allows us to come full circle, as it were, and witness again the force of Benhabib's claim that the utopian is a practical and moral imperative in feminist practices. Finally, the section on integrative feminisms illustrates that Benhabib's call is not an isolated one. To the contrary, integrative feminisms support Benhabib's claim that *feminists* have much to lose in giving up on the utopian. And through this example, we will see something that not only Benhabib sees but also that which other feminist thinkers have begun to recognize, namely, that the utopian properly conceived is something that is or should be central to feminist thought and practice. In the end, what appears to be an isolated and surprising petition on the part of Benhabib is echoed by integrative feminisms, and by other feminist

thinkers from a variety of theoretical orientations. To demonstrate this further, I want to mention two prominent feminist theorists who confirm Benhabib's call for such a reassessment.

A call for the utopian has emerged in a variety of feminist projects, from political philosophy to literary theory to theology and religious studies (see, for example, Hewitt 1995; Moi 1993; Sargisson 1996; and Whitford 1991). In addition to Benhabib, two feminist thinkers in particular argue for retrieval of the utopian and in doing so substantiate Benhabib's claim. First, Toril Moi writes, in an essay on Simone de Beauvoir, that "to deprive feminism of its utopias is to depoliticize it at a stroke: without a political vision to sustain it, feminist theory will hit a dead end. The result will be a loss of purpose, a perfect sense of futility, and the transformation of feminism into a self-perpetuating academic institution like any other" (1993, 352). As Moi suggests, without this kind of distinct political vision the emancipatory impetus of feminism itself can easily become irrelevant and unaware of situatedness as an event of transformative politics. Drucilla Cornell arguably has offered the clearest picture of the utopian in a way similar to that called for by Benhabib, and a view that has influenced my own understanding. The utopian, for Cornell, is "an 'opening' to the beyond as a threshold we are invited to cross" (1991b, 110). More explicitly, utopian thinking "demands the continual exploration and re-exploration of the possible and yet also unrepresentable. . . . Without utopian thinking . . . feminism is inevitably ensnared in the system of gender identity that devalues the feminine" (Cornell 1991a, 169). Other statements also reveal the importance of the utopian in Cornell's work, such as her claim that the utopian is a "turn toward the future" that "has already begun," which is to say that the utopian "remains the 'not yet,' but as that power it has always already begun" (1992, 118, 129–30). Most recently, Cornell has argued for the centrality of the utopian for her own project of deconstructive feminism and claims that the utopian is a product of the "imaginary domain" insofar as feminism is at its best when it employs "representational devices" that enable us to "imagine new ways of being 'sexed' that are less costly to both men and women." In the end, Cornell presents a view of the utopian that is rooted in our sexed and gendered lives where the utopian is that which is possible but "cannot be known in advance of social transformation" (Cornell 1998 185).

Taken together, Benhabib, Moi, and Cornell demonstrate how the utopian can be viewed as important to feminist projects *if* it is understood in a particular way, namely, a way that I argue is not conventional. What is significant is that others such as Moi and Cornell carry on Benhabib's call. My aim is to develop Benhabib's claim even further by focusing specifically on the possibility of situating the utopian by thinking the utopian with embodiment, thereby extending her notion of interactive universalism in which the call of the utopian emerges. Let me now turn to this discussion.

I. INTERACTIVE UNIVERSALISM

Benhabib criticizes a traditional “legislative” or “substitutionalist” view of universalism for depositing a disembedded and disembodied subject situated beyond historical and cultural contingency (for example, see Benhabib 1992, 4). It presupposes that humans are like “geometricians in different rooms who, reasoning alone for themselves, all arrive at the same solution to a problem” (1992, 163). Over against this view Benhabib offers what she calls “interactive universalism,” which “acknowledges the plurality of modes of being human, and differences among humans, without endorsing all these pluralities and differences as morally and politically valid. While agreeing that normative disputes can be settled rationally, and that fairness, reciprocity, and some procedure of universalizability are constituents; that is, necessary conditions of the moral standpoint, interactive universalism regards difference as a starting-point for reflection and action (1992, 153). She challenges the substitutionalist view of universalism and claims that a disembodied and disembedded subject, unstructured by language or narrative, is unthinkable. That is to say, our identities as subjects, whether individually or collectively, evolve in and through the stories we tell others and ourselves. As the above passage suggests, however, to embrace an interactive universalism is not to accept all the ways of being human as morally and politically valid. Benhabib argues that we adjudicate always, but we do so as situated critics. An important goal of interactive universalism, then, is “to situate reason and the moral self more decisively in contexts of gender and community, while insisting upon the discursive power of individuals to challenge such situatedness in the name of universalistic principles, future identities and as yet undiscovered communities” (1992, 8). What is emphasized here is a rational process that seeks *agreement* instead of *unanimous consensus* on the one hand, and that emphasizes differences among people instead of ignoring those differences under the guise of a uniform rational moral autonomy on the other hand.¹ In the end, interactive universalism is made possible by focusing on concrete bodies as they evolve in and through narrative frameworks. The roots of interactive universalism are found in Benhabib’s now famous essay, “The Generalized and Concrete Other,” which is included in *Situating the Self*.

The generalized and concrete other can either be viewed as a mutually exclusive relationship, because it emphasizes different views of the self, or this relationship can be viewed on a continuum. Benhabib’s proposal of an interactive universalism demands that we understand the standpoint of the other(s) and view them “not only as generalized but also as concrete others” so we do not privilege one over the other (1992, 9–10). On the one hand, the self as “generalized other” distinguishes individuals as rational beings who are entitled to the rights and privileges we would afford ourselves. This view of the self is such that “our relation to the other is governed by the norms of *formal equality*

and *reciprocity*: each is entitled to expect and to assume from us what we can expect and assume from him or her" (1992, 159). For example, the notion of the generalized other allows me to claim the right (often viewed as a basic human right) to do or enjoy something and not to expect hindrance from another in attempting to enjoy or do that which I perceive as a basic right. Even though the other is one who possesses particular characteristics, desires, wants, and needs as an individual, what is emphasized as the defining trait of the other's moral dignity is not these individual wants, needs, and desires but that which is held in common, namely, that the other, like us, is an acting and speaking rational agent.

On the other hand, the view of the self as "concrete other" highlights that as individual rational beings we have various histories that constitute our identities, which is to say we are embedded and embodied. This view of the self claims that "our relation to the other is governed by the norms of *equity*, and *complementary reciprocity*: each is entitled to expect and to assume from the other forms of behavior through which the other feels recognized and confirmed as a concrete, individual being with specific needs, talents, and capacities. Our differences in this case complement rather than exclude one another" (Benhabib 1992, 159). The focus here is on individuality where we attempt to comprehend the needs of the other along with the motivation that guides her or him. "These norms," she writes, "require in various ways that I exhibit more than the simple assertion of my rights and duties in the face of your needs. In treating you in accordance with the norms of friendship, love, and care, I confirm not only your *humanity* but also your human *individuality*. The moral categories that accompany such interactions are those of responsibility, bonding and sharing. The corresponding moral feelings are those of love, care and sympathy and solidarity" (1992, 159). We see again the force of Benhabib's criticism against a traditional view of universalism where the view of the self is *exclusively* generalized, inattentive to the concrete selves that participate in the reasoning process, and incapable of individuating among subjects. Benhabib argues, in contrast, that *both* the generalized and the concrete other are important toward the development of an interactive universalism, which in the end, is "cognizant of gender difference not gender blind, contextually sensitive and not situation indifferent" (1992, 3).

What is central to interactive universalism is the place of both our embeddedness and our embodiedness as the conditions that situate the self. While the place of embeddedness is significant, and that to which Benhabib pays most attention, I am most interested in the role of embodiment as it relates to her call for the retrieval of the utopian. It is this connection, I argue, that enables us to begin to situate the utopian. Moreover, Benhabib implies a connection between embodiment and the utopian by revealing her call for a retrieval of the utopian within her understanding of interactive universalism, which relies

equally on embodiment and embeddedness. This connection, I show below, is one that can be made clearer by considering the work of Merleau-Ponty. But I am getting ahead of myself. Before I turn to that discussion I first want to highlight Benhabib's view of embodiment, which can be glimpsed in the following discussion of the gender-sex system:

By the "gender-sex" system I understand the social-historical, symbolic constitution, and interpretation of the anatomical differences of the sexes. The gender-sex system is the grid through which the self develops an *embodied identity*, a *certain mode of being in one's body and of living the body*. The self becomes an I in that it appropriates from the human community a mode of psychically, socially, symbolically experiencing its *bodily identity*. The gender-sex system is the grid through which societies and cultures reproduce *embodied individuals*. (Benhabib 1992, 152; emphasis added)

Historically the gender-sex system has contributed to the exploitation and oppression of women insofar as they have been viewed as epistemically unimportant. For example, other feminist theorists have shown that one result of this gender-sex system is to view types of embodied knowledge, such as midwifery, merely as "old wives tales," "gossip," or "witchcraft" (Dalmiya and Alcoff 1994, 217–44).² Through the analysis of the generalized and concrete other, with its emphasis on embodiment, Benhabib attempts to show the limits of the system, and more importantly, to offer an alternative in its place. Thus, like other feminist thinkers, Benhabib argues for the following.

First, she seeks to transform the view of the gender-sex system as that which reinscribes superior and inferior ways of knowing (for example, reason/disembodied/disembodied over passion/embedded/embodied; mind over body; man over woman), especially as it "others" women's experience (see, for example, Bordo 1996 and Lloyd 1984). That is, instead of using the gender-sex system as a way of discounting the embodied experience of the knowing individual, Benhabib views embodiedness and embeddedness as integral in coming to knowledge of the world, others, and ourselves. The transformation of these systems of hierarchy requires an alternative conception, which is to say that in its demand that things be otherwise, it seeks to fashion new openings for the lives and experiences of women. It is in this context, then, that Benhabib's claim that utopian thinking is a "practical and moral imperative" is best understood. Transforming a hierarchical gender-sex system is essential in affirming the lives and experience of women who historically have been dehumanized by this system. Interactively understood (embodied and embedded/generalized and concrete) universalism is an essential moment in feminist transformative politics.

Second, by embracing embodiedness and embeddedness, feminist activists and thinkers do not engage in such transformative and utopian politics from principles that exist independent of their experience with and in this system of oppression. Rather, as Benhabib's work attests, their lived bodily experience is the connection to this system and thus the locus of the transformation in and through it. That is to say, the practical and moral imperative of the utopian demand for something else emerges from and is located in the embeddedness and embodiedness in which women find themselves. But how? In other words, what is the view of the body here, for example, such that the phrase, "The Body is the site of [utopian] transformation" can make sense in an interactive universalist framework? Benhabib's proposal, like that of other feminist thinkers, takes seriously bodily identity as that which locates or situates us in the systems that degrade and dehumanize, making possible a description and depiction of the dehumanizing tendencies of such systems. More importantly, however, our bodies, as she further suggests, are the vehicles through which we transform such systems, which is to say that our bodies allow us to offer an alternative given to us by our situatedness.

It is here that I wish to pick up on Benhabib's theme of embodiment, and drawing on the above discussion, to offer an account of how embodiment grounds the utopian demand that things be otherwise. But before this embodied or situated picture of the utopian can be understood we must first, as Benhabib does with universalism, consider what is involved in the traditional view of the utopian and how it is in need of reconfiguration. What I offer in the following section, therefore, is a brief description of the contours of traditional utopian thought, which is *not* the view of the utopian affirmed by Benhabib, Cornell, and others. Once I have delineated these characteristics, I will discuss the relationship between embodiment and the utopian, and how the former situates the latter without stripping the utopian of its ability to guide transformative practices.

II. TRADITIONAL UTOPIAN THINKING

Even though feminist thinkers such as Benhabib and Cornell see the importance of the utopian for transformative politics, their enthusiasm for the utopian is seemingly overshadowed by the fact that the utopian has fallen on hard times in recent years. I say "seemingly" because to label one a "utopian thinker," at least in light of the emphasis on difference and otherness associated most often with feminist and postmodern thought, is at best a way to cast him or her as hopelessly naïve, escapist, or at worst one who perpetrates totalizing thought.³ The picture of the utopian that is associated with this form of violent thinking, however, is not the kind of thinking Benhabib and others have in mind. It is a traditional form of utopian thought that possesses the following characteristics.

First, understood conventionally, the utopian as a mode of thought and action is that which “reflect[s] on politics and society, which seeks the perfect, best, or happiest form of society, *untrammelled* by commitments to existing institutions” (Goodwin 1991, 533; emphasis added). This definition suggests that conventional utopian thinking above all has as its goal a state of perfection (Utopia) where incongruent particulars are unified under the same principle/vision, and a vision that is accomplished by implementing a worked out plan (rational or otherwise). More importantly, and as a result, the utopian, for it to be effective, must be *opposed* to our situatedness (embodied, historical, and social); otherwise the utopian becomes too particular and too located.

Second, traditional utopian thought is most often (though certainly not always) preoccupied with the “what” of the utopian. That is to say, it is concerned primarily with that which lies “beyond the reach of necessity of change, since there is no progressing beyond the perfect” (Goodwin 1978, 5). When this persistence of the “what” of utopian thinking takes over, fixity and finality take precedent at the expense of becoming and movement. Fixity and finality, more importantly, are posited so as to absorb and thereby eradicate all contentious particulars that threaten the worked out plan that the utopian blueprint is claimed to ensure. Ralf Dahrendorf usefully articulates this element of traditional utopian thought when he writes that the utopian “may exist ‘nowhere,’ but it is held up as a counterproject to the realities of the world in which we are living. Utopia is a complete alternative, and therefore of necessity a complete society. . . . Whoever sets out to implement Utopian plans will in the first instance have to wipe clean the canvas on which the real world is painted. This is a brutal process of destruction. Second, a new world will have to be constructed which is bound to lead to errors and failures, and will in any case require awkward transitional periods like ‘dictatorship of the proletariat.’ The probability must be high that in the end we will be stuck with the transition; dictators are not in the habit of giving up their power” (Dahrendorf 1990, 61–66).

This movement toward stasis, as the above quotation indicates, is why in the end utopian thought is said to be irrelevant and violent, a violence that is captured concisely in the notion that the utopian is “untrammelled by commitments to existing institutions.”⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s normative utopian project best exemplifies this traditional notion. Rousseau, whose normative utopian project in *On the Government of Poland* (1770–1771) can be said to begin with one’s existence in the world and relies on both experience and interaction, soon via *The Social Contract* (1762) replaces the individual will with the will of the whole. This displacement is accomplished by education, illustrated by *Emile* (1762), where human nature becomes remade. What is presented in all of this is a rationally worked out plan to attain human freedom where the individual’s own particularity is sacrificed for the will of the whole. And even though Rousseau

begins with existence, he still posits the autonomous male ego as that which defines all other subjectivities, hence ignoring certain particularities (especially those of women), and thereby contributing to the dehumanizing sex-gender system. In the end, traditional utopian thinking projects a quest for totalization and presents itself as a privileged standpoint able to yield an unmediated vision. Thus, the utopian in its traditional form is thought that “presupposes a form of philosophical idealism that inevitably results in a mystification which ignores difference, flux, dissemination and heterogeneity” (West 1993a, 166).

We can see from the above discussion that traditional utopian thinking has problems similar to those of traditional universalism. What is needed, then, is an understanding of utopian thinking that is nonconventional, which, following Benhabib, begins with embodiment. What follows is one way of accomplishing this reconfiguration. With the above discussions in mind I want to offer an understanding of the utopian that resonates with Benhabib, Cornell, and others.

III. SITUATED UTOPIAN THOUGHT

Let me begin this section by saying that I embrace the spirit of conventional utopian thought as that which imaginatively questions what is given and produces alternative possibilities. I agree here with Drucilla Cornell, who embraces the “representational device” of traditional utopian thought and its “pride of place given to the imagination, including its function as fundamental to reason” (Cornell 1998, 185). However important this function of utopian thinking is, as Cornell also suggests, it is not enough. More is needed. First, situated utopian thinking is the mode by which we reflect on society at the level of both politics and morality. This is not, however, in the sense of the establishing a blueprint of an ideal society. Rather, and again following Cornell, the utopian is that which “demands the continual exploration and re-exploration of the possible and yet also unrepresentable” (Cornell 1991b, 169). Second, situated utopian thinking is the fundamental way we avoid the pitfalls of parochialism (often an extreme implication of situatedness), and ahistorical disinterestedness (a risk in retaining a notion of universalism). That is, utopian thinking provides the point of convergence between our need to speak from our location and our ability to argue for the universally intended dimension of our claims. Third, utopian thinking argues for more than that which is different.

Difference is not necessarily utopian. Situated utopian thinking, insofar as it is political thought, *demands* something of those who argue for alternative pictures of reality. For example, broadly construed, feminism as a political movement is not utopian simply because it seeks to *think differently* about the sex-gender system, which is to say offers alternatives to our understanding of this system. Instead, as Benhabib indicates, feminism as a political movement

is utopian because on the one hand it argues for, among other things, the universally intended claim that the sex-gender system as a system that reinscribes a hierarchy of knowledge that excludes the experience of women is oppressive and wrong. On the other hand, as a utopian movement, feminism requires those committed to its visions to place themselves at risk, which, for example, might mean jeopardizing job security or personal safety, or risking other forms of persecution. Feminism as a transformative political movement of the utopian demands that those who are committed to the betterment of the lives of women (including men) place themselves at risk in offering an alternative to the sex-gender system that seeks to degrade and dehumanize so many women.

What Benhabib offers is a way to conceptualize how the utopian is both universal and interactive. It is universal insofar as it posits a vision of the future and attempts, in her words, to “woo the consent” of everyone (Benhabib 1992, 136). When, for example, we undergo a transformation, an interruptive moment, a utopian moment, we will more than likely argue for that position in a robust and confident way (especially if this transformation fundamentally reorients us). Perhaps, then, to “woo” is not as strong because based on the universalistic and rationalistic dimensions of the utopian (understood the way Benhabib explains it) we will woo, argue, testify, critique, and even exclude positions that we do not like because on an interactive model not every ethical and political claim is equally valuable.⁵ In this regard, the utopian moment that interrupts us and reorients our thought and practice and potentially opens us to newness is a *normative* moment, which can be understood in the following way.

First, the normative weight of the utopian occurrence arises from our lived bodily experience as we attempt to make sense of the situation in which we find ourselves. This attempt is one where we describe or venture an interpretation of the situation that, as in the case of the sex-gender system, shapes our identities in particularly degrading ways. Second, we also attempt to interpret the situation so as to enable us to reconfigure or transform the situation for the better. What is offered here is a description and depiction of what is other to, which is to say better than the current narrative that is harmful. Third, and important for my purposes, our embodiment supplies us with and offers a standard against which we are able to challenge and interrupt the system in which we find ourselves. This standard, therefore, is an embodied norm that judges and prescriptively offers something else in the place of that which often devastates our lived existence. The sex-gender system again can illustrate this point. Once we find ourselves in the sex-gender system that constructs our identities in particular ways, we undergo a moment that causes us to challenge a particular understanding of the system. The interruption we undergo, which is grounded in and by our embodiment, is an interruption that moves us then to disrupt and transform the sex-gender system in ways that offer new alternatives. What may follow, and I would contend does follow, is that the normative claims

against the sex-gender system and the claims for something other are claims that interactively emerge in a situation but are *intended* universally. This is something that Benhabib helps us to see, namely, that even though our normative claims are put forth with confidence (for example, the sex-gender system as that which reinscribes an inferior/superior way of understanding knowledge to the exclusion of women's experiences is wrong *everywhere*), our new understanding does not entail that in order for us to have agreement on the best utopian alternative we must all concur on a certain set of *a priori* principles. The normative weight, while boldly engaging others, proceeds with humility and the recognition that the newness that has come from a utopian moment is still a particular and located vision. Thus, the normative weight that emerges in and through our bodies is understood *interactively*, where we are intertwined with those whose consent we seek to "woo" (to use Benhabib's language).⁶

The important point here is that in offering a modified view of the utopian that utilizes the framework of interactive universalism, with its reliance on our *embodied* interaction with our environment, we can begin to transform the utopian by reconsidering the body as the ground for its situatedness. The place of embodiment as that which structures or illuminates the movement of the utopian must be examined more closely so that the connections between embodiment and the utopian can be seen more clearly. In doing so, however, we must turn or return to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose work on embodiment provides the framework to make this connection clearer. Accordingly, with the help of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body, I now want to do for the utopian what Benhabib does for universalism, namely, to show how it is possible to reconceive it as thoroughly situated yet equally critical.

IV. THE EMBODIMENT OF THE UTOPIAN: MERLEAU-PONTIAN (Re)CONSIDERATIONS

The future is only probable, but it is not an empty
zone in which we can construct gratuitous projects;
it is sketched before us like the beginning of
the day's end, and its outline is ourselves

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*

The claim I want to argue below, which I have made throughout, is that the body illuminates the utopian, and is, therefore, a key to articulating a non-conventional understanding of the utopian itself. Our embodied experiences enable us to see and experience something not previously understood, which is to say our bodily interaction can and frequently does disrupt a received societal story that narratively constitutes us as subjects. It is in this regard that the body

structures the utopian. To argue for this I want to begin with the following general remarks.

There is a *structure* to the utopian that derives its understanding, movement, and logic from the structures of *embodiment* that are *potentially* shared by all humans. I am here drawing on the insight of phenomenology in general (for example, Paul Ricoeur, Simone de Beauvoir, Gabriel Marcel, and Jean-Paul Sartre), but especially Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the structures of transcendence, intentionality, and motility. He enables us to see that the movement of the utopian, as that which interrupts us and calls for something other than the situation we find ourselves in, is a movement *on the order of embodiment* and an order understood *as* the movement of transcendence, intentionality, and motility. What I show, following his work, is that these phenomenologically understood structures of embodiment present themselves to us in ways that produce new thought, which critically give direction and meaning that are central to our existence. In other words, these structures reveal the utopian as a disruptive force that shifts, transcends, and reorients us toward new possibilities, and as a movement that presents itself as both critical and transformative. And though Merleau-Ponty is important for my efforts here, Benhabib and feminist theorists in general are equally influential. For example, the epistemological work of Linda Alcoff, Lorraine Code, Elizabeth Potter, Naomi Scheman, and Nancy Tuana (among others) demonstrates that lived bodily experience is the condition, we might say, of the possibility of thinking or knowledge in general. And feminist political thinkers such as Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, Nancy Fraser, Susan Moller Okin, and Iris Marion Young (among others) explain how our lived bodily experiences are the sites for transformative political thought and action.

What I present below, by drawing from this varied body of work, is a formulation of how the body can be considered the structure of the utopian. The lessons of these thinkers are particularly important to a project such as this one because any talk of "structures" of embodiment or otherwise must proceed cautiously and with the full awareness that while these structures might potentially be shared by all they are in fact not. One way of proceeding with caution, then, is to delineate clearly what I mean by the terms "embodiment," "embodiedness," and "lived bodily experience." To be sure, I have already used these words in the previous sections, but now it is important to address the specific distinctions and how they relate to my claim that the body *structures* the utopian.

As already indicated, when I speak of embodiment I mean certain structures *potentially* shared by all. That is, even though there are general features of embodiment that seem to be shared by humans in general, these structures (I will discuss three examples below) are *not* to be thought of as being fixed or timeless. They are not structures that rigidly determine our embodiment/embodied existence, that are *a priori* foundations, necessary *and* sufficient, which establish

determinate borders such as “inside” and “outside,” “immanence” and “transcendence,” structures which, in effect, inscribe such demarcated lines rigorously; structures that *are* the meaning, and structures which, in this respect, would be regarded as transcendental. Instead, they are structures that *potentially* open us up to the world in new and interesting ways; structures that *potentially* en-able as well as dis-able, structures that *potentially* empower us to break free from the narratives that have determinately defined us, that keep us moving within these ever present and not-wholly-transcendable determinations; structures that, because they are constantly in motion, are always in contention; and structures that, in this respect, are better thought of as *quasi*-transcendental (for example, see Caputo 1993). These structures of embodiment, it must be stressed, are not solely *in* us to be projected *out* onto the world. Likewise, the structures of embodiment are not *out* there in society waiting to be accessed. Thus, when I speak of utopian thought structured by embodiment I am not, as it were, speaking of a logic of embodiment but more accurately of logics where these “logics” are derived from an intertwining of embodiment within a particular horizon of bodily existence. How, then, does embodiment differ from embodiedness?

Embodiedness designates the lived bodily experience of individuals understood relative to a particular socio-historical matrix. Not to be mistaken: the body often “knows” what is “inside” and “outside,” precisely because lived bodily experience is about routine bodily habits and everyday bodily practices. To speak of the embodied dimensions of the utopian is to say that “all interactions are opportunities for the progressive fleshing out of this originary schematism, this implicate order, this hint, in our intercorporeality, of a more *utopian* intercorporeality, concretely structured forms of reciprocity generated from within the shared body of social experience” (Levin 1990, 43). This description is another way to convey my rejection of a rigid line of demarcation between the “in here” (immanence) and “out there” (transcendence) of embodiment, a rejection that feminist thinkers have argued for in different ways (for example, see Young 1990a and Braidotti 1994).

To summarize this section, the chief insight from feminist thought is that structures of embodiment are forever colored and shaped by our embodiedness, or lived bodily experiences. Conversely, how we examine lived bodily experiences is shaped by theoretical commitments to particular understandings of embodiment (in my case Merleau-Pontian phenomenology). As a result, we cannot speak of either embodiment or embodiedness as if they are noninterpretive. Now that I have made some necessary clarifications, I want to explore how the body structures the utopian.

The lived body is situated, which is to say that our bodily experience first and foremost locates us within a particular narrative framework. Said differently, lived bodily experience is the precondition for any talk of situatedness.

Even though Merleau-Ponty does not invoke this idea of narrative framework he nevertheless has this in mind when he speaks of the body's ability to see always from somewhere and to inhabit a particular perspective on the world. The body is the vehicle of being in the world and "having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 82). His unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, continues this line of thinking by discussing the three dimensions of touching, all of which situate our bodies as both participatory and active in the world. In the touch, he tells us, we find "three distinct experiences which subtend one another, three dimensions which overlap but are distinct: a touching of the sleek and of the rough, a touching of the things—a passive sentiment of the body and of its space—and finally a veritable touching of the touch, when my right hand touches my left hand while it is palpating the things, where 'the touching subject' passes over to the rank of the touched, descends into the things, such that the touched is formed in the midst of the world as it were in the things" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 133–34). This passage indicates how for Merleau-Ponty our embodiment is a medium of the world that brings together the past, present, and future in order that some sense can be made of the narrative structuring of one's identity. But this situatedness of the lived body still does not address how lived bodily experience illuminates the utopian. Let me explain.

Generally speaking, our embodiment structures the utopian insofar as the body possesses the ability to shut itself off from the world or open itself upon the world towards others, the world, and the future. Grounded in and by our lived bodily experience we have a horizon of futurity that surrounds the body and thus have our actual present seen as the future of that past (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 165). Since the body is the precondition for our situatedness relative to a narrative framework, the body is not only the axis by which we enter into that particular narrative framework, but also is the primary vehicle by which we either reinscribe that narrative or transform it. That is to say, the body as the medium through which we understand or describe the narrative framework in which we are immersed is the means that can either carry out and reinscribe narrative constraints that exclude, limit or dehumanize; or interrupt the narrative and normatively challenge it for something else that reconstitutes it differently. The source, however, is the same: our body. I am claiming, therefore, that this forward-looking capacity to disrupt, critique, and transform a given situation is the utopian insofar as it "keeps open social transformations and new realities" that have not yet been thought, because "they are inconceivable within the constraints of our current symbolic order" (Cornell 1998, 230). This connection between embodiment, embodiedness, and the utopian emerges from at least three specific Merleau-Pontian structures of embodiment: bodily motility, intentionality, and intentional arc.

Through its motility we become aware of the body's capacity for opening up new life experiences. Our bodily motility is a prereflective bodily felt awareness that enables us to act in such a way that is consistent with future alternatives our lived bodily experience warrants. To be sure, just as the body possesses this forward-looking capacity, it is also limited in its ability to do just anything; we are not always able fully to illuminate the possibilities of these structures. The body through motility, projection, and intentionality "can" act on the world in such way that creates new life experiences. However, because one's embodied location is a fundamental factor in acting on this utopian potential, the body often "cannot" fulfill such experiences because of the constraints imposed on us from a restrictive narrative framework. Motility, then, is central to the structure of embodied utopian thinking insofar as it transports "the body to that point in space of which we have formed a representation beforehand" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 139). As such, it is that aspect that enables us to recollect the past, think the future, and orient us in ways that are potentially new and promising.⁷

This utopian logic of the lived body further arises through what Merleau-Ponty calls the "intentional arc," which "projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects. It is the intentional arc which brings about unity of the senses of intelligence, of sensibility and motility" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 136). Via this intentional arc, the body possesses not only a rudimentary understanding of an ideal community of embodied subjects but also serves as a vehicle for transformation insofar as it allows us to make sense, interpretively speaking, of the situation and offers something other to the less-than-promising potentialities accessible in the given situation. In the end, when we consider the situation of embodiment within our lived bodily existence, we can say with David Michael Levin that "the body is inherently social; it is also inherently capable of rendering moral and political discriminations which might otherwise not have formed and been visible" (1985, 317–18).

The relationship of this Merleau-Pontian view of the body to the utopian possibility for newness can be understood more concretely by examining an instance of its occurrence. The final section, first, offers an example that illustrates concretely what I argue for in the previous sections, namely, that the utopian can be situated or embodied and still be able to guide transformative thought and practice. Second, it demonstrates the relationship between Benhabib's claim that the utopian is a practical-moral imperative and my claim that the utopian demand that things be different is, in the case that follows, grounded in the actual lived experience of women.

V. THE UTOPIAN EMBODIED: INTEGRATIVE FEMINISMS

The example I wish to consider is what has been labeled “integrative feminisms” (Miles 1996). Two important statements from this movement, which are central to my essay, join integrative feminisms together with the version of situated or embodied utopian thinking argued for above through Benhabib more generally and Merleau-Ponty more specifically. The first statement is the role that a “new universalism” plays in integrative feminisms. The second statement is that integrative feminisms are guided by “utopian goals.” These two statements together demonstrate practically what I have shown conceptually in the preceding sections. Moreover, what we see in what follows is a distinct example of how the utopian as now situated on the order embodiment is in fact a practical moral imperative. Let us consider these two statements more closely.

First, integrative feminisms rely on an understanding of universalism that is, to be sure, epistemological but, like Benhabib, one that is equally ethical and political. Corinne Kumar D’Souza describes this “new universalism” as that which neither denies the accumulated experience and knowledge of all past generations nor accepts the imposition of any monolithic, “universal” structures under which it is presumed all other people must be subsumed. Instead, it challenges the “universal mode, the logic of our development, science, technology, militarization, the nuclear option. A new universalism that will respect the plurality of different societies—of their philosophy, of their ideology, their traditions and cultures, one that will be rooted in the particular, on which will develop in the context of the dialectics of different civilizations, birthing a new cosmology” (D’Souza 1992, 44, cited in Miles 1996, 141). As we can see, this “new universalism” is very similar to that of Benhabib. Like Benhabib’s interactive universalism, integrative feminisms, as the above passage attests, affirm situatedness as important to generating transformative links without employing sectarian practices that in effect depoliticize feminist efforts at collective transformation. This means, for instance, that integrative feminisms work from their own locations on issues of health, labor, education, violence, and peace along with other issues in ways that forge new global relations. How do these connections across differences occur?

Two important components ensure this kind of transformative politics: dialogue and shared, life-centered values. Dialogue creates the space whereby women who have experienced violence, degradation, and dehumanization can speak openly about their own particular embodied experience within and over against these systems of oppression. Whether it is in a conference setting, a village gathering, or a policy generated to resist such domination, each perspective and experience is taken as the starting point rather than each woman being asked to set aside her particular experience and react only to those points of

commonality. This means that agreement is sought, but in a way that gives full voice to those who have witnessed the atrocities that have constituted their existence. The component of shared life-centered values, put simply, and is the moment where networks are created from particularities so that an integrative position is forged. Guided by the idea that “women-centered perspectives” contribute to the “large feminist project of transforming the world,” consensus is attained through integration rather than complete unanimity. One example of this is the “Statement from the Women of the South Caucus” generated from the *World Women’s Congress for a Healthy Planet* in 1992. Reflecting on this statement, Angela Miles reveals how the notions of dialogue and shared, life-centered values converge. She writes:

Regional caucus statements from Africa, Europe, International Indigenous Women, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, North America, Pacific, Women of the South, and Women of Color of North America articulate remarkably similar concerns, priorities, and principles, reflecting the influence of intensive exchanges in plenary meetings, hallways, workshops, and drafting sessions on already well-established shared perspectives. They express strong commitment to continued dialogue and solidarity and leave no doubt that Women’s Action Agenda 21, the collectively written Conference Report, reflects a genuine and developing consensus of indigenous and nonindigenous participants from all regions of the world. (Miles 1996, 142–43)

We see here how the “Statement from the Women of the South Caucus” embodies the new universalism crucial to integrative feminisms and also how it is structurally similar to Benhabib’s interactive universalism. What is even more apparent is the way in which the shared perspectives spoken of from embodied specificity are not considered something to be overcome. To the contrary, Miles makes clear throughout that women’s specificity, especially as it is understood in terms of embodiment and embodiedness, is the key through which collective transformations occurs. This dual relationship between specificity and shared experience in the end “provides the necessary frame for the affirmation of women’s diversity” (Miles 1996, 62). And it is in this context that the second statement I mention above, namely, that integrative feminisms are motivated by utopian goals, is best understood. This claim allows us to see how integrative feminisms connect a “new universalism” to a politics of utopian possibility by paying attention to the lived bodily experience of women.

Miles states specifically that integrative feminisms are “without exception . . . generating and working with new paradigms unashamedly informed by *utopian goals*” (1996, 142; emphasis added). I submit, in light of my argument throughout, that the view of the utopian assumed here is a modified or situated

understanding. In general, it is, first, grounded in embedded and particularly embodied situations. Second, it is critical in its reliance on the “new universalism” mentioned above. And though this is the only direct reference to the utopian, it nevertheless can be seen throughout Miles’s work, where she claims that integrative feminisms, grounded in a new universalism, are those that as a bearer of the utopian seek to make transformative links across traditions and difference. Thus, the unashamedly utopian goals that direct integrative feminisms are a commitment to “new connections and practices of internationalism,” to the development of “new models,” and a commitment to “building equal, multicentered, mutually initiated and mutually beneficial relationships with shared integrative goals defined and explored together, across and through diversity” (1996, 140–41, 145). We can see how this is accomplished when we consider an even more specific example from the work of integrative feminisms, such as the National Black Women’s Health Project, *Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt* (WHISPER).

Founded in 1985, WHISPER is an organization of women who have survived degrading systems of prostitution and who are committed to ending this particular form of violence. It is comprised of women from diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds who seek to create change in both personal and communal lives. To be sure, WHISPER is the acronym used to indicate a shared dehumanizing experience. However, instead of a shared experience that isolates them from others who have been excluded, the shared experience here links prostitutes together in ways that *open* them onto the world for transformation. As an instance of the utopian, WHISPER, grounded in lived bodily experience and committed to a new or interactive universalism, functions in a way that embraces specific experiences with forms of dehumanization while at the same time it remains committed to forms of liberation that transcend their particular locations. Second, WHISPER’s aim is to make transformative links with other women’s groups, along with the wider public, in hopes of bringing about societal transformation across different locations. Therefore, on a societal level WHISPER intends its practices to work for the freedom of those whose lives are affected in similar ways. What is important to see is that the sharing of the devastating effects of prostitution, instead of closing off those who undergo this particular affliction from others, is the basis from which a politics of utopian possibility is generated.

The importance of WHISPER, then, is its ability to illustrate the utopian in a way that embraces the particular experience of violence perpetrated on prostitutes. I use “embrace” to indicate something mentioned earlier in the essay, namely, that our situatedness dictates much of our understanding of systems of dehumanizing and the possibilities of eradicating them. The way I use the term here does not mean an acceptance of these systems of dehumanization. To the contrary, it means attempting to interpret or understand them in ways

that potentially empower the transformation of the degrading and dehumanizing situations. This means, then, that in listening to the particular voices of prostitutes they “contribute to a general development of feminism as the inclusive, multi-centered movement it must be. . . . Increasingly, [however,] their outreach efforts include a global component. [They carry] information about global structures of prostitution, their relationship to international economic and military arrangements, and the growing resistance of women around the world” (Miles 1996, 57). What this example demonstrates, in the end, is how WHISPER witnesses to the promise of something new, structured by lived bodily experience and informed by a new universalism that enables us to see concretely how the utopian as interactively and universally understood is nothing short of a practical and moral imperative that we are invited to cross. As a part of integrative feminisms, WHISPER illustrates how the utopian can be conceived in a nonconventional manner that once thought differently becomes relevant and vital to transformative practices. Finally, integrative feminisms demonstrate what Benhabib and other are claiming, namely, that liberatory movements in general and feminist transformative movements in particular can benefit from the utopian and thus should reconsider it.⁸

VI. CONCLUSION

The above examples, in the end, indicate something that feminist thinkers such as Benhabib and Cornell adamantly claim: we do not have to fear the utopian. Instead, as they do, we can and should reject crude forms of utopian thought and affirm a more interactive and embodied understanding. Without thinking through these embodied and situated dimensions, utopian thinking runs the risk of repeating the past problems of presenting alternative visions as naive, disinterested and pathological. In this essay, I have shown one way we might begin to think through these connections. I have, more precisely, argued that such thinking relies on the following: First, it depends on a reconfigured understanding of universalism that initially provides the framework in which the call emerges for a non-conventional view of the utopian. Second, as that which is central to understanding what it means to speak of the interactive, it depends on rethinking the relationship between our embodiment and the utopian movement that inspires transformative ethics and politics. Finally, whether one chooses the view of Benhabib, or of Cornell, or of Merleau-Ponty (and these are by no means the only theorists who can aid us in this task), it calls for a retrieval of *philosophical* resources that enable us to adopt utopian thinking without succumbing to naive, futuristic projections that ignore the present. I have tried to tell one narrative—from interactive universalism to embodiment to utopian thought—as to how we might begin this task. If our utopian thinking is to be different than the past and avoid pathological moves

to disinterestedness, then it has to begin to take situatedness in its embodied and embedded forms seriously. If, however, our situatedness is not to paralyze us ethically and politically, then we must find ways to rise above our particularities so that transformative links can be made where differences are not violently erased. Only then will utopian thinking be a credible mode of thought and action “after metaphysics.”

NOTES

I would like to express my thanks to Nancy Tuana for comments on a very early draft of the paper, to two anonymous *Hypatia* readers, and the copyeditor who saved me from many mistakes.

1. One way to read Benhabib here is offering what we might term “weak rationalism,” as opposed to a “strong” view where principles of justice must be “freestanding,” which enables a strong conception of “Public Reason” to be operative in negotiating differences.

2. For further discussion on how such types of knowledge are embodied see Susan Bordo 1993; Lorraine Code 1991 and 1995; Maurice Merleau-Ponty 1962; and Richard Rorty 1979.

3. This pejorative label, whether explicitly or implicitly, is common in political philosophy. When, for example, “utopian” is used in context it is almost always in reference to naiveté or bad metaphysical thinking. There are many examples of this, but I will only mention one. Iris Marion Young (1990a), whose work is also important in making the connection between embodiment and transformative politics, unfortunately associates utopian thinking in this narrow way. While this view is certainly valid, it is by no means the only way to view utopian thought. In fact, I would argue that Young’s project is itself utopian in an embodied and embedded, hence modified way. But because showing this is beyond the scope of the present article I will not pursue it further.

4. I want to acknowledge that not all utopian thinkers engage in such fixed thought. In fact, many of them such as Charles Fourier and feminist utopian writers such as Octavia Butler do not (see, for example, Butler 1987 and Fourier 1971). My point in this discussion is not to claim that *all* utopian thinkers, especially traditional ones, are beyond redemption. Rather, my aim here is to show the presupposed view of the utopian that lies behind the rejection of suspicion of the label “utopian.” And even though Rousseau could be interpreted in a non-normative way (as Judith Shklar 1969 has eloquently done), Rousseau still illustrates the kind of thinking most philosophers have in mind when they hear, see, or invoke the word “utopian”; that is, one who is naïve and who seeks unified sameness at the expense of difference.

5. I am increasingly influenced by the compelling argument of Jane Mansbridge that “coercion must play a large, valuable, and relatively legitimate role in almost any democracy that functions well” (1996, 59). She is, however, quick to remind us that there is a tension in embracing this position and concludes the following:

[W]e must remember that in decision-making functions democracies need coercion, that the coercion is needed is usually far from fully legitimate, and that in using power, we must also fight it at the same time. To fight power means affirmatively encouraging oppositional discourses and oppositional cultures. Those discourses and cultures have evolved in part for the purpose of reminding their participants and, through them, the other members of society, of the illegitimate coercion and substantive injustice that pervades any existing democracy. These discourses and cultures make it easier to investigate different ends from those the larger polity is pursuing, and different means to similar ends. The different ways the cultures work and the different avenues they explore may later replace or supplement the ways that reign at present. (Mansbridge 1996, 59–60)

6. I borrow the language of “universal intent” from Michael Polanyi (1962) by way of Jerry Gill (1981).

7. I am indebted here to Dillon (1988, chaps. 7–8). I would also like to add here that Iris Young’s work on phenomenology, especially her utilization of Merleau-Ponty, is an important source to mention in support of the language of “structures,” which I embrace with regard to the utopian. Young is helpful because she shows how we can use the language of structures that is important to phenomenological investigation, but how these structures are understood not as givens. For example, she relies on an analysis of the structure of “transcendence.” At its root this is the structure of “I can.” However, Young helpfully shows how many, especially women, are incapable of experiencing fully this “I can” and instead, by virtue of patriarchy and other systemic oppressions, experience the “I cannot.” Young labels this inability to experience the *structure* of transcendence, *potentially* shared by all, *ambiguous transcendence*, which illustrates that ways in which structures are colored by one’s location. However, and this is my point in this extended discussion, Young does not reject the language of structures, which she rightly derives from phenomenology in general and from Merleau-Ponty in particular, but instead illustrates how such language is understood in relation to particular histories. For a fuller discussion of this see Young 1990b.

8. Let me add here that WHISPER does not exhaust the ways in which the utopian might relate to transforming our views of prostitution. For example, COYOTE (Call of Your Old Tired Ethics) could potentially be conceived as equally situated and utopian and illuminate the utopian as I developed it here. This is important to note because, first, COYOTE’s methods are different from WHISPER with regard to prostitution. And while their aims might be similar, namely, the betterment for the lives of women in general and those women who suffer from prostitution in particular, they both (different as they are) could be vehicles for situated utopian thought. Second, I note this alternative to reemphasize my refusal to suggest *a priori* where and where not the utopian might occur. To be sure, a case for COYOTE as instantiating the utopian would have to be made in much the same way as I have done here with WHISPER.

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