In the novel *Moo*, Jane Smiley depicts various characters adjusting to life at a large state university in the Midwest. A new student named Keri, described as a “one of those pretty but vapid girls,” rents a small room in a house that suits her very well, and perhaps even a little too well. “She could... look around this tiny, empty room and recognize it perfectly as the mold of the person she was going to become,” the narrator explains (Smiley 1998: 403). An African-American student named Mary is more troubled by her surroundings: “When she thought of the campus or her classes or even her room, she was absent... No amount of friendliness on the part of her roommates (white) or approval on the part of her professors (white) or partisanship on the part of her friends (black) ... got at the root of her problem—the longer she stayed here, and here was the whitest place she had ever been... the less she seemed to exist” (402).

What is the space that we inhabit as social creatures? How might we capture the effect of this space on our sense of individuality and freedom? It is not easy to identify the features of the social landscape. We respond to the climate of the workplace, the home, or the college campus as we walk down pathways and around physical barriers, largely without direct awareness. While Maurice Merleau-Ponty did not elaborate upon the social meanings of space, his study of embodiment sheds light on the relationship between social space and our sense of self. Most significantly, he argued that the oriented response of the body to its environment calls into question the persistent Cartesianism of social theory and philosophy. Under the influence of this Cartesianism, theorists and philosophers model space as a flat, empty, and preexistent place, and view the subject as first of all cognitive and only secondarily embodied.¹ This model of space and sub-

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¹ While I will focus on Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Cartesian rationalism in this essay, it
jectivity does not allow for the fact that our posture, gestures, and physical movements respond without conscious intervention to the world around us. Moreover, the objects that we perceive respond to us. We compose dimensions of space by the way in which we move through it.

Not only are features of the social and physical landscape rarely the focus of our attention, much of what we respond to may not be available for conscious or discursive analysis at all. Typically we respond to the surroundings through our peripheral vision. There is, however, one highly visible feature of the social landscape, and this is the dimension of color. Social observers have puzzled over the fact that long after the end of legal apartheid in the United States, blacks and whites do not live in the same neighborhoods or join the same churches, private clubs, or civic organizations. It is difficult to understand why this segregation continues long after the demise of publicly sanctioned racist ideologies and when the concept of race has lost all claim to scientific validity. Are we choosing voluntarily to separate from one another by race when we do not even think that race exists?

Liberal traditions of social and political theory focus on individual or institutional racism as well as individual choice as the primary factors for segregation, and I think that each of these factors accounts for much of the persistence of racial division. African Americans who choose to avoid certain neighborhoods or schools do so, in part, in response to specific racist incidents or persistent practices of exclusion or discrimination. The student Mary described in Smiley’s novel, however, is not bothered primarily by racist events or practices at her university. Her sense that something is wrong is more vague and more pervasive, and yet, as the narrator tells us, “Mary herself knew just what it was. It was that she could not imagine herself here. . . . [H]ere was the whitest place she had ever been” (Smiley 1998: 402).

Neither the traditional liberal view of the individual as an autonomous agent nor the contemporary model of social space as a set of institutional practices provides us sufficient tools for explaining the malaise that Mary experiences. As a black student at a liberal white university, Mary experiences a sense of not belonging that has less to do with the racist events and practices that she experiences than the whiteness of the space that she inhabits. Liberal theory lacks the conceptual resources to account for the impact of racism on the space in which we encounter one another. Following Merleau-Ponty, I will argue that this failure of liberal theory traces back to its implicit Cartesianism. Liberalism views the subject of political rights as disembodied, and the space the subject inhabits as a set of positions in a void. I will then explain the perpetuation of Cartesianism

in the dialectical philosophy of Hegel and Marx, Merleau-Ponty’s unfinished ontological study of space (developed late in his life) helps us to see past the lingering Cartesianism of contemporary liberal and leftist theory, while opening for philosophical reflection the space that can nourish or destroy us as embodied social subjects.

In his struggle to capture the elusive nature of this space, Merleau-Ponty borrows images and themes from Greek mythology. Merleau-Ponty, however, neither elaborates upon the significance of these borrowed images and themes nor reflects upon their meaning in the Greek context. The final section of my essay examines the political function of Greek mythology in ancient Greek democracy. The Greeks named the crimes that damage social space as acts of hubris, and they used the theater as well as the assembly to warn the elites of the consequences of hubris for the social milieu. Western democracy theory today needs to reacquaint itself with ancient legal and moral tools against social domination.

I. TOWARD A NEW HUMANISM

Merleau-Ponty’s political views are never fully developed. He appears to shift from Marxism toward liberalism between the writing of Humanism and Terror in the 1940s and of Adventures of the Dialectic in the 1950s. But while he clearly grows more suspicious of the undemocratic politics of the Soviet Union and Marxist ideology, he remains wary of liberalism’s blindness to the impact of class on democratic politics. As Merleau-Ponty argues, Marxist critique teaches us something important about the situatedness of the individual in a social and economic structure, which liberalism fails to fully grasp. In the epilogue of Adventures of the Dialectic, he calls at once for a new liberalism and a noncommunist left. In his shifting and sometimes ambiguous political positions, I view Merleau-Ponty as seeking a humanism that would acknowledge the concerns of liberals and their Marxist critics, while not yielding to the excesses of either side. Merleau-Ponty gives us a clue as to where this new humanism lies in his brief but persistent allusions to ancient Greek mythology and culture.

Merleau-Ponty draws upon Greek themes both in his Marxist critique of liberalism in Humanism and Terror as well as in his later critique of Marxism. In Humanism and Terror (1959: xxi), he defends Marxism as exposing the blind arrogance, or, as he writes, the tragic “hubris,” of liberalism’s formal conception of human rights. These formal, bourgeois rights fail to protect the social, cultural, and economic rights of individuals and repressed groups against the excesses of capitalism. Marxist regimes also have their excesses. Once again alluding to Greek themes, Merleau-Ponty explains (1973: esp. 207, 226) that the liberals are right to point out the need for “limits” on state power, and to insist on the importance of political “contestation” (or, as the Greeks would write, agon).
While Merleau-Ponty never elaborates on the political significance of his poetics of space, or the Greek myth upon which this poetics draws in his later work, he clearly believes that he could find in this poetics the basis for a broader social humanism. Today, in our second decade after the end of the Cold War, we may believe that Marxist ideology is dead and that liberalism has won the twentieth-century war of ideologies. But the Marxist interest in class consciousness has returned and multiplied through the guise of American-style identity politics, anti-globalization movements, and the mounting critique of U.S. arrogance voiced by oppressed peoples. These diverse movements suggest the need to moderate the excesses of liberal capitalism, but they fail in their differences to articulate a vision for a common humanity. Merleau-Ponty's poetics of space allows us to attend to some of the tears in the social fabric that these movements critique while giving us a sense of the interconnections that we need to sustain for a global humanism.

Before we tease out a political vision from Merleau-Ponty's poetics of space, we need to examine the specific critique of liberalism that his method yields. In *Humanism and Terror*, Merleau-Ponty critiques liberalism on the basis of insights from his early work on the phenomenology of perception. The problem with liberalism, he argues, is that it works only in theory. While liberalism aims to protect the individual against many forms of coercion, it fails to protect the individual against exploitative labor practices. The contemporary liberal theorist John Rawls intends to correct for the injustices of these economic policies through a strong commitment to redistributive justice. In various respects, however, Rawlsian liberalism fails to meet the challenges that Merleau-Ponty poses. Along with other liberal theorists, Rawls defends as the central moral claim of liberalism the principle that we should treat each individual as an "end in himself," or as a "pure consciousness" (Kymlicka 1990: 103). In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls (1971: 12) argues that the ability of the rational ego to think uninfluenced by social status, class position, and the like is critical for entering what he terms the "original position" and constructing principles of justice. More generally, liberal theory presupposes the moral capacity to judge another apart from morally irrelevant categories such as status, class, and race. Without this capacity for abstraction, according to liberal theory, we would lack the capacity to treat each other as moral equals (13).

But if the rational mind is inextricably linked with a body-in-space, as Merleau-Ponty's early phenomenology suggests, then it is impossible in principle to treat the other person from a perspective that abstracts altogether from our social position. Liberalism's important goal of moral equality requires a more realistic foundation. Merleau-Ponty's early phenomenological studies of the embodied subject demonstrate that we do not encounter "naked" subjects, but only persons with specific roles or positions in socioeconomic systems. This does not mean that we do not see their individuality, as Merleau-Ponty suggests in his discussion of some of our more authentic personal roles and relationships: "As in love, in affection, or in friendship, we do not encounter face to face 'consciousnesses' whose absolute individuality we could respect at every moment, but [unique] beings qualified as 'my son,' 'my wife,' 'my friend'" (1969: 110). The fact that we do not experience ourselves as bare individuals but as individuals-in-relationships throws into question liberalism's focus on autonomy as the ultimate measure of freedom: "If one loves, one finds one's freedom precisely in the act of loving, and not in a vain autonomy," he adds (1964: 154). There does not exist a "plurality of subjects [as liberalism presupposes], but an intersubjectivity, and that is why there exists a common measure of the evil inflicted upon certain people and of the good gotten out of it by others" (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 110).

The liberal conception of basic freedoms is designed to guarantee individuals a private space to carve out their own identity as they choose. Freedom for the liberal means first of all noninterference. A larger perspective reveals the role that well-intentioned individuals occupy in a socioeconomic system, and this system, as the Marxists argue, exploits workers and creates patterns of domination through status. Abstracting liberal theory from social realities is the essential error, in fact, the "tragic blindness," of liberal traditions of philosophy. To understand and judge a society, one has to penetrate... to the human bond upon which it is built; this undoubtedly depends upon legal relations, but also upon forms of labor, ways of loving, living, and dying" (Merleau-Ponty 1969: xiv). The liberal, or existential, "ideology of choice" is blind to the way in which "my tasks are presented to me, not as objects or ends, but as reliefs and configurations, that is to say, in the landscape of praxis" (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 198-99). We need to acknowledge, Merleau-Ponty concludes, that there is more to the world than "men and things," as liberal theory presupposes. As individuals, we mediate our relationships through symbols, and these symbols, I would add, can secure or destroy the social milieu. Our actions cannot be judged by their intentions or causal consequences alone; they must be judged as well through "the effect that they will have as a meaningful gesture." "Truly all action is symbolic." (200, 201)

Contemporary critics of liberalism (including communitarians, Marxists, and many feminists) join with Merleau-Ponty to accuse liberals of over-valoring the role of choice. These critics agree that liberal theorists fail to acknowledge the full significance of social, historical, or cultural dimensions of the...

individual. I think these critics are, in part, right. Rawlsian theory maintains that access to civil liberties, equal opportunities, and basic material goods suffices to secure individuals a meaningful experience of freedom. Freedom is conceived narrowly in terms of the ability to choose one's own lifestyle apart from external coercion. Of course, the liberal does not deny the importance of social relationships, cultural traditions, or historical embeddedness, but liberalism's primary aim is to protect the autonomy of the individual and the moral neutrality (or relative neutrality) of the state. If freedom for the liberal means non-interference, then the individual does not expect the state or other civic authority to foster forms of interdependence and social relatedness. If, as Merleau-Ponty argues, we encounter individuals always already in relation with one another, then the view of space as an arena for autonomous decision making and self-chosen relationships does not cohere with lived experience.

As the critics point out, the liberal conception of civil society models the individual as an atom in the void, and as a consequence overlooks the importance of the social fabric for weaving together the relationships that sustain us. For these critics, individual choices operate best when they occur within the relationships that make these choices meaningful. The state should not take as its primary aim the need to protect individual choice, although this remains a concern. More important, the state or community needs to protect the relationships that make choices meaningful.

While liberals recognize that human beings are by nature social creatures in need of meaningful human relationships, I do not think that even the most socially minded liberal theory has plumbed the depth of meaning that underlies our social life. Rawls (1971: 440) handles the social question in large part by adding the "social bases of self-respect" to the list of primary goods (including basic liberties, opportunities, and wealth) that are to be protected by the state. Certainly, consideration of the "social bases of self-respect" is an important tool for correcting social inequalities. As Will Kymlicka explains, "the US Supreme Court struck down segregated education for blacks, even where the facilities were funded equally, because it was perceived as a badge of inferiority, damaging black children's motivation and self-respect" (1990: 153). Whether liberals today argue for the integration of public schools or favor equal funding for community-based schools, they typically base their arguments on the need for self-respect as a primary good.

The inclusion of self-respect as a primary social good marks an advance in liberal theory. While Rawls theorizes the individual as a rational, self-interested ego, and not first of all as a social being, he acknowledges the impact of social forces on one's ownmost sense of self (Rawls 1971: 148). As Kymlicka rightly points out, Rawlsian liberalism "demands that each person start life with an equal share of society's resources, which is a striking attack on the entrenched divisions of class, race, and gender in our society" (1990: 86). The problem with liberalism's focus on self-respect is that it reduces our immersion in social space to a psychological dimension of the individual, in fact, one more dimension alongside rational capacities and physical needs. The African-American girl that Jane Smiley describes in her novel does not suffer from diminished self-esteem, but she does suffer from a sense of malaise while attending the white university. The focus on the personality of the individual does not come to terms with the fact that sociality is not only a dimension of the individual; it is the air that we breathe, the element of our lives.

If liberalism fails to capture the element of our social lives, Marxism does not fare much better. Like liberalism, Marxism may sound good in theory, but it does not work in practice. While the traditional liberal perceives space through the abstract constructions of Cartesian geometry, the Marxist ideologue reduces the social landscape to a materialist operation defined by cause and effect. As a consequence, much of Marxism (and too much of leftist identity politics, I would add) sees individuals in terms of their social positions and then authorizes the abuse of those who do not occupy the positions that are politically correct. Merleau-Ponty observes that the doctrinaire Marxist is forced to abandon the possibility of a universal ethics and to think instead in terms of the violence of class politics. The Marxist then tries to regain some moral legitimacy by distinguishing progressive and regressive forms of violence. As Merleau-Ponty explains, this legitimacy relies solely upon granting the perspective of one social group, the proletariat, universal moral relevance. On the Marxist view, the unmediated aims of a single class carries the world toward a greater humanism.

One of the immediate problems with the Marxist view is that the proletariat is not in fact the "pure" class that doctrinaire Marxists (and the younger Merleau-Ponty) seek. This proletariat is divided by ethnic and religious differences and, most crucially perhaps in the American setting, by race. The support among U.S. workers of NAFTA as a preventive measure against Mexican immigration, of an expanded prison system, and of ending welfare is based not on shared interests but on white racism. The liberal or leftist aim of "building coalitions 'no longer bedeviled by race' perfectly illustrates the tendency to remove the 'workers' from the considerations of 'white workers,'" historian David Roediger writes (1988: 55). The political appeal to a pure class of dispossessed workers fails to take into account the way in which whiteness functions in the United States as a source of capital (or, as one historian writes, "property").

Color, as the most prominent indicator of race, is not the only factor dividing workers. What legal theorist Kimberle Crenshaw lays out as an intersectional

analysis of the position of women of color reveals that multiple and often conflicting factors affect status and power. This analysis rules out any hypothesis of a “pure” class (or race or gender) identity.

The ideological claim that some class or culture (for example, liberal capitalism) stands totally outside of power, and represents the universal, reflects a dialectical logic that sharply opposes two (or more) perspectives. Social theorist Patricia Hill Collins (1988: 5) uses the term “outsider within” in place of the Marxist concept of the pure proletariat in order to clarify the more ambiguous situation of the black workers in the U.S. economy. The black service worker does not stand outside of the socioeconomic system with nothing to lose but her chains. She is tied to the system through her need to support her family, friends, and community as well as through: the limited status and power that she acquires through her work. Society is not radically divided between two (or more) classes or perspectives, but stratified in such a way that individuals have varying degrees of status and power. The all-or-nothing ontology of dialectic, no less than the formalism of liberalism, abstracts from the diverse forces that impact individual lives in the stratified social sphere. The question posed by an intersectional analysis is how to acknowledge the multiple perspectives and social positions of American identity politics, and yet locate what holds together a common humanity.

Perhaps the most exciting contribution of Merleau-Ponty to a theory of social justice is not his political philosophy or even his early studies of perception. His most exciting contribution to justice theory comes from his late, unfinished studies on the space in which perceiving subjects and perceived objects are immersed. In these studies Merleau-Ponty argued that philosophers following Descartes, including Hegel and Marx, have tried to map space through a multidimensional determination of a set of positions. The Cartesian-Hegelian (or Marxist) model empties space of texture and meaning. Merleau-Ponty offers in its place a poetics that respects the tacit resonances and curved lines of space; he develops this poetics from his study of depth and color in visual art. From this study, he describes space as an interconnecting tissue of sensitivities, and he names this tissue “flesh.”

Space as an experience of depth and color, or of an interconnecting “tissue” of sensitivities, offers a way of understanding the persistence of racial segregation. Merleau-Ponty, focusing for most of his life on the problems of perception, did not give much attention to the politics of space. In his poetics, he describes space as of a piece, without tears in its fine fabric or dissonance in the play of its oblique meanings. What if we were to bring his ontology of space to the political arena? Could his appreciation for depth and color help us to discern the in-visible barriers of the social landscape? Could this political landscape bring us beyond the contemporary polemics of liberals and their critics to a new humanism?

II. THE POETICS OF SPACE

In the essay “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty notes that “the ‘problems’ of painting that structure its history are often solved obliquely, not in the course of inquiries instigated to solve them but, on the contrary, at some point when painters, having reached an impasse, apparently forget those problems and allow themselves to be attracted by other things. Then suddenly, their attention elsewhere, they happen upon the old problems and surmount the obstacle” (Merleau-Ponty 1993: 149). Perhaps too some problems of our political life are best confronted not directly but, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, through circuitous paths. For this reason, I will swerve away from major social issues, and take a detour through Merleau-Ponty’s remarks on color and depth in painting.

In his late essays, including “Eye and Mind” and “The Intertwining—the Chains,” Merleau-Ponty takes a step back from his earlier focus on the perceiving subject and the visible object to consider the “thereness” of space. Space is not itself visible, and yet it is in space that subjects and objects appear. We might first think of space as akin to an empty box or to a grid point on a plane. Beginning with these intuitions, Descartes, and Hegel after him, explained space in terms of intersecting planes based on three dimensions. Merleau-Ponty points out that this Cartesian-Hegelian conception of space reflects the technical advances of Renaissance painting. While medieval and classical artists drew figures as though they were ornaments on a flat surface, Renaissance painters were able to convey depth on the flat canvas by constructing lines of perspective. Nonfigurative paintings from the twentieth century such as Paul Klee’s 1938 Park near Lucerne and Cézanne’s late watercolors provide a clue as to what the artists of the Renaissance and the modernist writers have been able to bring to the surface. In Cézanne’s watercolor of Mont Sainte-Victoire (1900), “space ... radiates around planes that cannot be assigned any place at all” (Merleau-Ponty 1993: 141). Merleau-Ponty contrasts the “flowing movement” of the watercolor with the mechanical line of Renaissance perspective painting. As Galen Johnson (1993: 39, 41) explains, Renaissance painting belongs to a world of scientific and technological domination that “imposes a fixed, univocal perspective of godlike survey.” But Merleau-Ponty does not see in modern painting the simple fragmentation of multiple perspectives. He sees planes bent around a

7. See Fóti 1993: 293–308.
space in which these multiple perspectives are submerged. Nonfigurative art is not about multiple subjects or objects but about the space that we inhabit together. This space is not composed of a series of straight lines that define either single or multiple perspectives. Space curves around meanings that linger in the air through which we move. Modern twentieth-century art does not oppose Renaissance univocality with its own perspectivism. Modern art evokes the space in which perspectival subjects and visible objects are submerged.

The nondiscursive meanings that nonfigurative art evokes give space its depth. Describing the voluminosness of space as less a dimension than a medium, Edward Casey writes that “depth is something that we first of all feel.” “Like an aura or atmosphere . . . it is neither a substance nor a relation, but subtends both” (Casey 1991: 134). This space is neither homogenous nor static. Merleau-Ponty describes it as a density with ebbs and flows, and even turbulence, like water (1993: 123). “When through the water’s thickness I see the rolled bottom of the pool, I do not see it despite the water . . . I see it through [that medium] and because [of it]” (142). While the thickness of space resists measurement, it has its distinct expressive unity and coherence, or style. Characteristic rhythms, colors, tone, and textures distinguish one part of space from another, giving space its directionality and asymmetry (cf. Casey 1991: 134). Johnson identifies “the inner animation” of space as a “source of the self” (1993: 46). This is a source of the self that is experienced but not known, or as Merleau-Ponty remarks in a note (1968: 257), this space of origin “exists . . . kinesthetically” but not conceptually, withdrawing ever to the fringes of our perception.

“To designate [this space],” Merleau-Ponty continues (1968: 139), “we should need the old term ‘element,’ in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire . . . a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being.” The thickness that he describes in terms of a classic element from Greek mythology he also names as flesh. What we see in the visible world, Merleau-Ponty writes, are “things we could not dream of seeing ‘all naked’ because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh.” “Tissue that lines [the visibles], sustains them, [and] nourishes them . . . is not a thing, but . . . a flesh of things” (131, 132–33).

The flesh of space is no more transparent than is the flesh of our body, and like our flesh, space is known through the dimension of color. While modern philosophers and engravers may dismiss color as a “secondary quality,” the return to color has the virtue of getting somewhat nearer to ‘the heart of things’” (Merleau-Ponty 1993: 141, quoting Paul Klee). “Cézanne . . . went directly to the solid, to space—and came to find that inside this space—this box or container too large for them—[that] the things began to move, color against color . . . The problem [for the painter] . . . is no longer solely that of distance, line and form; it is also, and equally, the problem of color” (140–41).

This is because any particular instance of a color receives its meaning “only by connecting up from its place . . . with other colors it dominates or that dominate it, that it attracts or . . . repels” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 132). The precise red used by a painter or found in our surroundings takes on a rhythm, texture, and feel from an invisible fabric of meanings that gives this red its particular force. These meanings may not be discursive, but they are not lacking in historical, political, or social references. As Merleau-Ponty writes, a particular red “is a punctuation in the field of red things, which includes the tiles of roof tops, the flags of gatekeepers and of the Revolution” (132). The colors that we encounter have specific cultural and political meanings. Some of these meanings may call for war, social unrest, or revolutionary violence.

“Philosophy paints without colors in black and white, like copperplate engravings,” Merleau-Ponty remarks (quoted in Foti 1993: 293). For “colors,” as Véronique Foti (1993: 293) explains, “are suspected by philosophy . . . [T]he light of reason, supposedly, is achromatic.” It is also true that the perceiver ordinarily does not see color, or at least not consciously. Along with lighting, shadows, and reflections, color “exists at the threshold of profane vision,” it is “not ordinarily seen,” Merleau-Ponty writes (1993: 128). But if the perceiver, unlike the artist, does not observe color, she nonetheless responds to it. As Merleau-Ponty explains (1993: 125), “my body is . . . caught in the fabric of the world . . . Things are an annex or prolongation of [my body]; they are incrusted in its flesh.” I do not find these things in a space that is flat, empty, and preexistent—these things are wrapped in my own flesh.

### III. Racialization of Space

In a front-page article in a Pulitzer Prize-winning series on race for the New York Times, a journalist interviews school age children in Maplewood, New Jersey. This “is the kind of place where people—black and white—talk a lot about the virtues of diversity and worry about white flight, where hundreds will turn out to discuss the book Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” . . . But even here, as if pulled by internal magnets, black and white children begin to separate at sixth grade. These are children who walked to school together, learned to read together, slept over at each other’s houses. But despite all the personal history, all the community good will, race divides them as they grow up” (Lewin 2000: 14).

The issue of self-segregation in primary and secondary schools in America may appear to be relatively benign: this issue is connected, however, to a more pressing one in a society that claims to base rewards on merit and not color. On every major measure of academic achievement, white children perform better than black children, and this gap remains even after controlling for educational and class background of the children’s families (Lewin 2000: 15). Moreover, this
issue does not disappear in higher education. In *The Agony of Education* (Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996), several sociologists interview black college students at white colleges and universities, seeking answers to the question of poor black advancement in higher education. These social scientists come to the same conclusion as the report on the public schools: the integration of the American educational system is not working.

Some of the causes for the failure of schools are well documented. There is no doubt that the educational achievement of whites owes much to institutional discrimination against nonwhite children in school (including the differential tracking of students), prejudices of white teachers against children of color, and larger patterns of discrimination against black families (housing, loans, jobs, etc.). Prisons, in America, expand faster than do schools, and these prisons are full of disadvantaged populations who too often are presumed but not proven guilty. Many of the more sensitive adolescents respond to these hypocrisies by turning their back on the system and identifying with prison culture (gangsta rap, butt breeches, and crack cocaine). Liberal political leaders, including the former Atlanta mayor Andrew Young (2001), point out the urgent need to overcome disparities between whites and blacks in access to capital, and they are right to do so. But if the gap between white and black performance in schools remains after controlling for the economic and educational backgrounds of families, then something besides access to capital is perpetuating segregation among our children.

This more subtle factor may be impossible to conceptualize, but black families know that it is there. These families tell of how black honor students reject admission to prestigious white institutions because of the vague sense that something “felt bad” or because they felt “out of place” despite the honor student’s clear merit (Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996: 5). They perceive these institutions as reeking of “whiteness,” and one parent explains that this is just “a thing you can feel... nothing [no racial incident] happened. It’s just an atmosphere” (73).

The sociologists explain that black students attending white schools are “forced to adapt to white views, norms, and practices. Predominantly white colleges and universities are more than demographically white; typically, they are white in their basic cultures and climates” (Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996: xi). In fact, these schools never did aim in their policies to change basic norms and climates to welcome black students; on the contrary, integrative policies function to “assimilate young black people in a unidirectional manner to the dominant white... culture” (12). The research into white space directly challenges what these social scientists refer to as the “passive container” model of space. “Most human beings,” they argue, “view space expressively and symbolically” (49). When black students report of schools that reek of whiteness, they are “speaking of the overall character and tone of that campus space” (16). “For these African Americans, as for most other Americans, the basic unity of human reality is not the individual human being but rather a cluster of social ties and relations that extend across space and time. The experiential reality of space is at the heart of interpersonal ties and is a critical element of U.S. racial relations,” these sociologists explain (16).

White students and teachers often enough express their dismay that black students choose to self-segregate, and it is true that segregation in the schools is largely initiated by blacks. I have discussed with other faculty at Emory the curious fact that while our university boasts a very high proportion of black students relative to other historically white universities, black students are much more likely to miss classes than are other students; these black students are also more likely to miss not just a few classes but a sizable amount of the semester, and black students are much more likely to drop out of Emory before graduation. The sociological study points out that with or without awareness, white students and teachers have in fact marked what they perceive to be neutral public or quasi-public spaces as their own. They mark these spaces through gestures, classroom practices, and other embodied styles of expression. These signs send messages that blacks are anomalous, if not intruders onto white space. This tacit racialization of space through style explains why the occasional black student in the classroom at a predominantly white university, no less than the black philosopher at the American Philosophical Society, stands out as highly visible. This space has been marked as white turf by body gestures and styles of movement that work below the threshold of consciousness. This is not simply an issue of whether the percentage of blacks in a particular institution reflects the percentage of blacks in the larger society. Liberal white students and teachers may or may not affirm the principle of integration, but they continue to act white. In order to reclaim a space of their own, black students develop styles that mark their distinct identity and challenge white domination. One of the consequences may appear in standard measures of merit. If whites own the tests, the honors classes, and even the schools, then performing well by allegedly neutral academic standards is equivalent to “acting white” (Lewin 2000: 15).

In his major essays on space, “The Intertwining—the Chiasm” and “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty does not discuss the political ramifications of his phenomenology. He elaborates upon the prediscursive meanings of space through images drawn primarily from Greek mythology, while excising these images from the political context that was their home. He describes space as an element like water, and he depicts the perceiving subject through the mythic figure of Narcissus. “The seer is caught up in what he sees, and it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision,” he writes (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 359). Through this poetics, he envisions the stylization of space as an experience that is originally (although not finally) as solitary as the work of the modern painter. The sociologists (Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996) approach the poetics of space not through modern art but through racial politics, and their metaphors
center around turf marking, visibility, and recognition. Other writers approach this space differently again. Toni Morrison (1998: 10) describes the desire for belonging through images of home, acknowledgment, and a paying-out of homage due.

When Merleau-Ponty expands his focus in these essays beyond the solitary individual to the social realm, he does not describe the middle distance of the turf war or the haunted intimacy of a homecoming. He describes the “synergy” that exists between “different organisms.” He believes that “the synergy derives in part from the fact that we share the same sense of a particular color” (1968: 142). “I recognize in my green his green,” he writes (142). For those who are sensitive to the role of color in the social and political landscape, this statement appears naive. Space is charged with civisive political meanings, and in the United States these meanings are racially coded. The black children in Maplewood, New Jersey, no less than writers like Morrison, aim to create new meanings for color, performing through their elaboration of a style what Merleau-Ponty calls the “labor of vision” (1993: 129). For the hip-hop generation, this labor of vision appears in reappropriating white space through “black noise” (both mainstream and underground rap music), break dancing, and graffiti art. For Morrison, the broken lyrical style of her narratives pays homage to lives denied by white history. However much they differ, these authors and artists agree that space is not a vacuum, and that we are submerged in a depth that is larger than ourselves. They also agree that this space is indexed by color. But then what are the political implications of this space?

IV. THE POLITICS OF SPACE

Merleau-Ponty’s remarks on the ontology of space point beyond the liberal model of space as empty space as well as the leftist demarcation of space as a set of social positions. These models focus on the perspective of rational egos or social groups, while neglecting the space in which we are all immersed. Both views of space draw implicitly upon the Cartesianism that Merleau-Ponty critiques most fully in his study of painting. There he explains that the Cartesian model of space reduces the individual’s experience of depth to a matter of perspective, and he urges us to “eschew... thinking by planes and perspectives” (1968: 138). We are not spectators on life representing a point of view, but individuals with embodied styles of responding to what we see around us. The presence of style makes it difficult to determine the boundaries between the individual and the world. Just as the things that we encounter are “incrusted” upon our flesh, so we inscribe our style upon our surroundings. The social sphere contains the meanings that we inscribe with our bodies and communicates these meanings to others. Without the mapping of my style into the social realm, and the encounter there of limits imposed on what we can do through the gestures of others, “there would be no humanity” (Merleau-Ponty 1993: 125). As neither pure subjects nor pure objects, neither ends nor means, our distinct individuality takes shape through the styles that we embody in the social milieu. Before we adopt the liberal procedures of an abstract self-consciousness or the positional consciousness of identity theory, we develop a sense of ourselves through our style of comportment in our surroundings.

Like the Renaissance engraver, the liberal theorist abstracts the individual from the space in which he is immersed and imposes “a fixed, univocal perspective of godlike survey” (Merleau-Ponty 1993: 141). The liberal constructs principles of justice on the basis of unconditional respect for the other despite the fact that the other-in-a-situation is never encountered stripped bare of his or her habits, or of what Merleau-Ponty terms style. The style of expression testifies to the class, race, and gender affiliations of an individual. But these social markings do not determine the choices or perspective of an individual, and they do not limit her perspective to her social position. These markings do introduce meanings to which the individual consciously or unconsciously responds.

Leftist social theory makes it seem almost impossible to understand how we can transcend the perspective of our class or other social position. According to the Marxist, the capitalist sees the worker as nothing more than an instrument of labor. Marxism “had understood that it is inevitable that our understanding of history should be partial since every consciousness is historically situated” (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 19). Certainly the capitalist does treat the worker as nothing more than an instrument of labor, but Merleau-Ponty’s model of the space as flesh helps us to understand how it is also possible for the capitalist to stand close enough to the worker so as to “hear his breath and feel his effervescence and his fatigue” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 144). It is possible for the capitalist to know the worker not only as an instrument but also as an individual character with a style of his or her own.

Neither the liberal nor the Marxist has the theoretical tools to explore the space that binds the capitalist and worker together or the element of style that gives each a sense of his or her own individuality. Space is neither a void nor a set of possible positions on a Cartesian plane. Space is weighted, dense with equivalences, curved by forces of repulsion and attraction, animated by specters from the past, and revitalized through nonsupportive sources of value and pleasure. Through its curved lines, space takes us beyond ourselves and our “posi-

8. Merleau-Ponty traces the abstract thinking of the liberal to Calvinism: “Summoned to break the vital alliance that we have with time, with others, and with the world, the Calvinist pushes to its limits a demystification that is also a dehumanization... The... church [and even] human friendships... are rejected as magic” (1973: 14–15). It is this classic liberalism that disturbs him throughout his life.
tions" to feel in our own way with, or against, others. This space is an extension of the individual who possesses a rational ego and a class position, but who is more essentially defined through his or her style of comportment. Neither the liberal concept of autonomy nor the Marxist concept of social position provide us with moral norms for the embodied subject. Merleau-Ponty gives us a clue as to where to find these norms in his constant reference to images and themes from classical Greek culture.

V. JUSTICE IN THE SOCIAL ELEMENT

In Humanism and Terror, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we might discover the moral meaning of human life in classical tragedy. The tragedy of human life, he offers, is that while our individual worth should be measured by inner motives, our worth will in fact be measured by actions whose meaning we will never know (1969: 62). For "man can neither suppress his nature as freedom... nor question... [the] tribunal" of history which sets his tragic fate (64). Classical tragedy may in fact teach us much about the meaning of modern life. But while the conflict between public and private spheres defines a prominent theme for the middle class in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this conflict does not capture the moral forces articulated in ancient law and literature. For the ancient Greek people, man was in essence, as Aristotle wrote, the social animal. The moral turmoil of classical tragedy did not focus on threats to the inner worth of the private man or his moral right to autonomy. In classical drama, moral turmoil centers on the violation of social bonds (or philia). Merleau-Ponty is right to turn to Greek theater for a place where art, culture, and politics would meet, but ancient theater reveals categories of justice beyond the liberalism of the modern middle class.

Oedipus Rex signals this alternative focus at the opening of the play, where Sophocles portrays a city beset with plague. The general malaise of the city points beyond the physical ailments of the inhabitants and the infertility of the land to the social pollution of the community itself. The priest speaks of his city as a ship that "pitches wildly, [and] cannot lift her head from the depths, the red waves of death." The audience learns a terrible crime has left the city a "wasteland... stripped of men alive within it, living all as one" (Sophocles 1984, lines 30, 67). The crime that defines the plot of ancient tragic drama does not harm only the victim. The consequences of the crime boomerang to bring down the perpetrator and befoul a whole community. But what was the nature of this crime?

Contemporary scholars emphasize the importance of understanding Greek plays in the context of performance rather than simply through a formal analysis of their meaning or structure, and Merleau-Ponty would surely have to agree. One of the most revealing features of these plays is the composition of choruses. These choruses were composed of ordinary citizens, primarily the poor crafts-

men and farmers, who were drafted in lieu of military service. The participation of the ordinary citizen in theater may have played at least as important a role in maintaining Athenian democracy as the assembly. One scholar (Ober 1989: 208--12) argues persuasively that the masses, or demos, turned to the theater in order to communicate political concerns to the elite, and they communicated these concerns through the music, gesture, and dance of the chorus in tragic plays. While some scholars emphasize that citizens who performed in the chorus represented the largely working poor population of Athens, another group of scholars observes that in their dramatic persona, they represent, remarkably often, a socially marginal segment of society—women, old men, foreigners, underlings, or even slaves. They are thus far from being an embodiment of the Athenian polis... in the abstract" (Blondell et al. 1999: 39).

While the democratic choruses of Greek tragedies represent diverse social positions, these choruses sing in a unified voice. "Hubris breeds the tyrant," the chorus of Oedipus rings out to the audience (line 964). Through their songs, the choruses warn the elite of the mortal crime of hubris, and of the consequences of arrogance for the well-being of the city. The hubris of the elites does not just harm individuals and the relationships between them; hubris weakens the fabric that holds a community together. In ancient Athenian democracy, the demos had the legal right to charge the elite with arrogance and bring these individuals before the courts. These charges focus not just on the substance of the hubristic act but on the immoderate manner (or style) in which the agent acts. Laws and social codes against hubris served to protect individuals of lower status against the excesses of those of higher status. While modern liberalism articulates principles of justice in abstraction from the stratification of society, Marxism conceives of strata in starkly economic terms. Both liberalism and Marxism lack the category of hubris and, as a consequence, fail to acknowledge specters of domination and violence that haunt the highly stratified public domain.

Liberalism dreams that it can "exorcize these specters... brush them to one side of an unequivocal world," Merleau-Ponty writes (1993: 130). The liberal ideal of a color-blind society is one such dream, for it assumes capacities that we do not have. We may transform the meaning of color, but we cannot abstract from color or other signs of status and view each other entirely outside of our social positions. In the name of an impossible ideal, liberals attack nonliberal regimes for failing to recognize the individual as an end in itself, and for contaminating the public sphere with religious ideology or other moral values. This is our hubris. The normative American citizen inscribes whiteness wherever he or she goes. We may not see the whiteness that is inscribed; color and other nondiscursive qualities in our space hover at the periphery of our ordinary consciousness. Only the racist focuses directly on color and judges an individual

accordingly. But the liberal is wrong to think that we can construct formal principles of fairness in abstraction from social realities.\textsuperscript{10} We do not live and work in a void but in a space that establishes our status and power, in part, through color. We need to construct our principles of moral equality from an awareness of the stratification of society and not in abstraction from it. This is liberalism's mistake.

When the African-American character in Jane Smiley's novel reflects upon campus life at her liberal white university she experiences a general malaise. The white professors and students are friendly, she has her black friends, and yet "when she thought of the campus . . . she was absent. There wasn't even a space where a black person should be. Embarrassed as she would have been to admit it, this seemed to be the ultimate effect of that time in the commons," the narrator explains (Smiley 1998: 402). "That time" refers to a relatively minor incident in the school cafeteria when a white boy had called her the "N word." This single, isolated event might be harmless by itself but, in the racial climate of the United States, the event touches off associations and resonates with past harms. These harms did not begin in the United States; they began hundreds of years ago in Africa, and they continue to haunt our social space. It is common to report, as the New York Times journalist does, on the sensitivity of blacks to "slights from friends of a different race" (Lewin 2000: 15). It is less common to understand why this sensitivity occurs. The Times article links themes of sensitivity and insult with style and space, the central themes of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. And like Merleau-Ponty, the article alludes to central themes of ancient Greek culture. It describes the schoolchildren of Maplewood, New Jersey, as "like a Greek chorus" and warns that these children's experiences warn us to expect "tricky currents ahead" for interracial friendships in their schools and communities (14). The choruses of classic tragedy understood slights among those who should be friends as acts of hubris, and they communicated through rhythm and tone the turbulence these assaults bring, not only to individuals but also to the moral climate for generations to come. Hubris was understood to be the cause of war, social unrest, and revolutionary violence. For this reason, the Greeks constructed moral codes and laws against it. In modern middle-class democracies, we understand arrogance as an individual moral failing, but this is not enough. We need as well to understand hubris as a category in our law and literature and in our theories of national and international justice.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} This is what Rawls (1971: 12) describes as the original position.
\textsuperscript{11} For more on this topic, see Willett 2001.