

I LINGUAGGI DELLE
SCIENZE COGNITIVE

a cura di
DONATA CHIRICÒ

Progettare la cognizione

Nuove prospettive di ricerca interdisciplinare



(CORISCO)

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Giovanni Pennisi

*Home, space, boundaries:
a geography of the body in racialized experiences*

Abstract

In this paper I will propose an embodied approach to the problem of racism. Relying on a definition of the term *embodiment* as “the experience of one’s body in the first-person perspective”, and, conversely, on a description of *disembodiment* as “the condition in which the subject of conscious experience is localized outside the person’s bodily borders”, I will frame racialized experiences as a shift from the first to the second extreme of the embodiment-disembodiment spectrum. In doing this, I will draw on many authors who, addressing the issue of being racially discriminated against as a matter of feeling distant or detached from one’s own body, shed light on phenomena such as racialized people’s feeling of being “not-at-home” in their own bodies, and perception of being compelled to live their space in restricted ways. I will dwell on both the concepts of “body-at-home” and of “space-as-I-can” and reunite them under Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “lived body”, in order to provide a solid theoretical background to the embodied approach to racism; then, I will show why such concepts allow us to better understand the results of some studies which proved that the virtual embodiment of a black body reduces white people’s implicit racial bias. The relationship between the phenomenological account of the lived-body and the virtual “erasure” of the boundaries between the white and the black body will be discussed in the final part of the paper.

Keywords: Embodiment, Racism, Lived body, Body-at-home, Space-as-I-can

Riassunto

In questo articolo proporrò un approccio “embodied” al problema del razzismo. Appoggiandomi a una definizione del termine *embodiment* come “l’esperienza del proprio corpo in una prospettiva in prima persona” e, specularmente, a una descrizione del *disembodiment* come di quella condizione in cui “il soggetto dell’esperienza conscia è localizzato al di fuori dei confini corporei della persona”, inquadrerò l’esperienza del subire atti di razzismo come un passaggio dal primo al secondo estremo dello spettro embodiment-disembodiment. A tal fine, attingerò a diversi autori che, nell’affrontare la questione della discriminazione razziale in termini di una pratica capace di generare in chi ne è vittima un sentimento di distacco dal proprio corpo, hanno gettato luce su due fenomeni interrelati: la sensazione di non essere “a casa” nel proprio corpo e la percezione di essere costretti a vivere il proprio spazio in modi limitati. Approfondirò tanto il concetto di “corpo-a-casa” quanto quello di “spazio-in-quanto-possibilità”, riunendo entrambi sotto la nozione di “corpo vissuto” di Merleau-Ponty, al fine di dotare l’approccio “embodied” al razzismo di una solida base teoretica. In seguito, mostrerò come tali concetti forniscano una nuova chiave di lettura dei risultati di alcuni studi sperimentali che hanno dimostrato come l’incarnamento virtuale (realizzato tramite VR) di un corpo nero sia capace di ridurre il pregiudizio razziale implicito in molte persone bianche. La relazione tra l’approccio fenomenologico fondato sull’idea di “corpo vissuto” e la “cancellazione” virtuale dei confini tra corpo bianco e corpo nero verrà discussa nella parte finale dell’articolo.

Parole chiave: Embodiment, Razzismo, Corpo vissuto, Corpo-a-casa, Spazio-in-quanto-possibilità

1. Introduction

According to *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (Gregory *et al.* 2009), human geography «is centrally concerned with the ways in which place, space and environment are both the condition and in part the consequence of human activities» (350). The interdependence between human action and environment, which is considered pivotal by those who work within that field of research, is notoriously the core of phenomenological inquiry too. Basing on such a common ground, human geography and phenomenology proved to be two approaches that can fruitfully contribute one another (Ash & Simpson 2016; Simonsen & Koefoed 2017; Simonsen 2013). At the center of this entanglement lies the concept of *body*, for it is the body that is always engaged in an interaction with the world that determines a perpetual mutual influence. However, as human and social geography experts Simonsen & Koefoed (2017) tell us, when we address the relationship between body and environment, we have to keep in mind that «there is no such thing as “the” body. Whenever we are referring to bodies, they are taking meaning as *particular bodies*, that is, a woman’s body, an Asian body, a mother’s/father’s body or a daughter’s/son’s body, an ageing body, etc.» (20, emphasis added). Therefore, if we want to build a phenomenological account of how bodies impact on and are shaped by their surroundings, we must first and foremost assume that “particular bodies” are co-involved with the social, cultural, and even physical environment in a different way than other “particular bodies”.

With that in mind, in this paper I will focus on the “particular bodies” of people who are subject to racism. Relying on a definition of the term *embodiment* as «the experience of one’s own body in the first-person perspective» (Michael *et al.* 2020, 8), and, conversely, on a description of *disembodiment* as the condition in which «the subject of conscious experience is localized outside the person’s bodily borders» (Blanke & Metzinger 2009, 8), I will frame racialized experiences as a shift from the first to the second extreme of the embodiment-disembodiment spectrum. In doing this, I will draw on many authors (Fanon 2008; Yancy 2017; Ngo 2017; Ahmed 2007) who, addressing the issue

of being racially discriminated against as a matter of feeling distant or detached from one's own body, shed light on phenomena such as racialized people's «feeling of being not-at-home in their own bodies» (Ngo 2017, 96) and perception of being «compelled to live their space in restricted ways» (Sullivan 2006, 144). I will dwell on both the concepts of “body-at-home” and of “space-as-I-can” and reunite them under Merleau-Ponty's (2012) notion of “lived body”, in order to provide a solid theoretical background to the embodied approach to racism; then, I will show why such concepts allow us to better understand the results of some studies which proved that the virtual embodiment of a black body reduces white people's implicit racial bias (Peck *et al.* 2013; Banakou *et al.* 2016). The relationship between the phenomenological account of the lived-body and the virtual “erasure” of the boundaries between the white and the black body will be discussed in the final part of the paper.

2. Home and the lived body

“Home” is a word universally charged with a positive meaning. In his *What makes a house a home*, Lawrence (1987) claims that taking care of one's house interior decorations and design is what enables people to express their identity and to convey information about themselves. One of the decisive moments in the process of transition between a house and a home, thus, is when the latter becomes «a means of communication with oneself, between members of the same household, friends, and strangers» (161). Another valuable definition of “home” can be found in *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (Gregory *et al.* 2009), according to which home is «an emotive place and spatial imaginary that encompasses lived experiences of everyday, domestic life alongside *a wider sense of being and belonging in the world*» (339-340, emphasis added).

One of the aspects that stands out from these descriptions is the implication of the term “home” with the perception of “being one” with something, namely, a physical location with certain features. This immediate and intimate connection with the place (or places) we call

home is captured by everyday expressions such as “I’m home” or “I feel at home”, through which we give voice to the warm sensation of being in an unproblematic relation with a surrounding space that reflects, embodies, and, to a certain degree, *corresponds to* our identity. However, not only do home represent an extension of our personality, but it also constitutes a space that we are so accustomed to and feel so entitled to inhabit that we never doubt who it belongs to. As Casey put it, «there is nothing like staying at home precisely because *at home* we do not usually have to confront such questions as “Where am I?”» (121). Being home, then, is a matter of being in a place that is both a piece of me (something I am) and unquestionably mine (something I own). I will call this aspect the “twofold nature” of home.

What does this discussion about the meaning of home have to do with racism? This is the issue I will tackle in section 4; before that, however, it is important to examine the interesting parallel that Ngo (2017) and Jacobson (2009) traced between the concept of home and Merleau-Ponty’s (2012) account of the lived body. According to Ngo (2017), home has three key features: «it offers a starting place, cogenerates and supports bodily habits, and affords rest or retreat» (101). Whereas the topic of bodily habits will be addressed later, now I want to turn to the first and the third aspect outlined by Ngo.

When we say that home offers a starting place, we are stating something the Rykwert (1991) relates to the very origin of human species, given that «home could just be a hearth, a fire on the bare ground by any human lair» and that «taming fire is *the* origin of culture [...], the mark of settlement» (51). In this sense, the notion of home corresponds to one of the turning points of our evolution, that is, the ability to build a fire and to get together around it. In the same way the control of fire played a major role in the development of traits that were crucial for survival, such as social gatherings and the formation of strong coalitions (Burt 2011; Chung 2016), our childhood home «makes its mark *on our future way of being in the world*» (Jacobson 2009, 364), which is to say, it is the place where we move our first (ontological) steps and understand how to relate to the social and physical surroundings.

As we can see, the definition of home as the starting place is both a metaphorical and a literal one. On the one hand, in fact, home is “where our life began”, a place that we usually feel connected to thanks to the accumulation of childhood memories and associate to the process of growing up, with all that it entails (making mistakes, developing a certain relationship with our parents, etc.). On the other hand, home is the physical space in which we experience the first interactions with our caregivers and relatives, the ground upon which we build the foundation of our intersubjective life by sharing our emotions and negotiating our presence with the others. Moreover, home affords rest or retreat precisely because it is a space that we learnt how to inhabit, and that, as such, comes along with a sense of being at ease in it: “I’m home”, after all, is just another way of saying “I feel in the right place”. If we embrace such a conceptualization of home, then we can follow Ngo’s and Jacobson’s comparison to the notion of the lived body.

Drawing from Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012), Seamon (2018) defines the lived body as «a latent, lived relationship between an intentional but pre-reflective body and the world it encounters and perceives through continuous immersion, awareness, and actions» (44). First of all, then, the lived body is a particular way of being connected to and directed towards the surroundings: living (through) the body means being engaged in an ongoing interplay with the environment such that the body “withdraws” to the background of one’s consciousness, letting the subject have a fluid and non-opaque experience of what is out there. Such «transparency» (Fuchs 2010) of the lived body can be described also as a peculiar perspective towards the outside world, namely, a first-person perspective: as opposed to the “objective” body, which is «the body as something that we, as subjects, can observe as an object» (Gallagher & Zahavi 2008, 136), the lived body is «the body that sees or that exists in the act of seeing» (Gallagher 1986, 140), the source from which all somatoperceptions stem and center to which they convey. The lived body’s primordial function of granting us a straightforward access to the environment thanks to its movements and possibilities is addressed by Merleau-Ponty (2012) as follows:

«Consciousness is being toward the thing through the intermediary of the body [...], and to move one's body is to aim at the things through it, or to allow one's body to respond to their sollicitation, which is exerted upon the body without any representation». (140)

«For my window to impose on me a perspective on the church, my body must first impose on me a perspective on the world». (93)

Merleau-Ponty's metaphor of the body as a window that "imposes" a certain view of the outside supports the intuition that the concepts of home and lived body overlap: in the same way home represents the place in which we learn how to be in the world, providing us with a sense of belonging to and being at ease in it, the lived body is to be intended as the vital force that shapes our social and physical interactions, allowing for a pre-reflective and unproblematic attunement to the environment. If home can be referred to as "the space of the subject" in virtue of its twofold nature, the lived body can be designated as "the subject body", that is, the body that perceives and experiences, rather than being perceived and experienced – in a word, objectified.

3. Self-objectification

The word "objectification", when referred to the body, has a meaning that is very important to phenomenology. Both Merleau-Ponty and Husserl (1931) used to distinguish between the lived body (*le corps vécu* or *Leib*) and the objective body (*le corps objectif* or *Körper*), to account for the twofold way in which every individual can experience his own body: whereas the lived body correspond to a first-person perspective towards the world, the objective body is the body taken as an object of contemplation and that sees itself from an observer-like point of view, as it happens during medical examinations (Gallagher & Zahavi 2008; Gallagher 1986) or when a novice try to learn the complex movements behind skilled actions (Toner *et al.* 2016; Pennisi & Gallagher 2021).

More contemporary theories have addressed the exacerbation of the tendency to objectify one's body as a typical symptom of eating disorders. It is the case of the *self-objectification theory* (Fredrickson

& Roberts 1997; Calogero *et al.* 2005; Calogero 2012), which posits that women and young girls in Western society are subject to a series of cultural practices and experiences that make them perceive their body not as the expression of their own identity, but rather as an object that must be evaluated only in terms of attractiveness and acceptability. According to the self-objectification theory, this phenomenon is deeply interrelated with the onset and worsening of eating disorders (a class of pathologies that involve mainly women and young girls) because «it is likely that the more girls and women become accustomed to seeing the others' body as an object or a sexually connotated image, the more they will engage in appearance-based behavior and activities, thereby increasing the tendency towards the compulsive monitoring of their own look and self-distance» (Pennisi 2022), which are both eating disorders predictors and symptoms (Fitzsimmons *et al.* 2011; Stanghellini *et al.* 2015). One of the most interesting aspects behind the self-objectification theory is that it describes the objectification of the body as a twofold, self-fueling process: on the one hand, it is the society that «fosters a female image that only emphasizes (sexy) looks» (Puvia & Vaes 2015, 67); on the other, it is the woman – who has previously internalized the sexually connotated images and the correspondent models of corporeity– who objectifies her own body, entering a dimension of constant body surveillance and alienation that Stanghellini *et al.* (2012) call «the lived-body-for-others». As I will argue below, the shift from the *embodied* experience of one's body in the first-person perspective to a twofold, self-fueling form of *disembodiment* (the perception of one's body from a third-person perspective) is a core feature of the life of people who are subject to racism.

4. The body-not-at-home: racism and the third person perspective

Racism, as historian and activist George M. Fredrickson (2002) pictures it, is a word that, despite having undergone a process of redefinition that puts it «in danger of losing the precision needed to make it an analytical tool for historians and social scientists, [can be

more or less unquestionably designated as] a strong expression to describe some horrendous acts of brutality and injustice that were clearly inspired by beliefs associated with the concept of race» (151-152). In his book, Fredrickson traces back the history of some of the most dreadful and striking examples of racism, such as the enactment of the Jim Crow Laws and the segregation and killings of African Americans in the United States; the Nazis' propaganda against European Jews, which culminated in their deportation to concentration camps and extermination; and the denial of citizenship and economic subservience of South African blacks during apartheid. Although I recognize the importance of knowing the unfolding of events that brought to such aberrant episodes, so that they will not happen ever again, in the remainder of the paper I will not dwell on the historical aspects of racism, nor on the sociocultural contingencies that led to infamous outbreaks of violence against racial minorities. What I will do is focus on the micro-episodes of racism that occur in everyday life and analyze the impact they have on people who suffer them in terms of perception of one's body, embodiment, and disembodiment. In order to do that, I will now turn to some authors who explored the potential of the interplay between phenomenology and human geography, a peculiar kind of «geographers of race and ethnicity [who] seem to have made their most solid contributions in understanding race and ethnicity as *events* arising through bodily interactions» (Price 2012, 2, emphasis added).

One example of such a new approach to the problem of racism is Simonsen's & Koefoed's *Geographies of Embodiment* (2017). In this book, the authors give a phenomenological interpretation of the effects that recurrent episodes of racial discrimination generated in Copenhagen residents with a Pakistani background: such episodes go from being prevented from entering many places because of the skin color, to being looked at with suspect inside shops or stared at by the scared eyes of other train passengers during daily trips (see 35). According to the authors, manifestations of racism like these can be explained by the elicitation of at least two unconscious cognitive mechanisms: the *stranger danger*, that is, the perception of the stranger – identified

as such by the skin color and look – as being the origin of troubles and violence (Žižek 1993); and *banal terrorism* (Katz 2007), a suspicious and diffident attitude – especially towards Muslims – that arises when «geopolitical conflicts and the fear of terror become compressed into the intimacies of everyday life and incorporated into everyday embodied encounters» (Simonsen & Koefoed 2017, 36). However, what I want to highlight is not the (cognitive or sociocultural) source from which acts of racial intolerance stem, but rather the impact they have on racialized people’s perception of their own body. Simonsen & Koefoed addressed this issue by referring to another infamous episode of racial discrimination, occurred to Frantz Fanon and reported in his *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008).

While travelling on a train in France, Fanon was being looked at by a little white boy, who suddenly raised his arm and pointed a finger towards him, yelling «Look, a Negro! Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!» (84). In the pages that follow, Fanon describes in a vivid language the sensations that such a brief, but extremely intense encounter had the power to trigger:

«Now they [the other passengers] were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible. I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all *historicity* [...]. In the train I was given not one but two, three places [...]. I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics [...]. But I did not want this revision, this thematization. All I wanted was to be a man among other men». (84-85)

Fanon’s words are full of sorrow, but they are also extraordinarily explicative of the nature of the relationship that a person establishes with her own body when she gets racially discriminated. Fanon talks of an «epidermalization», that is, «a sudden, acute awareness of his body» (Petherbridge 2017, 109), which brings his flesh (his “blackness”) at the center of his attention. Such abrupt and unescapable act

of thematization towards his own body, however, does not make him focus only on his physical appearance, his being a black man among white men: it involves the history of *all* black men, and reveals to Fanon's eyes how the black man is perceived by white men, that is, as the bearer of a past made of «intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships» (Fanon, 84-85). The black man's understanding of what he is for the others induces shame, which, as Sartre (1943) points out, is both the apprehension of something wrong, and that this something is *in me* (Macey 1999); but, most notably, such an understanding contributes to generating a sense of alienation and distance from one's body that results in a form of self-objectification comparable to the one I have previously discussed: under the scrutiny of the white man's gaze, the black man develops a third-person consciousness, «a consciousness of one's body as a body-for-others» (Simonsen & Koefoed 2017, 37; see also Alcoff 1999; Petherbridge 2017).

In what I consider to be a very interesting choice of words, Fanon (2008) expresses such a sense of disembodiment in terms of a «complete dislocation» (see 85). According to the dictionary, «to dislocate something» means «to move it from its proper place or position», or «to disturb its normal position». The idea that acts of racial discrimination are capable of disturbing the normal position of the embodied subject, forcing a shift to a third-person, self-objectifying perspective, is both very powerful and consistent with the parallel between the lived body and home. If we think at the lived body as a place that we inhabit – that is, a place we feel at ease in, and that grant us an immediate, transparent, and pre-reflective access to the world – then we can easily imagine how it would feel like to be “kicked out” of it, and to be coerced into a position from which we have to thematize our experience or justify our presence. This issue has been addressed by Ngo (2017), who claimed that «the racialized body is not only alienated from others, it is alienated from itself; the racialized body is not-at-home in its own body» (96). To clarify the concept of the body-not-being-at-home, Ngo compares it to that of «forced migration» (107): in the same way people who live in countries tormented by war, poverty, or environmental disasters

are compelled to leave the place they call home to reach a destination where they will eventually have to account for their presence, the racialized person is constantly “displaced” by acts of intolerance, and needs to negotiate her existence within a sociopolitical and geographical context that makes her often feel like she does not belong to it (see also Lugones 1987). Examples of such a necessity to justify one’s black presence in a white world are manifold: just look at the cases I mentioned above, or think about how easy is for black people to be stopped by police while driving (Harris 1999; Meeks 2000; Baumgartner *et al.* 2018), and how frequently such an encounter results in a tragedy (Richardson 2014; Carbado 2017).

At this point, it is crucial to say that the notion of home-body is relevant not only because it accounts for the embodied aspects of our life (sense of belonging somewhere, first-person perspective, unproblematic access to the world, etc.), but also because it involves a *spatial* dimension, which is to say, a dimension that concerns the ways in which the subject is entitled to move in space and among others. This is the topic I am going to tackle next, starting from the premise that «the home-body is important because it orients us, providing the ground for the bodily sense of “I can”» (Ngo 2017, 119).

5. Space-as-I-can’t

What does it mean to be oriented in space? According to the phenomenological tradition, bodies that can orient themselves are bodies that «know where to find things. “Doing things” depends not so much on intrinsic capacity [...], but on the ways in which the world is available as a space for action, a space where things “have a certain place” or are “in place”» (Ahmed 2007, 153). This concept corresponds to what Merleau-Ponty (2012) referred to as the bodily dimension of the “I can”, the lived body’s predisposition towards habitual and familiar circumstances, which allows it to move and act without any prior rationalization or mental representation. This means that, in most of our daily interactions with the surroundings, we do not have to analyze the situation or reflect on what we have to do in order to engage with things and people:

I see an object and implicitly *know* whether it is within my reach or not; I see a person and implicitly *know* what is appropriate for me to do and not to do to her; and so on. Additionally, we can say that the habitual and pre-reflective domain of our motor intentions is regulated by our *body schema*, which is «a system of sensory-motor capacities» (Gallagher 2005, 24) that «allows the body actively to integrate its own positions and responses and to deal with its environment without the requirement of a reflexive conscious monitoring directed at the body» (32). In a nutshell, the body schema is responsible for all the actions we carry out in absence of a thematization of our bodily experience, which is not requested due to the ordinariness of the situation.

In recalling the episode occurred in the train, Fanon (2008) described the vivid sensation of feeling his body schema «assailed at various points» and «crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema» (84). Again, Fanon's choice of words provides a powerful image of the alteration that racial discrimination induces in the subject's embodied experience of the world: crushed by the burden of the white man's objectifying look and violent language, the black man's spontaneous connectedness to the environment ceases to exist, and is superseded by a hyper-focused attention to one's movements and actions, which are to be performed accordingly to the white man expectations: «a man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man - or at least like a nigger» (86).

A similar point was made by Yancy (2017), when he illustrated the *elevator effect*²⁵: as a black man living in a predominantly white world, Yancy recounts the uncanny situation of finding oneself in the elevator with a white, stranger woman. He depicts the unpleasant sensations that arise from perceiving the other person's micro-movements – her pulling the purse more closely to herself, her quick but worried glances, her self-defensive body posture – as he simply stands in the elevator. Most notably, he provides a detailed description of how a neutral and familiar space – that is, a space where he usually does not

25 For an in-depth discussion on the *elevator effect* and its controversial theoretical validity, see Ngo 2017.

feel like to control the movements of his body, and in which he can relax and be lost in thought – is transformed by the white woman's peculiar attitude:

«My movements become and remain stilted. I dare not move suddenly. The apparent racial neutrality of the space within the elevator (when I am standing alone) has become an axiological plenum, one filled with white normativity [...]. I feel trapped. I no longer feel bodily expansiveness within the elevator, but corporeally constrained, limited. I now begin to calculate, paying almost neurotic attention to my body movements, making sure that this “Black object,” what now feels like an appendage, a weight, is not too close, not too tall, not too threatening». (32)

What emerges from this passage is that the white man's (and woman's) racializing gaze has the power not only to trigger a process of self-objectification, but also to modify the way in which space is normally perceived and explored. Whereas «white bodies are comfortable *as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape*» (Ahmed 2007, 158), the racialized person's space is marked by an ontological lack of possibilities, and charged with an unescapable and forcefully imposed sense of “I can't”. This is the result of the elicitation of cognitive and motor mechanisms that might even be unconscious, but there are nonetheless spoiled by the existence of an implicit racial bias.

6. Conclusion: erasing the boundaries

Implicit racial bias is «the unconscious collection of stereotypes and attitudes that we develop toward certain [racial] groups of people» (Edgoose *et al.* 2019, 30), and is particularly evident in the cases and first-hand accounts I mentioned. Some experiments have shown that such phenomenon can be temporarily neutralized through the use of Virtual Reality (VR hereafter), a virtual experience that employs «computer technology to create a simulated world that individuals can manipulate and explore as if they were in it» (Riva *et al.* 2019, 7). Specifically, Peck *et al.* (2013) demonstrated that putting oneself in the skin of a black avatar – that is, a “virtual version” of one's body that the

subject experiences from a first-person perspective as if it was black – reduces the individual’s implicit racial bias for about 12 minutes. Banakou *et al.* (2016), then, not only replicated the results of the previous study, but also showed that the mitigating effect lasted 1 week after the final exposure. Both the experiments measured the participants’ implicit racial bias through the administration of a racial IAT (Greenwald *et al.* 1998), a test that requires people to quickly categorize faces (black or white) and words (positive or negative), allowing then to calculate the difference in speed and accuracy between the association of faces with one or the other word. The two studies, thus, proved that VR is an instrument capable of modifying even close to automatic cognitive responses, such as the association between images and words; but, most notably, they showed that «when the body changes not only are there updates to the multisensory representation of peripersonal space but also there are corresponding psychological updates» (Banakou *et al.* 2016). If we were to provide a phenomenological explanation to such “psychological updates”, then we might say that VR enables the subject to “feel at home” inside another body, erasing (even if for a very short time) the boundary between the black and the white body and giving the individual a (rough and approximate) idea of what it feels like to inhabit a different skin. This interpretation is consistent also with the results of those studies that proved the efficacy of VR to increase the empathic response and resonance to the others’ pain (Bertrand *et al.* 2018; Harjunen *et al.* 2021), and shows how important it is to rely on an embodied approach to racism in order to understand the nature of the cognitive mechanisms that underlie this phenomenon.

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