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Embodied Transcendence and Phenomenological Field: Subjectivities in Caryl Churchill's *Fen* Through Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the interrogation of cross-gendered subjectivities in Caryl Churchill's dramaturgy through the theoretical approaches of Luce Irigaray's feminist philosophy and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment. This article argues that Churchill's stage is not merely a platform for representing these ideas but becomes the very phenomenological field in which they are experimentally lived and perceived by the audience. The bodily presence of performance itself, the material-of-body-of-performance—actor's body, common space, audience's perceptual trust—is the proximal site of this phenomenological investigation. Meanwhile, Merleau-Ponty's notion of the phenomenological field makes intelligible the dynamic, inter-bodily horizon within and in relation to which gendered identities are progressively constructed through embodied perception and intersubjective encounter. Churchill's theatrical strategies of cross-gender casting and fluid performativity enact these paradigms by destabilizing fixed gender binaries and fostering a corporeal and symbolic space for alternative subject formations. The study contributes to feminist and phenomenological debates by demonstrating how Churchill's dramaturgy operates as a praxis of sensible transcendence and embodied field engagement, opening ethical and ontological possibilities beyond normative gender frameworks.

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1. Introduction

Caryl Churchill, a prominent voice in contemporary British theatre, is renowned for her exploration of gender and power dynamics. Her 1983 play Fen exemplifies this approach by examining the links between female oppression and socioeconomic exploitation. Based on Churchill's ethnographic research in the East Anglian fens, the play is structured as fragmented episodes that depict harsh work conditions embedded within the natural landscape. The ensemble cast functions as a chorus, revealing mechanisms of patriarchal and economic oppression.

Interrogation of cross-gendered subjectivities in Churchill's playwriting engages Luce Irigaray's (1993) feminist theory and Merleau-Ponty's (2012, 1968) phenomenology of the flesh. Irigaray's philosophy of sensible transcendence challenges the patriarchal symbolic order by positing a feminine subjectivity realized through embodied difference and relation rather than assimilation into masculine norms (Irigaray, 1993, p.129-147). Merleau-Ponty's theory of the field situates lived experience within a dynamic, intercorporeal horizon, where identity emerges through embodied perception and interaction with the world (Merleau-Ponty's, 2012, 1968). Churchill's use of cross-gendered characters and fluid performativity enacts these frameworks, destabilizing fixed gender binaries and creating a corporeal and symbolic space for alternative subjectivities.

These figures avoid essentialist identities, enacting a fluidity that allows the emergence of feminine subjectivity grounded in difference and relationality. This aligns with Irigaray's call for female subjectivity as a positive, embodied mode of being, honoring the irreducible alterity of the feminine. Through cross-gender casting and role reversals, Fen undercuts the hegemonic symbolic order, turning the female imaginary into a site of creative resistance and ethical reconfiguration. For Merleau-Ponty, these cross-gendered individuals inhabit a field of perception and intersubjective engagement, where identity is a continuous, dynamic process of becoming (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 1968, p.248-250).

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on Fen has extensively engaged with its socialist and feminist critique, centering analysis on the play's depiction of women's oppression under patriarchal and capitalist regimes in rural England. Scholars observe Churchill's (1983) episodic structure and ensemble casting as highlighting the intersections between class, gender, and labor, revealing women trapped in circuits of economic exploitation and domestic constraint (Adiseshiah,

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2009, p.57; Aston & Diamond, 2009, p.112). For instance, the play's focus on characters like Val, torn between motherhood, love, and desperation, evokes a view of limited agency among working-class women, where personal desires collide with societal expectations (Dolan, 2011, p.45). This feminist interpretation frames Fen as a powerful criticism of how economic dependency reinforces gender subordination, with women's bodies bearing the brunt of physical and emotional work. However, critics argue that Churchill's representation risks essentializing women's suffering, potentially overlooking instances of resistance and collective solidarity that could yield more nuanced narratives of empowerment.

Integrated with phenomenological approaches, recent research has employed the embodied and perceptual theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012, 1968) to consider how Fen constructs subjectivities from lived, intersubjective experience. Merleau-Ponty's (2012, 1968, p.250-270) concept of the phenomenological field—a dynamic, relational horizon from which identity emerges through perceptual engagement with the world—is seen as analogous to Churchill's depiction of the fen landscape as a transitional space that shapes gendered identities (Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Diamond, 1997, p. 102). From this perspective, the corporeal labor of the characters constitutes a test of alienation in which bodies are not fixed entities but fluid "becoming spaces" that dismantle Cartesian dualisms (Vasseleu, 1998, p.88). Yet, existing phenomenological analyses of Fen are often generic, offering little specific analysis of how perceptual faith—a pre-reflective belief in the world's coherence—underpins the play's ethical dimensions in situations of vulnerability and crisis (du Toit, 2013, p.315; Aston & Diamond, 2009, p.115).

Luce Irigaray's (1993) feminist philosophy extends these phenomenological inquiries, most significantly through her theory of sensible transcendence, which redefines transcendence as an embodied, relational process rooted in feminine difference rather than patriarchal abstraction (Irigaray, 1993, p.129; Tilghman, 2009, p.33). In analyses of Churchill's dramaturgy, Irigaray's framework explains how the cross-gendered performativity in Fen disrupts binary oppositions, producing ethical spaces for alternative subjectivities (Anderson, 2009, p.40; Diamond, 1997, p. 102). For example, characters like Nell, perceived as ambiguous or hermaphroditic, express a transcendence dependent upon bodily alterity, subverting normative models of gender (Butler, 1988, p.523). Critics maintain that fusing Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty enhances the understanding of Fen's praxis, positioning the stage as a site of sensible, intercorporeal opposition (Vasseleu, 1998, p.92; Fisher & Embree, 2000,

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p.15). However, a significant gap remains in the scholarship: while numerous feminist interpretations exist, few texts deeply integrate Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference with Merleau-Ponty's field of intersubjectivity in Fen, often favoring socialist over ontological critiques (Adiseshiah, 2009, p.60; van der Braak, 2021, p.13). This absence limits inquiry into how the play's ecological metaphors of fog and marshy fluidity create ontological possibilities for liberation, leaving room for further study in eco-feminist phenomenology (Meiring, 2016, p.9).

Overall, the scholarship on Fen recognizes Churchill's innovative synthesis of feminism and phenomenology but sometimes criticizes the play's dystopian imagination for reinforcing victimization rather than transcendence (Dolan, 2013, p.48; Gobert, 2014, p.212). By synthesizing Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty, new work highlights ethical transformation through embodiment but calls for further interdisciplinary efforts to engage with still underdeveloped topics, such as intergenerational trauma and environmental intercorporeality (Andrade, 2024, p.94).

3.Theoretical Framework

It is precisely this dynamic, pre-reflective horizon that Churchill’s theatre seeks to replicate and manipulate, using the stage not as a picture frame but as a lab for perceptual experience. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological inquiry rearticulates the concept of the field as the spatial and perceptual horizon conditioning our visual engagement with the world. This field constitutes the ontological backdrop against which objects manifest, not as static entities but as interrelated phenomena within a dynamic plenitude. The world revealed through “pure vision” is an ontic fullness imbued with sacred positivity, wherein each entity participates in a holistic totality transcending reductive objectification.

Merleau-Ponty (1968, p.35) in Visible and Invisible states: “We come to realize that all that for us is called thought requires that distance from oneself, that initial openness which a field of vision and a field of future and of past are for us... our assurance of being in the truth is one with our assurance of being in the world”

In this framework, vision is conceived as a primordial disclosure wherein the visible world unfolds as a continuum of presence and absence. Objects that delimit our perceptual horizon recede into the background, enabling the foregrounding of proximate phenomena without fixing them into rigid categories. Experience thus emerges from the interplay of

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presence and withdrawal that characterizes perception (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 130–50). Lived experience appears as a contingent synthesis refracted through embodied vision.

Merleau-Ponty articulates existence as entwined with the world—not a sum of essences nor an empty indeterminacy, but an active field of perceptual and existential interdependencies. His theory of the field describes a liminal, fluid horizon of embodied presence where subject and world are co-constituted. Perception is a lived, transcendental field in which things appear as meaningful wholes (gestalts) against a shifting background. The field is an open, relational space where figure and ground continuously shift, disclosing the world as a "familiar place of our life." This dynamic understanding of perceptual fields aligns with embodied cognition perspectives that challenge Cartesian spatial models assuming fixed external coordinates (Sanna, 2019, p.4). In such a field, things receding into the horizon allow near-at-hand phenomena to appear as inexhaustible rather than closed essences. Defined by the dialectic of presence and absence, foreground and background, the field resists fixed ontology.

Perception is bodily and intentional, rooted in le corps propre, the lived body that orders experience meaningfully through its engagement with the world. Through this bodily involvement, the field becomes spatial, temporal, and intersubjective, encompassing bodily presence, temporal context, and relationality. More broadly, Merleau-Ponty's domain is a corporeal horizon grounding perceptual experience as situated and relational—the spatial-temporal ground on which meaning arises through figure-ground dynamics, presence-absence, and self-other interplay.

Between pure being and the subjective self lies a mediating field, the Flesh—the relational milieu that separates and connects horizon and perceiver. The Flesh manifests as a sensuous atmosphere, an ontic world suffused with historical sedimentation and perceptual resonance. Being thus inhabits this interstitial locus: "Flesh as 'the edge' where a human meets world that exceeds and entreats it—animal and environmental, sacred and profane" (Meiring, 2016, p.9). As Merleau-Ponty (2012, p.85) observes:

"The involvement of men in the world and of men in one another... is transversal with respect to the spatial and temporal multiplicity of the actual... But this must not lead us into the inverse error... to treat this order of involvement as a transcendental, intemporal order... to postulate once again that life is only death nullified..."

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Luce Irigaray's notion of sensible transcendence constitutes a paradigmatic reconfiguration of traditional metaphysical dichotomies—those bifurcating the sensible and the intelligible, the immanent and the transcendent, the corporeal and the spiritual (Irigaray, 1993, p.129-147; Anderson, 2009, p.27-35). In his essay "Dōgen on Language and Experience" (2021, p.13), Braak states:

"Such a new understanding can help us to go beyond the immanent frame, with its rigid separation between an immanent natural order and a transcendent supernatural order, and its separation between theory and practice. Rather than present a new version of 'the Zen experience' as a new attempt at radical transcendence, or a new conception of religious experience, Dōgen's thought can serve to overcome the implicit dichotomies in Western modes of thought between inner and outer, mind and body, individual and the world, immanence and transcendence, and theory and practice"

Breaking from the phallocentric tradition of Western philosophy, which systematically excludes the feminine by relegating it to the merely sensible or corporeal, Irigaray presents sensible transcendence as an ontological and ethical possibility wherein divinity and flesh meet. This vision conceives transcendence not as an unreachable abstraction but as a self-emergent process rooted in embodied, sensuous life—specifically the woman's body—discrediting the epistemic order grounded in disembodied reason and hierarchical dualisms. To relate Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Irigaray's thought, André Dias de Andrade's article "The Gap of Presence: Challenges in Describing Perceptual Phenomena" (2024) is illuminating: "The attachment of the body and environment as both sides or developments of the unique operative intentionality enables phenomenology to describe the world and 'being as that which appears' (so not as something alien to subjectivity), as well as consciousness as a universal fact (so not an exclusive or ideal realm of meaning). The main gain here amounts to the unveiling of a new notion of transcendence in this phenomenological approach. Through motility and perception, precisely, the corps propre as a perceptive subject gathers the sparse meaning already motivated by passive syntheses in the environment. Therefore, "the world is not only the correlate of the acts or powers of a so-called bodily consciousness, but the source of this meaning and, Therefore, as Andrade (2009, p.3) argues, "the world is not only the correlate of the acts or powers of a so-called bodily consciousness, but the source of this meaning and, therefore, a positive transcendence to its apprehensions by the bodily subject." This concept of the world as a transcendent source of meaning finds a provocative

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parallel in Lacanian psychoanalysis. From this perspective, the subject's engagement with the world is driven by a fundamental lack. As explained, "The agent of the discourse is the castrated shortage of the Hysteric; hidden beneath its bar is his/her object cause of desire. This barred Subject, driven by its object petit a, addresses the master signifiers of the other, which respond with the production of knowledge, beneath the bar." Here, the world's 'positive transcendence' can be understood as the field of the "Other," whose "master signifiers" the desiring subject constantly addresses in its quest for meaning.

4. Discussion and Results

4.1. The Field and Relational Identity in Fen

Merleau-Ponty's concept of the field is articulated through the play's episodic dramaturgy and the characters' situated corporeal experiences within the fen as milieu. The women's reciprocal interactions with one another and their environment disclose identity as a perpetually negotiated construct within a relational and ecological nexus, rather than a static essence. The tableau of the women walking in rigid formation through the potato fields, interrupted by affectless stillness, brings the field to life as a material and socio-symbolic horizon structuring their subjectivities. Their bodily exhaustion and repressive socio-cultural conditions make Merleau-Ponty's notion that perception and identity are dynamically intersubjective all the more convincing.

The multi-stranded relationalities of Val's love for Frank, Angela's bullying of Becky, and Shirley's stoic endurance further develop the field as a locus of social, historical, and bodily forces constituting subjectivity. The fen's ecological cycles and its history of reclamation and exploitation metaphorically reflect the cyclical and contingent nature of identity formation within a shared perceptual and cultural horizon.

Although Fen foregrounds female personae, its gender representations are fluid and performative, subverting essentialist dichotomies. The introduction of Frank—a working-class male within a women's socio-economic sphere—and the community's ambivalent reactions to gender and sexuality, as in the ridicule of a supposed hermaphroditic figure, deliberately de-naturalize gendered subjectivity. Such ontological pliability accords with Irigaray's call for a feminine symbolic order maintaining sexual difference without subsumption under patriarchal universality.

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The fen's liminal, marshy environment operates as a charged symbolic space that instantiates ontological fluidity—neither fully terrestrial nor aquatic—mirroring the variable and relational nature of gendered subjectivity theorized by Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty. The landscape, in its indeterminate state, becomes an emblematic field: an open, relational medium wherein identity is continuously formed through embodied relation to others and the environment. The episodic dramaturgy and the characters' labor position perception as contingent and situated, denying any fixed or objective standpoint. Intersubjective dependencies, coupled with bodily experiences of exhaustion, constraint, and fleeting agency, exemplify subjectivity's emergence within this perceptual field. Moreover, the cross-gendered casting destabilizes rigid identity taxonomies, emphasizing the fluid, situated, and relational constitution of the self-central to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology.

A point of relevance from Fen that is speaking directly to Irigaray's concept of sensible transcendence, very similar to Merleau-Ponty's Field, is the portrayal of the bodily labor of the women and their ambivalent relationship with their bodies and social roles. An example would be the opening scenes, making it unambiguously clear that the women are engaged in relentless, hard physical agricultural work, for example, potato picking and onion sorting, picturing their physical weariness and vulnerability. The audience's perception of these 'regimented, mechanistic formations' is not just intellectual; it is **a visceral, intracorporeal experience**. The synchronized, aching bodies on stage create a Gestalt where the 'field' is no longer a metaphor but a shared sensory reality between performer and spectator—a tangible feeling of oppressive spatiality.:

"The women move in rigid lines and soulless silence, stooping to pick potatoes from the blasted brown heath, their bodies aching, their faces marked by exhaustion and determination." WOMEN and a BOY working in a row, potato picking down a field. When their buckets are full, they tip the potatoes into a potato grave at the top of the field"(Churchill, 1983, p.169)

For the audience, this is not a passive observation but an intracorporeal experience. The synchronized, aching bodies on stage create a Gestalt where the 'field' is no longer a metaphor but a shared, sensory reality—a tangible, visceral feeling of oppressive spatiality (Irigaray, 1993, p.147; Vasseleu, 1998, p.55-60) Irigaray contends that transcendence is not a bodiless, abstract ideality but one that occurs in and through the phenomenological, sensuous enactment of the female body, thereby authenticating ontological difference rather than

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eliminating it. The women's working lives serve as a powerful empirical demonstration of this very principle, actualizing Irigaray's "sensible transcendence" through their embodied interactions with the world. Their bodily strength and affective unity, for instance, subvert patriarchal structures that confine female bodies to inert objecthood. In this way, their physical labor becomes more than a mere task; it becomes a metaphor for a form of transcendence grounded in somatic difference and moral connection, directly challenging abstract, masculine models.

Fen's portrayal of motherhood also reveals intergenerational conflicts within working-class groups, locating motherhood as both a site of limitation and potential agency shaped by gender, class, and patriarchy. Val's ambivalent motherhood and her mother Mavis's unfulfilled dream of singing exemplify the transmission of silenced desire and constrained subjectivity. These figures embody the tension between social expectation and self-realization, illustrating how transcendence is negotiated through gendered, embodied life within historical and familial contexts.

Furthermore, smoke and fog in Fen serve as metaphors of transcendence and obscurity, symbolizing the ambiguous nature of identity, perception, and relationality within the play's liminal world. The recurring imagery of spires of smoke and brooding mist evokes ancestral memory and the haunting persistence of past suffering. These atmospheric symbols suggest the transient quality of transcendence—an emergent potentiality amid material adversity and social opacity—emphasizing the dialectic of concealment and revelation in the women's embodied existence.To expound in greater detail:

NELL. You're paying her for what she's done?

MRS HASSETT. Will you mind your own business, or she won't be the only one who doesn't get picked up tomorrow morning?

NELL. It is my business. You'd treat me the same. (Churchill, 1983, p.172)

The exchange between Nell and Mrs. Hassett in Fen can be critically situated within Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological framework of the field and pure vision, revealing the embodied and intersubjective dimensions of power, perception, and ethical engagement. Nell's assertion, "you paying her what she's done" (Churchill,1983, p.172), constitutes an embodied act of perceptual and ethical witness that interrupts the normalized backdrop of oppression. Her questioning resists complicity, foregrounding the excluded laborer as a

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visible, ethical figure. In contrast, Mrs. Hassett's coercive retort attempts to restore the hierarchical field, relegating Nell's resistance to the background and maintaining the spatial and social contours of domination.

This tension exemplifies Merleau-Ponty's notion of pure vision—a non-reflexive perception in which the world appears as an interrelated field of events rather than discrete, objectified entities (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p.110–20). His phenomenology rejects the classical subject–object divide, insisting that perception "must encompass both the subject and the object" (Skender, 2019, p.352). Perception, for Merleau-Ponty, is a physical rather than psychological act, implicating the body as both perceiving subject and perceived object (Skender, 2019, p.352). Through this embodied philosophy, Fen discloses how seeing becomes an ethical encounter, revealing the world as a network of relations rather than isolated forms.

It is precisely this mode of ethical, non-objectifying sight that Nell embodies. Her perceptual action can be interpreted as a form of clean vision because it pierces through ideological naturalization; she sees socio-economic relations not as fixed givens, but as contingent and variable structures of the lived world. This critical perception is the first step toward their potential transformation.

In this regard, Nell's perceptual action is clean vision in the sense that it sees the socio-economic relations not as naturalized or fixed givens but as contingent, variable structures of the lived world. Her assertion that it is her business is an assertion of ethical openness to the intercorporeal field wherein the differences between self and other dissolve, and mutual recognition and shared vulnerability become possible. Thus, this paragraph enacts the dialectical tension between visibility and invisibility, agency and subjection in embodied experience space. Nell's ethical and perceptual vantage acts as a tear in the hegemonic space of capitalist labor relations, evoking pure vision as a resistance that reorients the perceptual horizon to include subaltern subjectivities. The flash puts front and center the embodied, intersubjective construction of social reality, verifying Merleau-Ponty's thesis that perception is inseparable from ethical engagement in a shared, fluid field of existence. This concept is immediately dramatized in the following scene, where the girls' act of spying on Nell becomes a lived example of this intersubjective perception:

NELL is hoeing her garden.

BECKY, **DEB**, **SHONA** spying on her.

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DEB. Is she a man?

BECKY. No, she's a morphrodite.

DEB. What's that?

BECKY. A man and a woman both at once.

DEB. Can it have babies by itself?

BECKY. It has them with another morphrodite. Like snails. But she's never met one yet.

SHONA. Is she a witch?

BECKY. She eats little children, so watch out.

DEB. She talks to herself. That's spells.

BECKY. Angela says she makes trouble.

DEB. She goes in the gang with my mum.

BECKY. She makes trouble.

DEB. Let's get her wild.

BECKY. I hate her, don't you?

DEB. She makes me feel sick.

BECKY. Let's make her shout.

SHONA. Poo bum! Poo bum!

DEB. Shut up, Shona.

NELL. What you doing there?

BECKY. Watching you, so what?

NELL. Come out and watch me close up then.

DEB. Can I ask you something?

NELL. What?

DEB. Have you got — have you got —?

NELL. What? They giggle (Churchill, 1983, p.177).

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The excerpt from Fen, wherein Nell is surveilled and othered by children who speculate about her ambiguous gender and label her a “morphrodite” and “witch,” can be rigorously analyzed through the intersection of Luce Irigaray’s concept of sensible transcendence and Merleau-Ponty’s notion of pure vision, yielding a profound feminist-phenomenological critique of gendered embodiment and perception. Thus, from an Irigarayan perspective, Nell’s liminal embodiment enacts sensible transcendence by destabilizing patriarchal binaries of sex and gender through an embodied subjectivity that refuses assimilation into normative masculine or feminine identities. Nell's ambivalently corporeal status, perceived by the children as male and female, subverts the strict sexual poles of the symbolic order, instantiating a kind of subjectivity that transcends reductive essentialism through its embodied otherness. The wide-eyed and terrified kids' rumor, saturated with monstrosity and witchcraft metaphors, reveals the symbolic fear aroused by this bodied otherness, illuminating the patriarchal desire for closure and exclusion of what resists categorization.

At the same time, the kids' distant, objectifying gaze attempts to book Nell into a fixed, binary paradigm, a partial, mediated perception that erases the fluidity and relationality of her embodied subjectivity. Nell's reply, inviting them to "Come out and watch me close up then," works a challenge to this limited vision, a presence demanding a more total, fleshed-out experience. This invitation gestures toward pure vision as an ethical perceptual openness, seeing beyond reductive categorizations to apprehend the embodied other in their irreducible complexity and situatedness.

The passage depicting Nell, an ontologically ambiguous, “morphrodite” figure, subjected to surveillance and othering by the children in Fen, constitutes a fertile locus for interrogating the phenomenology of embodied alterity through the prism of Merleau-Ponty’s notions of Gestalt and Field. Nell’s corporeality, apprehended as defying binary sexual classification, functions as an intersexed embodiment that subverts normative taxonomies, thereby destabilizing reductive categorical frameworks. This liminal corporeal condition invites a phenomenological hermeneutic that accentuates the body as a Gestalt configuration—a coherent and meaningful totality irreducible to its constituent anatomical or sociocultural elements.

Gestalt theory fundamentally transformed our understanding of perception by establishing that "there are holes, the behavior of which is not determined by that of their individual elements, but where the part-processes are themselves determined by the intrinsic

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nature of the whole". This core principle directly challenges reductionist approaches, as the theory "resulted from a backlash against the dominance of the reductionist theories" and centers around "the idea that perception should be viewed as a holistic phenomenon" (Yekta et al., 2018, p.6). Gestalts function as "organizational principles of cognition that allow humans to perceive structure, patterns and wholes in nature," representing "multidimensional entities, patterns, qualities consisting of a variable number of attributes" that cannot be "fully described or reduced to their constituent parts" (Tsiros, 2018, p.150). This holistic approach demonstrates how "a sensory whole transcends its parts and becomes something else in its quality" (Yekta et al., 2018, p.6). The theory operates through specific principles of perceptual organization, including "proximity, similarity, figure-ground, continuity, closure, and connection," which "describe how humans perceive visuals in connection with different objects and environments" (Wagemans et al., 2012, p.225). These principles work together under the overarching concept of Prägnanz or "good form," which states that "visual scenes are organized such that overall regularity of a visual configuration is maximized" (Rutar et al., 2018, p.6).

Nell's body, as perceived by the children, is not simply a sum of male and female parts but a singular, complex phenomenon that challenges the children, and by extension, society's habitual modes of categorization. The children's fragmented and mythologized discourse, "morphrodite," "witch," "eats little children", reveals their struggle to integrate this ambiguous figure into their existing perceptual and symbolic Gestalt. Their inability to assimilate Nell within familiar gender schemas produces anxiety and hostility, underscoring the limits of their perceptual horizon.

Shifting horizon that situates Nell's body in relation to the children's gaze, social narratives, and the ecological environment of the fen. Nell's invitation "Come out and watch me close up then" (Churchill, 1983, p.177) functions as an embodied assertion of presence within this field, demanding a reconfiguration of the perceptual horizon that moves beyond distant, objectifying surveillance to a more proximate, embodied encounter. Nell's Gestalt body resists fragmentation by the reductive typification of the children, requiring a perceptual willingness to ambiguity and multiplicity.

Besides, the children's abuse and mocking rumor is a classic articulation of the socio-cultural sediment of hegemonic gender oppositions in the perceptual order, a sediment that has the effect of excluding, marginalizing, or erasing bodies that depart from normative

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models. Nell's embodied presence constitutes a phenomenological disruption of this sedimented order, effectuating a rupture that demands the expansion of the perceptual field—one that is capacious enough to apprehend intersexed and non-binary bodies as coherent and integral Gestalts, rather than as aberrations or anomalies subject to exclusion.

Foundations of Reflective Thought: Ontic Immersion and Perceptual Faith in Fen

Reflective thought can't happen without our already being situated within the ontic world. Our existence is embedded in reality, marked by its probabilistic coherence and ontological givenness. Heidegger's concept of Befindlichkeit (situatedness or attunement) shows that being situated in the world isn't just one aspect of human existence but "an essential structure of human existence" (Miranda, 2020, p.63). This situatedness appears through our moods and emotional attunements, which "play the role of situating us in the world" by revealing how things matter to us and how we find ourselves disposed toward our circumstances (Miranda, 2020, p.64).

This situatedness doesn't come through deliberate, discursive thought but through a pre-reflective commitment to being-in-the-world. Human existence isn't made up of constant intellectual operations, as reductive cognitive paradigms suggest. The capacity for judgment assumes an already established ontological immersion within the real. This immersion isn't something we choose but a primordial perceptual facticity. The world is immediately grasped as real and intelligible through what Merleau-Ponty calls perceptual faith - a pre-cognitive acceptance of the world's reality that grounds all reflective and intellectual acts. Without this basic anchoring, reflective cognition would be impossible.

Val and Frank's dialogue reveals this background of perceptual faith - a mutual consciousness of fear and ontological risk that sustains their being-in-the-world. Val's admission, "I was scared when I left you," (Churchill, 1983, p.199) and Frank's disclosure of suicidal intent show a shared confrontation with uncertainty and disorientation that erodes their existential grounding. Their fear isn't rational but a bodily, affective response to life's precariousness and relational disconnection. Their dialogue shows how human beings depend on an implicit, pre-reflective belief in their lifeworld's coherence, which must be maintained for survival.

Frank's fears - "Going mad. Heights. Beauty." (Churchill, 1983, p.200) - capture existence's vulnerability before the world's magnitude, experiences that exceed cognitive control. Val's comment, "Lucky we live in a flat country," (Churchill, 1983, p.200) places this

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tension within the perceptual and material world, highlighting the ordinariness of their reality. Their continued engagement with each other assumes a tacit acceptance of the world's coherence before conscious reflection. Their weaknesses and terrors emerge within this horizon of perceptual belief, which preserves their existence despite crisis. The action reveals the fragile yet necessary pre-reflective trust through which humans navigate fear, loss, and relational fracture. Dialogue shows that perceptual trust is rooted in embodied relationality - Val and Frank's shared disclosures reconstitute a mutual lifeworld where perceptual faith is both tested and reaffirmed. Their exchange captures the tension between desperation and the lived, situated presence with the world that phenomenology seeks to define.

Merleau-Ponty's notion of perceptual faith describes this foundational, pre-reflective trust in the world's reality that supports all perception and cognition. It "underlies the possibility of gaining coherence of the world, objects and the subject itself" and represents "that characteristically shared pre-reflective conviction humans have through the coordination of the senses and their engagement with the other that the world (as given in perceptual experience) truly is the world" (du Toit, 2013, p.312).

VAL. I was frightened

FRANK. When?

VAL. When I left you.

FRANK. I was frightened when you came back.

VAL. Are you now?

FRANK. Thought of killing myself after you'd gone. Lucky, I didn't.

VAL. What are you frightened of?

FRANK. Going mad. Heights. Beauty.

VAL. Luckily, we live in a flat country. (Churchill,1983, p.200)

The reciprocal exchanges of fear between Val and Frank—Val's fear of her leaving, Frank's sadness, and his worries about "madness," "altitudes," and "aesthetic sublimity"—make the basic epistemic trust's fragility clearer. These feelings not only go beyond psychological but also represent ontological perturbations that could very well extinguish the basic openness to Being that is perceived as faith. Hence, their shared fear escalates into a crisis not only among themselves but also in the whole milieu of phenomenology. Frank's

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fright of "Heights. Beauty." is essentially a fear towards the horizon of the field—what is beyond his physical reach or, even worse, the very thing that could destroy the coherence of his world. Their interaction turns into a very delicate act of sensible transcendence whereby they transform their dependence to the world into a source of rebuilding a common horizon of meaning right from the "flat country" of their despair. The invocation of 'heights and 'beauty' operates as a symbolic reference to the overpowering phenomenological encounters that go beyond the limitations of embodied perception and consequently, unsettle the perceptual horizon. Val's down-to-earth rejoinder, "Lucky we live in a flat country" (Churchill,1983, p.200), gives concrete expression to this existential uneasiness being confined within spatial limits and emphasizes the role of the environment in influencing and restricting embodied experience. Therefore, the situation presents a scenario where perceptual faith keeps on being challenged but at the same time it is also the only way to keep embodied subjectivity and relationality alive; if there is no this implicit trust in the reality of the world, then the engagement would become meaningless. Their conversation brings forth a process of negotiation of transcendence done through affected vulnerability and openness. Val's inquiry, "Are you now?" (Churchill,1983, p.200) and Frank's disclosure form a moral openness to frailty—that is the very feature of sensible transcendence.

This openness recognizes the otherness and the interconnectedness as places of transformation instead of separation, revealing how the divine comes into being within the non-reflective area of perceptual faith, which makes it possible for people to take part in and change their situations. The symbolic images of "beauty" and "heights" embody the conflict between the stability of immanence and the overpowering nature of transcendence. Heights conjure up moments that are dizzying and that threaten the limit of the body, whereas beauty—associated with the perfect and the transcendental—is always along with fear, indicating that the plus of either aesthetic or existential quality does interfere with the perceptual field. In contrast, the "flat country" picture indicates a stabilizing horizon—a grounding of being-in-the-world where the transcendence is still mediated through the material and perceptual order that arranges the experience.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrated that Caryl Churchill's Fen enacts a dynamic interplay between Irigaray's sensible transcendence and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological field. Through cross-gendered casting, episodic dramaturgy, and embodied labor, the play foregrounds

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gendered subjectivities as fluid, relational, and ethically open rather than fixed or essentialist. The fen's liminal environment, the women's corporeal work, and the characters' intersubjective interactions exemplify how identity emerges within a contingent perceptual and social horizon. Moments such as Nell's ethical witnessing and Val and Frank's shared vulnerability reveal how embodiment, perception, and relationality create spaces for agency, resistance, and transcendence. Churchill's dramaturgy thus functions as a praxis of embodied critique: destabilizing patriarchal binaries, opening ethical and ontological possibilities, and demonstrating that subjectivity is continuously constituted through lived, relational, and perceptual engagement.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed significantly to the research process.

Declaration

We declare that this manuscript is original and has not been submitted to any other journal for publication

Transparency Statements

The authors affirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. Any additional data can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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