

# Phenomenology, Pomo Baskets, and the Work of Mabel McKay

SHERIDAN HOUGH

*This article characterizes the work of Native basket weaver Mabel McKay, using some of the conceptual tools of twentieth-century phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Specifically, McKay's baskets have often been described as "living;" Merleau-Ponty's account of the world as "living flesh" seems to suggest a way of thinking about these baskets as more than mere artifacts. I conclude that McKay's baskets are a powerful propaedeutic: they awaken a sense of ourselves as perceivers.*

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When I went away to college Mabel gave me a "prayer basket,"  
a miniature basket so small I need a magnifying glass  
to see its designs. She told me how to feed the basket  
with water once a month, and she told me how to pray,  
what songs to sing. Her baskets are living.  
They live with her. They live with their holders.

—Greg Sarris, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*

The flesh of the world is not self-sensing as is my flesh—  
it is sensible and not sentient—I call it flesh, nonetheless.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*

I never met Mabel McKay, but I have known and loved her baskets—and indeed the basketry of the Pomo peoples—all my life. I have an early, vestigial memory of seeing these Pomo baskets: most of the glass museum shelves were too high, but I was fascinated by what I could see, banking up and away from me: tan

and black baskets as tiny as the tip of my finger; rows of baskets, some round, other squat, the shelves dizzy with their colored, feathered patterns. When I was old enough to go to the museum alone, I went back to see them, day after day. What did I want? I stared at them as long as I could, until someone (my aunt, my mother) collected me, but no amount of staring satisfied me. Now, I try to reconstruct that child and that longing: “What do you want?” I ask her. Not a basket: this was not the hunger of acquisition. An older me would have said, “I want to be able to do that”—as an adolescent I collected books about basket-making, the gathering of sedge root, redbud bark. Later I would realize that a white girl from suburban Northern California is from the wrong world altogether for this kind of creative work.

But I know better now. My childhood longing was not about having or making baskets, but about understanding the spirit of those baskets.

Greg Sarris—whose marvelous work has preserved Mabel McKay’s spirit for those of us who never met her—sums up my earliest response to her work: “Her baskets are living.” I think I might have said something like that, if anyone had asked—but I certainly would not have been able to explain myself. Now, perhaps, I can say something useful about what that six-year-old was staring at, what she saw. Of course, what I have to say will be—perforce—in the voice of my philosophical training. I write about, and think about, phenomenology and existentialism in the Continental tradition, which is hardly the right kind of education for thinking about the life and work of the Pomo people. On the other hand, I sense that some of my phenomenological work helps me to get clearer about these baskets, which are not simply objects, or artifacts, or healing mechanisms, or works of art—although clearly they can be treated as all these things<sup>1</sup>—but as living interstices, as “ambiguous domains,” as places where—if we see aright—the usual split between subject and object is revealed as subservient to a more fundamental kind of Being.

What does it mean to say that Mabel McKay’s baskets are alive? In trying to explain this to myself (the older, philosophical self) I am reminded of some of Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts in his *Final Notes* (1968). Merleau-Ponty’s insistence that the *world* is “flesh,” is alive, helps me to think about what is going on with McKay’s baskets, while the baskets in turn are the made, living reality of what phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty are trying to describe. “The phenomenological significance of Mabel McKay’s baskets,” I could call this: but I suspect that McKay, if she were alive to read this, would laugh. So I will instead call this a meditation on McKay’s baskets, by way of the later work of Merleau-Ponty.

## I.

First, some introductory remarks about what a “Pomo basket” is. “Pomo” designates a group of tribes living in Northern California, including Mendocino, Sonoma, and Lake counties, a group bound by geography and seven

linguistically related yet distinct languages. As Malcolm Margolin remarks, “We refer, for example, to the “Pomo” as if there had once been a Pomo tribe or culture. Before the coming of the whites, however, the Pomo were several dozen independent tribal groups . . .” (1993, 3). The Pomo tribes are renowned for their basket work, which is generally considered to be the finest—that is, the most intricate, varied, and complex—ever created. Ethnographers of the late nineteenth century such as Otis Tufton Mason had already taken notice of the richness and variety of Pomo basketry. Mason, in his two-volume survey *American Indian Basketry*, lists seven varieties of the Pomo twined basket (horizontal strands woven around vertical shoots) and six kinds of coiled baskets (a spiral stitch through a hole made with an awl around a rod, or rods). Of these baskets Mason states, “There is no more interesting group of Indians in America than the Pomo with respect to the variety of technical processes in basketry. They not only understand many of the processes common among other tribes, but have introduced one or two types of manipulation peculiar to themselves” (1988, 384)—a remarkable claim on Mason’s part, considering the breadth of his account of native basket work.

Pomo baskets use a wide range of weaving techniques, and a single basket might display several twining techniques (this kind of virtuosity is distinctive of Pomo basketry) (Abel-Vidor, Brovarney, and Billy 1996, 17). These baskets have a host of uses and purposes; some were woven tightly enough to hold water, and acorn mush could be cooked in these baskets (Brown and Andrews 1992, 34). About a dozen kinds of material are used to make the baskets, although sedge root, willow, and redbud bark are the most common (redbud bark is used to create the red patterns so typical of the Pomo basket). Pomo baskets also include distinctive decorative elements, including glass, clamshell, and magnesite beads; weaver Beverly Ortiz claims that Pomo baskets “. . . are probably most famous, however, for the beautifully colored and iridescent feathers incorporated into them, including quail topknots (black); meadowlark breast feathers (yellow); mallard neck and head feathers (green); acorn woodpecker head feathers (red); and bluebird and jay breast feathers (blue)” (Abel-Vidor, Brovarney, and Billy 1996, 19). Mabel McKay’s feather baskets in particular are considered by many to be uniquely powerful and beautiful. In a colloquium sponsored by the Crocker Art Museum on 22 January 1996, native weavers and artists gathered to discuss native California basketry, including two of McKay’s feather baskets. Artist Craig Bates says, “I think this is just remarkably Mabel. Nobody else in the world made baskets like this. . . . Here’s this woman who became a really important traditional figure later, as she got older, but in making this basket, she’s made a total change. . . .” Ethnographer Judith Polanich replies, “But for Mabel this makes sense. . . . Mabel’s view of tradition was that you dreamed the pattern. For her, tradition didn’t mean that you were doing it the same way as the older generation or that you had been taught by a traditional weaver” (Bibby 1996, 83–84).

Pomo baskets are also incredibly beautiful. For those of us consigned to stare at these baskets through museum glass, they must first appear as aesthetic objects. (Very few people, besides curators and docents, have direct contact with the baskets. In all my years of basket admiring, I have held a Pomo basket (a mallard-feather gift basket thought to be the work of McKay) exactly once: the basket was placed on my latex-clad palm for a brief moment.) Pomo weaver Susan Billy, who trained with legendary weaver Elsie Allen and who has shown her work on tour alongside Mabel McKay (Abel-Vidor, Brovarney and Billy, 50) agrees that this hermetic mode of museum display misleads the viewer into seeing the baskets as merely beautiful. In an interview with me in Ukiah, California, on 6 July 2001, Billy said, "The baskets are alive and need to be handled. They need your body oils, and your care." Chumash weaver Julie Cordero agrees. In a phone interview from Charleston, South Carolina, on 28 September 2001, she told me: "Baskets have a life, a birth, and a death. Seeing them in the museum case is like seeing them in a hospital ward on life-support." The beauty of these objects is deeper than the pattern, the weave: it bespeaks the life that each bears.

In what follows, I will focus on the work of Mabel McKay. McKay's baskets are evocative and arresting, a kind of "phenomenological propaedeutic"; I wish, however, to stress that the qualities so readily perceived in her baskets are not unique to hers alone; in fact, the features of most interest to me in her work are surely present in every Pomo basket. Other basket-makers, particularly Elsie Allen and Essie Parrish, have also created arresting and instructive examples of the craft. McKay's baskets are certainly fascinating, but not singularly so. Nor can it be a matter of "degree": if all Pomo baskets are "living," then it makes no sense to say that some have a greater degree of life than others. What is it, then, about some baskets? How does a McKay basket (or an Allen or Parrish basket) get its revelatory power?

An initial way into this question is to consider the kind of ethnographic commentary I've just provided: the academic analysis of a basket into its "properties"—its history, materials, techniques, and uses—really fails to identify the *spirit* of the Pomo basket, and the oddly evocative spirit of McKay's baskets in particular. To say, as everyone does, that Pomo baskets are "the finest" ever woven, is true enough, and "fine" here is doing a lot of work: fine craftsmanship, fine aesthetic properties, finely honed utilitarian capacities. But to break down the baskets in terms of properties in this way is to miss the basket as a whole phenomenon: yes, they had a variety of uses and purposes; yes, they are no doubt beautiful: but each one is intended to be a creation of the Spirit, and thus "alive" to its uses in its own unique way. Sarris describes McKay's view of how to think about the Pomo basket:

‘Oh how they keep going on with the questions,’ she once lamented at Berkeley. While a handful of other notable weavers . . . can talk about design and technique . . . Mabel cannot separate a discussion about the material process of her basketry from a discussion about Dreams, doctoring, prophecy, and the ancient basket-weaving rules, *since for Mabel these things cannot be understood separately*. Mabel is the last ‘traditional weaver’, that is, a weaver whose work is associated with power and prophecy. ‘Everything is told to me in my Dream. What kind of design, what shape, what I am going to do with it—everything about the baskets—is told in my Dream.’ (Sarris 1993, 51; emphasis added)

Weaver Susan Billy concurs with this sentiment: “Weaving is not a craft, it is a spiritual path. It can’t all be put into words, what it means . . . every stitch has intention.” Furthermore, during the July 2001 interview Billy pointed out that the standard question “How long does it take to make a basket?” must have a holistic answer: the reeds and rhizomes must grow; the seasons turn; the weaver must make her place with the materials she selects and cultivates.

McKay’s reluctance to “deconstruct” the basket for her white listeners underscores an important feature of the “living” basket, the relation of the perceiver to the thing perceived. Here, I think, Merleau-Ponty’s efforts to explain the phenomenology of perception can help us to see the basket as a live thing. In order to honor the holistic view of McKay and others, we need to think phenomenologically.

## II.

Now, a brief excursus on Merleau-Ponty’s last phenomenological project. Merleau-Ponty’s final thoughts about how subjects are in the world—unfinished at the time of his death—are tantalizing and obscure. In attempting to make use of these remarks, we should begin with something we can be sure of: they are clearly intended to amplify his earlier account of embodied agency. As in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), the fact of our embodiment is the essential starting point for the investigation. Merleau-Ponty’s earlier account of consciousness and the body in the *Phenomenology* negotiates the opposition between “empiricist” and “idealist” conceptions of our perception. Merleau-Ponty demands that we really attend to the phenomena: neither “empiricism” nor “idealism” (that is, accounts that describe us solely as passive receivers or as active constructors) can account for our everyday experience of figuring out, of sorting out our perceptions, of sense-making. Merleau-Ponty is running the gauntlet between accounts that are utterly “objective” and utterly “subjective.” This “place” between

empiricism and idealism is what Merleau-Ponty calls the “phenomenal field,” a “place” that is neither a data-receptacle nor a mind-construct, but an “ambiguous domain” (his words) where embodied perceiving subjects are located, from which “subject” and “world perceived” only latterly emerge.

This project takes an unusual turn in his Final Notes. The central insight of the “phenomenal field”—still perfectly familiar from the earlier works—suddenly receives a new and startling metaphorical treatment. The body is still the site of an interactive field from which the self and the world emerge, but now the flesh of that field—somehow—extends beyond the flesh of the human body.<sup>2</sup> The world itself, says Merleau-Ponty, *is flesh*, is the source of what we call the sensible. “The flesh of the world is not self-sensing as is my flesh—it is sensible and not sentient—I call it flesh, nonetheless” (1968, 250). That flesh, furthermore, is not inert or static: it is reproductive. The world-flesh is *pregnant*. “It is a pregnancy of possibles, *Weltmöglichkeit* (the possible world variants of this world, the world beneath the singular and the plural)” (1968, 250). And in fact he attaches an instruction to this metaphoric account: “Do a psychoanalysis of Nature: it is the flesh, the mother” (1968, 267).

What does Merleau-Ponty mean? This trope—the world as “pregnant flesh”—contains an important ambiguity, one that, I will suggest, will help us to understand the remarkable power of McKay’s baskets.

What does the image of pregnancy offer us? In thinking about a pregnant woman, we have (at least) two ways of viewing her status. We might think of her as the custodian of an unborn child, as a rational, autonomous maternal being who has complete control over her helpless charge. In this light, we will see her as the maker of choices, the bearer of responsibility. Conversely, we may see her as one who has been invaded, impregnated, her hormones and her life held hostage by a powerful, unknown homunculus, her autonomy undermined, her very life dictated by forces beyond her control.

Julia Kristeva’s remarks about pregnancy are relevant here. Kristeva proposes a new approach to ethical questions via this metaphor, called “herethics” (1987, 262–63). This ethic is based on a particular relationship, that of mother and child during pregnancy and birth. Furthermore, it relies on *the ambiguity in pregnancy and birth between the subject and object* (Oliver 1993, 66; emphasis added). Kristeva’s emphasis on the indeterminacy of the mother’s status is instructive. The pregnant person is in charge of the pregnancy, yet *also* out of control, submitting to forces beyond the scope of choice or deliberation. In this sense the mother’s autonomy is compromised. The challenge to the mother’s autonomy is the result of the indistinct configuration in question: a pregnant body is simultaneously single and dual. We might say that a pregnancy involves two distinct entities that are remarkably blurred; on the other hand, we can describe the pregnant person as having two parts, the bearer and that which is borne, and conclude that this is an interesting duality, since it requires that we acknowledge “two” while treating them as somehow “one.”<sup>3</sup>

This necessarily indeterminate metaphor of pregnancy is a crucial part of Merleau-Ponty's claim. This notion—the world as “pregnant flesh”—is an *ontological* claim: his ontology, then, relies on the inherent ambiguity of subject-object positions in pregnancy. In calling the world of the embodied agent “pregnant flesh,” he wants to focus on the *dynamism*, the gathering and articulating of forces that pregnancy suggests, the coming to be of that which is not yet present.

Merleau-Ponty's approach to this “two that is one” emphasizes both the power of “gestation” and its “mother,” the source of our being-in-the-world. As he puts it, it is the “cohesion of ‘self with self’” (1968, 208). A kind of equality reigns. A good illustration of this relation is found in his well-known description of seeing the cube:

One has then: an openness upon the cube itself by means of a view of the cube which is a distancing, a transcendence—to say that I have a view of it is to say that, in perceiving it, I go from myself unto it, I go out of my self into it. I, my view, are caught up in the same carnal world with it; i.e.: my view and my body themselves emerge from the same being which is, among other things, a cube—(1968, 202)

The “openness” of the cube is the shared constitutive activity, the “flesh,” of the perceiver and the perceived. To say that the “world-flesh” is “pregnant” is to point out *the dynamism inherent in perceiving*. My gaze is never discrete or static: it is alive with that which will be seen. More importantly, it is grounded in that which is not currently being visually attended to; both viewer and viewed are engaged in the same process. “Pregnancy” captures this sense of the source of perception as well as the “fecundity,” the possibility of further perceptions, yet without demoting the “seer.” “I do not even see myself seeing, but by encroachment I complete my visible body, I prolong my being-seen . . . and it is for my flesh, my body of vision, that there can be the cube itself which closes the circuit and completes my own being-seen. It is hence finally the massive unity of Being as the encompassing of myself and of the cube. . . that makes there be a cube” (1968, 202). The individual act of seeing, the “mother,” must be placed within the “pregnant flesh” of the shared meaningful world in order to be the act of seeing that it is.<sup>4</sup>

### III.

But here we should pause to consider: what does this speculative and metaphoric account of our perception have to do with Pomo basketry, and the peculiarly evocative nature of Mabel McKay's creations?

I want to return, for a moment, to my child's eye view of the baskets. They are powerful, arresting, and highly suggestive (of a way of life, of the person who

created them, of the context—both environmental and social—from which they came). Why would an object as patently humble as a basket have this kind of power? More to the point, what *kind* of power is this? I will argue that Pomo baskets such as McKay's are a kind of phenomenological propaedeutic: these baskets make manifest some basic features of what it is like to be in the world. They speak to something fundamental in our experience, namely our perception of the world around us. The dynamism of the perceiver's relation to that which is perceived is immediately available to the sensitive (and, indeed, even to the not-so-sensitive) viewer of McKay's baskets.

Let me return to Merleau-Ponty's own propaedeutic, the cube. When we look at the cube, he says, "I go from myself unto it . . . I, my view, are caught up in the same carnal world with it . . . my view and my body emerge from the same being which is, among other things, a cube—" (1968, 202). The cube is meant to show us what it is actually like to perceive an object: a subject neither passively takes in, nor actively constructs what she sees: rather, perception is duality and interdependence, an "intertwining" of sensing and the sensible. Perception is the taking up of something on the basis of a ground: "What we call a visible is, we said, a quality *pregnant* with a texture, the surface of a depth, a cross section upon a massive being, a grain or corpuscle borne by a wave of Being. Since the total visible is always behind, or after, or between the aspects we see of it, there is access to it only through an experience which, like it, is wholly outside of itself" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 136; emphasis added). Every visible is utterly bound up with the invisible, with the ground that is "behind" or "after" it: and this is the lesson that the basket teaches. In fact, it strikes me that a McKay basket can reveal this in a way that a mere cube cannot. The basket's beauty makes the viewer aware of herself as viewer—of what? Of this object, that is made available by so seeing it, and yet the basket beheld is not created by this viewing. Rather, the viewer recognizes the "ambiguous domain" of our embodied experience, in which humans, as sentient subjects, are also necessarily objects, and in which the objects perceived are also part of our conscious and subjective understanding of them.

The body, Merleau-Ponty claims, is composed of two aspects or "moments." A body is at the same time one thing among many in the world as well as the means of sensing those things, including itself: "We say therefore that our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees and touches them . . . its double belongingness to the order of the 'object' and to the order of the 'subject' reveal to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders" (1968, 137). McKay's baskets illuminate the "unexpectedness" of these relations, of the dynamic flowing between taking up the world and being so taken (and of the potency latent in each act of perception, the possibilities always gathered around that which has been secured). Merleau-Ponty remarks, "No more than are the sky or the earth is the horizon a collection of things



held together . . . it is a new type of being, a being by porosity, pregnancy, or generality, and he before whom the horizon opens is caught up, included within it. His body and the distances participate in one same corporeity or visibility in general, which reigns between them and it . . .” (1968, 149). It is this “same corporeity” that the baskets reveal. Our seeing the basket is made possible by a more fundamental way of being, an originary oneness that makes possible the subject’s seeing of the object.

McKay’s baskets elaborate what it means to say that the self and the world are composed of one flesh: the experience of the world involves the sensible and the sensing, an arrangement in which the sensing and the “thinging” are only ever artificially prised apart. When Merleau-Ponty names this flesh *pregnant*, however, he suggests the *movement inherent* between sensation and thing sensed: again, this movement is palpable in McKay’s baskets.

#### IV.

What makes Pomo baskets such as McKay’s better able to get us in touch with what it is like to be in the world—to awaken a sense of ourselves as perceivers—than other objects? The particular power of her creations stems from, I believe, her holistic approach to her work. The function of the basket is, she claims, part of its Spirit-guided destiny: “The basket specialists tracked her down, and the orders kept coming . . . They asked her if she would weave twined baskets—all of her baskets were coiled. She said that she had made some twined baskets when she was younger, but that now she made only coiled baskets . . . She followed the spirit . . . She wove in redbud for the colored design, and feathers too, seeing a pattern form that was clear in her mind as she coiled around and around” (Sarris 1994, 88).

Here is McKay’s account of what the Spirit said to her as she began doctoring:

Your baskets, they will all come from me. You will be famous. People will want you to make baskets. They’ll offer you lots of money. But you pray to me first. I’ll show you what to make for each person. Each of your baskets has a purpose. Each has a rule. But a lot of people won’t understand that. You must explain, show the people that the baskets are living, not just pretty things to look at. Some basket makers just make baskets, but that’s not you . . . you’ve been cut out different. (Sarris 1994, 74)

McKay’s baskets are not simply artifacts, objects: they are purposive and highly specific. Each one is a unique creative event; each basket bespeaks a particular context, an ethnobotanical setting, a relevant set of needs. The basket’s design, color, ornamentation, and weave reveals the human concerns it addresses, and

these concerns are illuminated—sometimes healed—by the presence of the basket. Even when these baskets are placed in a museum case, this fundamental intertwining of the material and the spiritual, object and subject, can still be felt. The “originary oneness” of our experience is visible in the basket itself.

McKay’s baskets bear “ontological witness” to our experience of being in the world. Merleau-Ponty describes our ontological situation as a “whole that does not reduce itself to the sum of its parts” (1968, 149), in which the relation of the perceiver and the perceived is a “pregnant whole.” Coming to see this relation, Merleau-Ponty argues, is profoundly revealing: “Show that these notions (pregnancy, Gestalt) represent a getting into contact with being as pure *there is*. One witnesses that event by which there is something. Something rather than nothing and this rather than something else” (1968, 206). When we see aright ontologically, we see that “I was able to appeal from the world and the others to myself and take the route of reflection, only because first I was outside of myself, in the world, among the others, and constantly this experience feeds my reflection” (1968, 49). In recognizing our common home within the world’s fecund flesh we acknowledge the cultural and social bonds that in part constitute the objects around us, and that precede our individual perceptions: again, McKay’s baskets are uniquely suited for this ontological task.

When we view McKay’s baskets in the museum case, we are staring at, as Sarris puts it, a “culture under glass” (1993, 51). Looking at the detritus of a culture is hardly edifying; and yet these baskets continue to engage us with their potency, the power of ontological truth. In McKay’s baskets the material, spiritual, cultural, and temporal dimensions of being human are woven together, and only illegitimately understood as discrete elements. In looking at these baskets, we see, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, the “unseen”: we sense the presence of the “Invisible” in our bodily experience. These baskets suggest, and make use of, much that is not immediately available to us. Unseen vistas—perceptual, cultural and temporal—produce the objects selected by our gaze; both the seen and unseen are part of the flesh that gives birth to both the self and its world.

## NOTES

Thanks to Pomo weaver and artist Susan Billy and to Chumash weaver Julie Cordero for taking up the issues raised in this paper, and for sharing their knowledge about basketry with me.

1. Greg Sarris recounts the following cautionary tale: “Mabel once pointed to a basket under glass in a museum and told a long and horrifying story [about it]. ‘My grandmother knew that basket . . . it is not something to look at’ (Sarris 1993, 60).

2. I am indebted to the collection of essays prompted by Claude Lefort’s essay on the flesh (Johnson and Smith 1990).

3. See, for example, my account of Nietzsche's use of the metaphor of pregnancy in *Nietzsche's Noontide Friend: The Self as Metaphoric Double* (1997).

4. In an e-mail message to me dated 31 October 2001, Julie Cordero agreed that the trope of nature as "pregnant flesh" was an effective one, and she went on to observe: "[in the Pomo worldview] there is no set category for "nature," and therefore no category for "supernatural." This might lead us to ponder how English speakers of Indo-European languages could draw linguistic, categorical lines around something (nature) into which we are inextricably woven. To my way of thinking, it is rather like trying to describe your mother's face while you are still in utero."

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