

# (UN)EXCEPTIONAL TRAUMA, EXISTENTIAL INSECURITY, AND ANXIETIES OF MODERN SUBJECTHOOD: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF ARBITRARY SOVEREIGN VIOLENCE

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Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis.

Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*

It is thanks largely to Giorgio Agamben's work on the "state of exception" that questions of state sovereignty and state violence, of who is protected and who is excluded, and of the margins and failings of law in times of emergency have dominated certain strands of political philosophy in the post-9/11 world. The decision on the "exception"—originally theorized by Carl Schmitt as the emblematic mark of sovereignty—has, on Agamben's account, increasingly come to inform the organizational core (and the political reality) of sovereign and state power, and has gone from *proving* the rule to *establishing* the rule. The decision, in other words, has become "a *technique* of government rather than an exceptional measure," and as such the *normalized* logic of modern governmentality (Agamben 2005, 6–7, emphasis added). And if modernity is marked by the normalization of the logic of the exception, then it is also marked by the normalization of "unlimited authority" and the monopoly of sovereign violence (Schmitt 1985, 12). Unique to the sovereign decision of today is that "it radically erases any legal status of the individual, thus producing a legally unnameable and unclassifiable being" (Agamben 2005, 3). However, insofar as "[t]he state of exception thus ceases to be referred to as an external and provisional state of factual danger and comes to be confused with juridical rule itself," there are increasingly *entire populations of subjects* who have, for the sake of the purity of the state, become excluded from political protection and thereby acutely vulnerable to state violence (Agamben 1998, 168).

Influential though this reading has been, the conceptual framework of the “exception” crucially fails to account for the way in which such violence is *felt* under conditions of normalized, extralegal sovereign power. In other words, it is precisely when we accept that modernity is characterized by the state of exception turned rule without interrogating the actual *operation* of the normalized “decision” that we are unable, in the words of Judith Butler (2004), to account for the ways in which power “functions differentially, to target and manage certain populations, to derealize the humanity of subjects who might potentially belong to a community bound by commonly recognized laws” (68). This article accordingly problematizes the “exception” framework for precluding an analysis of the very *experience* of sovereign violence, due to its identification of the sovereign “decision” as a fundamentally *ontologizing* force that problematically renders bare life “a condition to which we are *all* reducible” (67, emphasis added). The approach I put forward here is predicated on a new understanding of sovereign power based not on a “decision” which renders all subjects “bare,” but rather on the exercise of *arbitrary violence* to which different subject-populations are vulnerable to varying degrees. Perhaps more importantly, however, such a critical phenomenological articulation of sovereign violence can attend to the *existential* phenomenological consequences once the structures that make possible its exercise are dismantled or overcome.<sup>1</sup> To this end, I conclude with a meditation on the *traumatization* resulting from persistent and pervasive anxiety by turning to narratives of subjects living in spaces where arbitrary sovereign violence is particularly acute.

Importantly, I do not suggest that we altogether abandon the conceptual framework of the exception; indeed, there is much in the theory of the exception that is valuable to my analysis and upon which I draw at various points in this article. My critique is therefore one of sufficiency: if we aim to theorize modern political violence and exclusion—and more importantly, if we aim to *bring to light* the experiences of the most marginalized, most liminal, and most precarious—it is not enough simply to articulate the grid of intelligibility of how sovereign violence is realized in institutions and norms, not enough to identify *where* exclusion takes place and *how* subjects are rendered in these places, not enough to simply state that “we are all virtually *homines sacri*” (Agamben 1998, 115). Instead, we must rethink contemporary political space as a horizon comprised of modalities which contour the lived experiences and conditions of possibilities of various subjects therein, rather than as demarcated, exceptional or extralegal regions which *ontologize* subjects into generalized categories of “bare life.” By thus looking at both the mechanisms that make possible arbitrary sovereign violence as well as survivor accounts of those who have experienced such violence firsthand, I propose a new understanding of modern subjecthood as one of *existential insecurity* as a result of *pervasive anxiety under conditions of arbitrary sovereign violence*.

<sup>1</sup>“Critical phenomenology,” as I understand it, is the utilization of the classical phenomenological emphasis on lived experience in tandem with an emphasis on the interpersonal nature of lived experience and the rearticulation of the “subject” as not only constituting of the world, but also constituted by the world. It is only such an interpersonal and mutually constituting nature of subjectivity that can account for, as thinkers like Frantz Fanon have shown us, the ways in which intersubjective and politicized contexts contour the conditions of possibility open to differently-constituted bodies. The hope, in so doing, is the possibility of making visible discrete sites of power and, as such, spaces for intervention in social and political struggles. As put beautifully by Gayle Salamon (2018), “if phenomenology offers us unparalleled means to describe what we see with utmost precision, to illuminate what is true, critique insists that we also attend to the power that is always conditioning that truth” (15).

## I. FROM SOVEREIGN DECISION TO ARBITRARY VIOLENCE

Much of why Giorgio Agamben identifies the state of exception as *nomos* of modern politics is the emphasis on *security* in a state-centric global order that upholds state sovereignty as the highest political virtue. Arguably, the security paradigm has intensified immensely in the post-9/11 Western (and especially U.S.) world through the framing of terrorism as the biggest threat to secular, democratic life. In the undefined and ongoing “War on Terror,” the U.S. has propagated the existence of a perpetual *threat* (against its territorial integrity, against its hegemonic imperialist aims, and against its dominance as a world power) as justification for taking exceptional securitization measures both inside the state (through heightened surveillance, vetting of “suspicious” persons, and racial profiling) and beyond (paradigmatically through drone warfare). Unique to the security paradigm is that, once threat has been woven into the fabric of political life as such, then the state need not identify a clear *object* of threat—the hallmark of Schmitt’s sovereign decision—and instead is able to take any exceptional measure, at any time, in the name of self-preservation. A consequence of this new sovereign logic is a shift away from the sovereign *decision* toward the *arbitrary* exercise of sovereign violence.

What distinguishes “arbitrary” violence from violence *simpliciter* is that the violence is often unanticipated, unforeseeable, or unknowable in advance by those upon whom the violence is ultimately inflicted. My understanding of “arbitrary” here draws from Robert Barsky’s (2016) characterization of “arbitrariness in law” (which itself is, he acknowledges, contextually and contingently indexed) as a counterpoint to legal *discretion*. Discretionary decision-making—characterized principally as some sort of *reasoned evaluation*—“has to be undertaken in a *reasonable* manner, consistent with the statutory powers of the agency in question” (20, emphasis added). Conversely, “arbitrariness” contains within it an element of *unreasonableness*, a characterization that falls in line with Timothy Endicott’s (2014) description (also cited by Barsky) of arbitrary government as “a distinctive form of *unreasonable government*; it is a departure from the rule of law, in favor of rule by the *mere will* of the rulers” (49, emphasis added). What Endicott emphasizes is the *lack of justification* as a marker of this unreasonableness and, thus, of arbitrariness: “a decision is arbitrary,” Endicott writes, “whenever the law itself ought to demand a justification other than the fact that the decision maker made it, and there is no such justification” (70).

Widely accepted by legal theorists such as Barsky and Endicott, “reasonable” justification may include reliance on past precedent, compliance with procedure, or grounding in reasoned discretion. However, as George Wright (2010) explains in the context of law, “a decision is often thought of as arbitrary when it is ‘founded on prejudice and preference rather than on reason or fact,’” the former of which are often mired in systemic and ideological biases (847). Arbitrary political decision-making may thus include political decisions or policies that are motivated by the biases and whims of the relevant party, without appeal to past precedent, procedural norms, or reasonable evidence.<sup>2</sup> Taking undocumented immigrants as the emblematic modern figure upon whom arbitrary law is applied, Barsky (2016) observes that their preemptive “undocumented” status allows law enforcement officials to stop, detain, or charge them by singling out individuals who bear the “mark” of the stereotyped “illegal alien,” “by their skin color, their accent, their inability to speak the language of the host country or by their license or ID (or lack thereof)” (2). The strength of executive power under these circumstances is heightened when subjects are rendered “illegal” or, as Agamben (2005) states in the case of Guantánamo

<sup>2</sup> Barsky (2016) himself lists racism and xenophobia as possible dimensions of such biases (18).

detainees, “legally unnameable and unclassifiable” (3).

Barsky’s and Wright’s recognition of the deeply prejudiced nature of arbitrariness is significant, speaking as it does to the reality that *not all subjects are equally vulnerable to arbitrary sovereign power*. Indeed, one of the biggest challenges to Agamben’s theory of *homo sacer* is the perceived ahistorical and apolitical framing of victims of sovereign violence embedded within. Given Agamben’s use of the Nazi camp as the emblematic site where bare life is produced (though he does, in a later work, recognize Guantánamo Bay as the “modern” camp), many postcolonial and critical race theorists have criticized Agamben’s lack of historical and material contextualization of *homo sacer*.<sup>3</sup> As Shampa Biswas and Sheila Nair (2010) note:

[e]ven if one accepts Agamben’s argument that the camp may be the *nomos* of our present, the distribution of bodily vulnerability in that present is far from democratic and indeed remains profoundly asymmetrical. Understanding which bodies are at risk of exceptionalization through the logic of sovereignty requires us to be attentive to the workings of colonial power. (6)

Sensitive, too, to the racial politics driving immigration law in the United States and elsewhere, Barsky and Wright recognize that a constellation of sovereign practices—from executive orders to immigration and incarceration policies—as well as social discourses—regarding who “belongs” and who threatens the imagined or desired hegemony of the nation-state—today have left a host of racialized subjects at the mercy of arbitrary violence without any clear understanding of *when* (during daytime police checkpoints or nighttime raids), upon *which subjects* (which migrant communities, which subjects of color failing to comply by hegemonic standards of civility), and *by whom* (police, security personnel, TSA agents) sovereign power will be enforced.

Nevertheless, Barsky’s and Wright’s analyses of arbitrary law fall very much in line with Giorgio Agamben’s (2005) reformulation of the space of exception as an “anomic space in which what is at stake is a force of law without law” (39). In traditional law, according to Agamben, “reference to the concrete case entails a ‘trial’ that always involves [...] an *enunciation* whose operative *reference to reality* is guaranteed by the institutional powers” (39–40, emphasis added). What Agamben touches upon here is the necessity of discretion (as that which justifies the norm’s application to a concrete particular) as a norm of the juridical sphere. This of course is a feature of law that even Aristotle foresaw, recognizing that the articulation of law—generalized principles—could never account for *all* possible cases, and the elevation of virtuous *phronesis* as critical for just legislation: “in the case of law,” Agamben too writes, “the application of a norm is *in no way contained within the norm and cannot be derived from it*,” and this is precisely why trial and due process become critical conduits for establishing justified application (40, emphasis added). It is in the state of exception where the justificatory link between law and its target of application becomes “impossible,” the “threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a *pure violence without logos claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference*” (40,

<sup>3</sup> Postcolonial and critical race-oriented critiques of *homo sacer* were, in the immediate aftermath of *Homo Sacer*’s publication, widely circulated. One of the predominant criticisms launched against this figure was the de-contextualization of *homo sacer* from her historico-material context into a generalizable referent of victimhood and oppression. I myself have offered a critique along these veins (see Ahmed 2019), but recognize that an array of alternative readings of Agamben’s “ontology” have emerged that aim to partially vindicate *homo sacer* from such critiques. Here, the work of Mathew Abbott (2014) is both indispensable and deeply persuasive, wherein Abbott suggests that “such criticisms depend in large part upon a category mistake” which fails to look at Agamben’s ontology as deeply enmeshed with politics rather than an abstraction away therefrom (17).

emphasis added). Just as in arbitrary law there is an unjustifiable departure from the rule of law, so too in the state of exception does the sovereign *transcend* the law in response to a supposed threat to the security of the State that law cannot foresee, abandoning *logos* in its wake.

If we take *arbitrary sovereign violence* as the defining characteristic of the normalized state of exception, then the prevailing consequence for vulnerable populations is a feeling of “fear and uncertainty” borne from *not knowing when one will be targeted*, precisely because there is “no rule of law upon which to rely” in terms of profiling *potential* “threats” (Barsky 2016, 150). Accordingly, members of such vulnerable populations live in a near-constant state of what some have called “ontological insecurity” and which I call existential insecurity generated by persistent *anxiety*.<sup>4</sup> Once the status (whether in terms of legality or criminality) of entire populations hinges on the whims of executive forces, the ever-present possibility of being singled out leaves one temporally and spatially bereft of security. For these persons, “the object of danger or fear is either absent/non-identifiable, or in such a proximity that no reassurance can be offered” (Eklundh, Zevnik, and Guittet 2017, 5) and “[t]he perception of time and space becomes displaced by the modes in which anxiety operates and changes the socio-political landscape” (7).

In order to better assess how precisely anxiety takes shape “on the ground,” so to speak, I turn now to a phenomenological rearticulation of the “state of exception” in order to highlight the existential consequences generated by arbitrary sovereign violence. It is the experiences of those who *inhabit* spaces of exception—in other words, those who are particularly vulnerable to arbitrary sovereign violence—that demand attention, and where the conceptual framework of the “state of exception” alone is insufficient. Importantly, my use of trauma studies here is not intended to diagnose vulnerable subjects as “suffering” trauma; rather, I suggest that trauma studies and affect theory can supplement our broader analyses of state and sovereign violence through its prioritization of affected and effected subjects rather than of oppressors or architects of violent practices. That being said, I also do not intend to suggest that affect theory and trauma studies should comprise the *extent* of our attention to vulnerable subjects; the next move, which lies beyond the scope of this paper, would be to amplify the mechanisms of *resistance* and *perseverance* that subjects possess and are able to employ *in spite of* inhabiting insecure spaces.<sup>5</sup> The reorientation toward affect studies that follows, then, is only the first step in centering vulnerable subjects *as* subjects whose voices are essential for understanding the broader consequences of arbitrary sovereign violence.

## II.

### ANXIOUS BODIES, TRAUMA, AND BEING-IN-THE-STATE OF EXCEPTION

Architectural historian Anthony Vidler noted in 1993 that “the realms of organic space of the body, and the social space in which that body lives and works [...] no longer can be identified as separate” (84), but recognized too that “a theory of space, uncorrected by any dialectical relationship with history, has often hovered dangerously close to a metaphysics of place” (85). Understood in a Marxist register, “history” is the *situatedness* of beings, the contextual-

<sup>4</sup> Though there is arguably an existential dimension thereto, I distance myself from use of the term “ontological” insecurity here as my interest is not solely on categories of “self-identity” or the “precarity” of being, but also on the affective and phenomenological aspects of such precarity on the individual and interpersonal level. However, I do share in many of the foundational assumptions upon which ontological insecurity is grounded, such as the necessity of trust and “belief in the continuity, reliability, and consistency of oneself, other people, and things” needed for ontological security (Hewitt 2010, 511). For more on ontological insecurity, I direct the reader to Giddens (1991) and Young (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Isabell Lorey (2015) and Mariana Ortega (2016) are particularly insightful here.



ized sociopolitical, cultural, and economic landscape in which beings come to be multifaceted subjects with overlapping identities. Taking up history in this distinctly materialist manner is not unfounded; Andrzej Zieleniec (2007) has emphasized the implicit role of space in Marx's historical materialism, as both a mode of production and context of consumption, and recognized that, "whether space is more or less experienced and emphasized as a barrier or a limit to reciprocity reflects an understanding of Marx's view of society as a set of relationships that link individuals" (7). Alongside these Marxist understandings of space as social and political arenas of sociality, the philosophical writings of Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Michel Foucault have, in recent decades, inspired critical phenomenologists to more deeply theorize about the relationship between body and space, recognizing a crucial *existential* dimension shaped by one's relation to space that delineates one's comfort in the world.

David Morris' *The Sense of Space* (2004) is a meditation precisely on this existential dimension, wherein he suggests that the fundamental situatedness of human motility—that which allows for the emergence of meaningful experience—is the "directed fit" that grounds all interactions between embodied consciousnesses and objects in the world:

. . . depth is constitutively differentiated as having a sense, a meaning for us, and it is we who make sense of that meaning; sensing is not a passive activity, it is an active, transitive activity that depends upon sustaining a difference and sameness that crosses body and world. Body and world are thus sensed to one another, their relation is constituted such that the two appear as having a directed fit, the sort of fit belonging to a glove that fits on one hand, but not the other. (24)

All perception, according to Morris, is thus a "matter of moving in the world in a limited way"—contoured, in other words, by our unique understanding of the spaces in which meaning has become sedimented over time (109). It is for this reason that familiar movements of objects and people fade into the background of our perceptual field—what Morris refers to as the "background unconcern" that is "sedimented with habitual meanings" (170)—and our attention is instead "grabbed by things that are 'out of place'" (113).

Beyond sensory experience, however, our sense of space contains within it an affective or psychosocial dimension that bears on our feeling of *comfort* in the world; "[a]ffective depth," as Lisa Guenther (2015) writes in her phenomenological critique of solitary confinement, "marks the emergence and unfolding of meaningful space, space that matters to what Heidegger would call my Being-in-the-world" (242). It is this affective element—in both its individual and intersubjective modalities—that I refer to as the "existential" dimension of being-in-the-world and which serves as the ground of *all* of our phenomenological experiences of spatiality. And crucially, once the unfamiliar enters our perceptual field or we are thrown into a spatial situation we have not previously encountered—once we experience a *disruption* of familiar space, in other words—we experience not only a perceptual "shock" but an *affective* one as well.

Sara Ahmed has been a leading voice in contemporary affect theory, recognizing that geopolitical shifts—particularly in the increasingly multicultural West—challenge the longstanding norms and narratives that shape the social imaginaries and constructed identities of the "nation." The response, Ahmed suggests, has been the reorientation of "world-making" by dominant social groups (in the U.S., *white* social groups) to reassert a "politics of truth" that recognizes and secures their privileged status. Crucial to this world-making is the use of *fear* to manufacture identifiable objects of threat from which subjects can "[reestablish] distance

between bodies” and make borders “by establishing objects from which the subject, in fearing, can stand apart, objects which become ‘the not’ from which the subject appears to flee” (Ahmed 2003, 388, 389). This has paradigmatically been accomplished by designating certain subjects (brown, ethnically Arab, Afghani, or Pakistani, of Muslim origin, etc.) “terrorists” that the sovereign, in the interest of its white subjects, uses to reassert itself as a beacon of freedom, liberal progressivism, and democratic self-fashioning.

Here the distinction between *anxiety* and fear is crucial, insofar as anxiety does not operate quite like the “affective political tool” of Ahmed’s writings. For Ahmed (2014), fear “preserves only through announcing a threat to life itself,” an announcement that in turn produces objects—*determinate threats*, in other words—that the state can then address through exclusion, containment, or elimination (64). Fear, then, works to preserve a designated “us”—which, for Ahmed in the context of the U.S., is the “white” world—and latches on to objects that (threaten to) “approach.” In this way, fear becomes identity-producing or -sustaining—creating “the very effect of ‘that which I am not’” (67) in order to mobilize and protect the (white) “bodies” that fear—due largely to the paradigm of security that has eclipsed (or perhaps, reoriented) the state’s aims in the post-Cold War age. Rather than inspire the production of political collectivities—as is its function in, for example, the Hobbesian social contract—the language of fear now “involves the intensification of threats, which works to create a distinction between those who are ‘under threat’ and those who threaten” (72).

*Anxiety*, on the other hand, is an *approach to objects*—rather than, as with fear, “*produced by an object’s approach*”—and manifests as the “detachment” from objects to which anxiety “sticks” (66). Anxiety is not unrelated to fear, but it does inspire in the anxious subject a unique *relation* to the world that fear does not, eroding the subject’s sense of self and motility in a world that has become unpredictable, unknowable, and unsafe. Insofar as objects of fear can be eliminated, bypassed, or avoided, the *looming threat* characteristic of anxiety is not exhausted even after concrete manifestations of sovereign reprisals—either through deportation raids, drone strikes, or unpredictable police brutality—are carried out. In these instances, it is the unpredictability of sovereign violence *itself* that sustains the feeling of anxiety for bodies vulnerable thereto; to the extent that there is no identifiable object of fear for those at risk of experiencing arbitrary sovereign violence (a mirror of the lack of referent that for Schmitt necessitated the sovereign decision), there is no way for the vulnerable subject to flee or eliminate that which induces the anxiety and, consequently, anxiety comes to pervade all aspects of the subject’s interactions in and with space. As Norma Rossi (2017) acutely observes, “anxiety is destined to remain below the surface once the crisis has passed, both in the form of past traumatic memory and possible future return” (127). Unlike fear, then, anxiety thus does not serve to *preserve* secure spaces, but renders space perpetually *insecure*.

Rossi’s appeal to the language of “trauma” here tellingly illuminates a key dimension of persistent anxiety which is mirrored in Judith Herman’s work on trauma. Herman (2015), professor emerita of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, observes that “[i]t is not necessary to use violence *often* to keep the victim in a constant state of fear,” but fear is rather “increased by *inconsistent and unpredictable* outbursts of violence” (77, emphasis added). Notably, Herman is here speaking of trauma caused by *captivity* in particular—drawing on the Nazi concentration camp as an extreme manifestation thereof—but, if the state of exception is everywhere becoming the rule, this may be reasonably extended to our conceptualization of the status of those living in spaces of arbitrary violence. Assumpta Ekeh’s (2016) phenomenological analysis of trauma is further helpful here, which posits that “[b]eing involved in an *unforeseen* trauma is being thrown into the world in a particular way” (174, emphasis added). Understood in the language of “worlds,” trauma “presents a loss of control over how *reality* is understood, severing the fundamental distinctions used by individuals to make sense of their surroundings” (Furtado

2017, 40, emphasis added). In other words, the unpredictability of the security of one's space of inhabitation and the trauma generated thereby renders one's very existential relation to the *world* insecure.

Building on this theme, theorists and social scientists alike recognize that trauma often accompanies fundamental changes in a subject's relation to space and, as such, comfort in space, both with regard to material objects and other "embodied consciousnesses." Drawing on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD) by the World Health Organization, Martin Endreß and Andrea Pabst (2013) outline five predominant symptoms of trauma "which have implications for interpersonal relationships" (97). Of the five, two include "alteration of spatial experience" and "alteration of self-awareness and perception of others" (97, 98). In their account of the phenomenology of violence as a "negation of sociality," Endreß and Pabst emphasize the interconnectedness of experiences of trauma and the destabilization of self and world.

A prime example is the reporting of Pakistani psychiatrists who have worked with survivors and civilians living in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the most unremitting site where drone strikes have taken place under the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF).<sup>6</sup> The testimonies of survivors and witnesses indicate psychological insecurities not dissimilar from the "phenomenological disorder" described by Guenther or the "alteration" of social situatedness described by Endreß and Pabst:

Interviewees described emotional breakdowns, running indoors or hiding when drones appear above, fainting, nightmares and other intrusive thoughts, hyper started reactions to loud noises, outburst of anger or irritability, and loss of appetite and other physical symptoms. Interviewees also reported suffering from insomnia and other sleep disturbances, which medical health professionals in Pakistan stated were prevalent. (83)

As Endreß and Pabst note in their analysis of social trust, "[t]he doubting of one's own perception combines with the finding that the social environment has lost its reliability . . . [and] 'ontological security' is harmed or destroyed." This, Endreß and Pabst suggest, is "accompanied by [not only] a loss of trust in one's own abilities, but the perception of others, the perception of spaces, time, and situations is, at least, disrupted" (100). Quite simply, the ontological insecurity generated by the spatial disruption of the drone zone, as we can see through these firsthand accounts, engender forms of experience that are, as Serena Parekh (2013) says, rooted in "a separation from the common realm of humanity" (646). Perhaps most troubling, however—and that which is most acutely absent in theories of the "exception"—is that the *effects* of these existential disruptions will linger well beyond the eradication of drone warfare or the subjects' departure from spaces where drone strikes have taken place. When speaking of drones' impacts on children, a mental health professional in the FATA voices her concern that:

. . . when the children grow up, the kinds of images they will have with them, it is going to have a lot of consequences . . . People who have experienced such things, they don't

<sup>6</sup>This is a theme I have explored in greater detail elsewhere; see Sabeen Ahmed (2018) for a more thorough analysis of the phenomenology of space in the "drone zone" than what is presented here.



trust people; they have anger, desire for revenge . . . So when you have these young boys and girls growing up with these impressions, it causes permanent scarring and damage. (“Living Under Drones,” 87)

Although sites where drone warfare are particularly acute spaces of arbitrary sovereign violence—arbitrary insofar as inhabitants have no way of knowing whether they are targets nor of *when* strikes will actually take place—they are by no means the only ones. Indeed, what I turn to now are accounts of U.S. *citizens* whose inhabitation in certain spaces—highly-concentrated immigrant communities, socioeconomically disadvantaged urban spaces, and, increasingly, the “intrusions” of subjects of color in white communities—render them particularly vulnerable to sovereign violence—incarceration, deportation, and execution—and induce a similar sense of existential insecurity.

What is distinctive about these spaces of exception, however, is that they are not spaces of exception for *all* subjects residing therein. This is a point beautifully expressed by Mariana Ortega, whose notion of the “multiplicity” of being attends to the varying degrees of “ease” that are contingent upon one’s corporeal subjectivity and subsequent location in space and time. Drawing on Heidegger, Ortega (2016) characterizes the multiplicitous self as “being-in-worlds and being-between-worlds, a singular self occupying multiple social locations and a condition of in-betweenness” with a “sense of how she fares in worlds” on an existential register (64-65). It is precisely “being-in-worlds” that “constitutes an existential dimension of this self,” insofar as “worlds are intertwined and stand in relation to powers with each other” rather than exist as static objects which organize subjects equally and homogeneously (65). This is largely why Ortega utilizes a *phenomenological* approach rather than an *ontological* one, to explain why it is that two subjects can exist in the same space without inhabiting the same “world.” The space of exception similarly renders an “exceptional world” for some and not others, and it is to testimonies of those inhabiting *these* worlds that I now turn.

### III. NARRATIVES OF EXISTENTIAL INSECURITY AND THE NECESSITY OF PHENOMENOLOGY

As Lisa Guenther (2013) eloquently states in her work on solitary confinement, life itself is “a struggle to maintain a meaningful, integrated, and open-ended relation to one’s environment as a whole, including the other living beings with whom one shares a common *Umwelt*” (119). But what can we say of subjects who are prevented from developing a relation of comfort to the world altogether, whose daily existence is one of spatial—and thus, existential—insecurity, and whose experiences of trauma “overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life” (Herman 2015, 33)?

Fortunately, traumatization is increasingly acknowledged within philosophy and political theories as the realities of psychological- and neuro-atypicalities are destigmatized and normalized on the social scientific and medical levels. Concomitant to these shifts, however, has been a growing concern with “adverse childhood experiences” (ACEs) and their consequences on cognitive and behavioral development—issues that have yet to be adequately attended to in philosophical and political writings. As Judith Herman (2015) observes, “[e]arly life trauma affects the ‘emotional brain,’ the right brain, which develops rapidly in the first years of life and whose functions form the basis of human sociability” (257). However, given that more and more children are subject to different iterations of sovereign violence, much of which is arbitrary in

nature, I suggest we look beyond discrete traumatic events—paradigmatically childhood sexual assault or abuse—toward the lasting developmental and interpersonal effects of *persistent anxiety*. It is for this reason that the cases I examine below focus on children, but in no way do I suggest that young adults or adults are not also vulnerable to similar psychosocial disorientations or destabilizations. Rather, if we understand the body as a “text” to the truth, then recognizing those most profoundly affected by arbitrary violence—children—may be particularly illuminating avenues for envisioning the futures of today’s normalized spaces of exception.

Journalistic pieces and news articles paint the clearest pictures of these phenomenological realities, principally by publishing testimonies from parents that highlight the psychosocial consequences of *children’s* suffering of arbitrary violence. Writing about a mother whose five-year-old son was shot during a Mother’s Day Cookout, Stephen Crockett Jr. (2014) characterizes the interviewee’s neighborhood in Richmond, Virginia as “infected”:

[C]hildren from urban neighborhoods live in continual violence and therefore suffer from all of the symptoms that have been found in veterans once they return home from war. The big difference here is that the trauma is on a continuous loop because the violence is happening outside the front door. Even people who live with the trauma every day may underestimate its effect.

Other articles documenting life in the inner-city United States—populated predominantly by socioeconomically disadvantaged people of color—make similar analogies to veteran trauma, suggesting that there exists a widespread crisis of “urban PTSD” generated by the constant threat of violence; the crucial difference, of course, is that the anxieties generated by one’s *predominant* world (rather than one that is singular and temporary, such as the battlefield) do not go away. As explained by Jen Christensen (2014) of CNN, “[i]f someone is exposed to prolonged, repetitive, or extreme trauma, the amygdala stays in alert mode. And the neuros, the pathways to this part of the brain, lose their ability to recover.” And indeed, she adds, direct exposure to violence is unnecessary for subjects to develop this type of PTSD: “When there is a *perception* that there is disorder in a particular neighborhood, it causes some residents to suffer from PTSD” (emphasis added).

Though especially acute therein, these anxieties are not confined to urban spaces alone. Many Americans of color—and especially black Americans—have written about their experiences raising children to comport themselves in particular ways, avoiding gestures or behaviors—including playing with toy guns or wearing baggy clothing—that may indicate “criminality.” Journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones (2018), for example, recounts not calling the police after a shooting incident in Long Island (“before Michael Brown [and] [b]efore police killed John Crawford III for carrying a BB gun in a Walmart or shot down twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in a Cleveland Park”) because she “feared what could happen if police came rushing into a group of people who, by virtue of our skin color, might be mistaken for suspects.” Jazmine Hughes (2014), writing during the early days of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, remarks that this inability to trust in law enforcement “makes people afraid to have black babies, because they won’t stand a chance.” For her own part, Hughes states that, “[a]s a black woman, nothing will stop me from bearing and raising my future child, but nothing will stop me from raising them in fear.”

Lisa Guenther has been a leading voice in illuminating the phenomenology of incarceration—principally in terms of solitary confinement—but we must remember that incarceration has harrowing psychosocial effects on the families and friends of those incarcerated. In par-

ticular, children with incarcerated parents experience their own share of trauma, whether by bearing witness to a parent's arrest, having to adapt to a way of life void of essential emotional and economic support structures, or removal to foster care. In her recent article on cognitive behavioral therapy with children of incarcerated parents, Anna Morgan-Mullane (2018) observes that

[c]hildren can exhibit the emotional effects of parental incarceration through complex trauma-related stress symptoms such as isolating themselves from their peers, anxiety, struggling to form healthy interpersonal relationships, concentration problems, sleep difficulties, emotional withdrawal from family members, substance use or dependence, and significant feelings of shame and secrecy. If unaddressed, the impacts of these symptoms can often lead to long-term psychological and emotional functioning problems. (200)

Speaking to the “worlds” of these children, Morgan-Mullane adds that,

[c]hildren of incarcerated parents experience numerous sources of material and emotional insecurity. For example, children of incarcerated parents are more likely to receive public assistance, to experience interrupted phone or utility service due to non-payment, and to experience residential insecurity through missed mortgage and rental payments . . . [and] a parent's incarceration can abruptly dismantle a family. (201)

Child separation is routinely addressed by trauma theorists as a *profound* source of chronic trauma, disruptive as it is of the necessary and “normal” attachment relationships established in infancy and which generate early feelings of “trust” in one's environment. Indeed, “[i]t has now become clear that the impact of early relational disconnections is as profound as the impact of trauma with a capital T” (Herman 2015, 263). Judith Herman and others call the effects of such relational disconnections “disorganized attachment,” the primary causes of which are neglect in childhood, either through parental absence or forced separation.

Unsurprisingly, then, the Trump administration's infamous “zero tolerance” approach to detention and deportation has garnered scrutiny from those who recognize the lasting damage that “disorganized attachment” may precipitate. As testimonies reveal, the psychological aftermath of child detention—where many children report having been subject to “neglect, assault and other horrific abuse” (Ellis, Hicken, and Ortega 2018)—persists long after children have been reunited with their parents. Harvard Medical School pediatrics professor Charles Nelson describes the effects of parent-child separation as “catastrophic” for children, and petitions brought forth by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American College of Physicians, the American Psychiatric Association, and “7,700 mental-health professionals and 142 organizations” warn of the future consequences of the “zero-tolerance” policy: “To pretend that separated children do not grow up with the shrapnel of this traumatic experience embedded in their minds is to disregard everything we know about child development, the brain, and trauma” (Wan 2018). There are, of course, myriad firsthand accounts that corroborate these professional edicts. Olivia Caceres, who was separated from her one-year-old-son at a legal point of entry in November of 2017, paints a harrowing and heartbreaking picture of life with her child after eighty-five days of separation:

(My son) is not the same since we were reunited. I thought that, because he is so young he would not be traumatized by this experience, but he does not separate from me. He cries when he does not see me. That behavior is not normal. In El Salvador he would stay with his dad or my sister and not cry. Now he cries for fear of being alone.

. . .

[and] he continued to cry when we got home and would hold on to my leg and would not let me go. When I took off his clothes he was full of dirt and lice. It seemed like they had not bathed him in the 85 days he was away from us. (Desjardins, Barajas, and Bush 2018)

Testimonies like Olivia's are not unique in the Trump presidency, nor are they foreign to other minority groups' experiences of ontological insecurity in the United States, both before Trump and since. And for children of undocumented immigrants who themselves *are* U.S. citizens, the possibility that one or both *parents* will be arrested has disrupted routine life. Speaking of her son Joseph, a U.S. citizen, Maria (last name not provided) tells reporter Hilary Andersson (2017) that he "is now afraid to go to school at all": "I tell him: "It's OK love, you go to that bus,"" said Maria. "But he's told me I'm scared I'm going to come back and you're not going to be in the house."

Even prior to these more recent and extreme policy measures, the phenomenon of being a targeted, undocumented, or minority resident has brought with it a lasting existential burden:

With nearly 11 million undocumented immigrants nationwide and 17.6 million people with at least one undocumented relative, large communities are now experiencing anxiety about separation from their families. Some are having flashbacks to the violence they experienced in their home countries. Some are retreating into the shadows, afraid to drive, bring their children to school, or even seek medical care. (Rinaldi 2017)

A recent article by Widian Nicola, in which she offers a distinctly phenomenological analysis of her upbringing as part of an "illegal" Catholic-Palestinian immigrant family in the United States, troubles some of the stereotypes of "illegal immigranthood" by charting the difficult and often-unsuccessful attempts of such persons to obtain "legal" residency. When they first arrived in 1990, she writes, her parents "spent countless dollars on attorneys who offered false hope and stole their money only to leave our family wondering if we would have the chance to stop living under the shadows and fear of deportation" (Nicola 2017, 293). As she grew older, Nicola states that the very term "immigration"

. . . intimidated me, filled me with doom, and made me anxious. I lived with this pervasive fear of deportation and equated "immigration" with a "monster" that might come to get our family, and worse yet, hurt us . . . This uncertainty and lack of permanency continues to impact life to this day. (294)

Although Nicola was eventually granted DACA status, the threat of deportation ostensibly lifted, and her status as an “illegal immigrant” eliminated, “its ghost still haunted” her, making itself felt in her very corporeal being:

I knew cognitively that I was okay, but my body had still not caught up to the present reality of my now legal status . . . As a child without the capacity to recognize, hold, and deal with my fears, I frequently disconnected from my body, mainly through eating. I did not have access, or, did not know I had access to, somatic resources to ground me in the awareness of my being, let alone my body . . . My distorted, yet very real embodied experience, meant that the terror and anger I felt would continue to grow over the years. The anger manifested itself in a great deal of confusion about my identity and free will. (297)

For Nicola and others who have experienced or continue to experience unstable senses of spatial “at-home-ness,” the psychological and social consequences of this perpetually insecure manner of being lingers well beyond any “correction” of ontological status.

By refocusing our attention on the existential consequences of inhabiting spaces of arbitrary violence, we find that theories of the exception fail to do justice to the realities of life in spaces where the exception has become the norm for many (*raced*) subjects. Even in literature on the traditionally theorized “spaces” of exception—the camp—there is little written on the phenomenological impact of camp inhabitation on the existential constitution of the subject; camp inhabitants are ontologized as *homines sacri* that are, for all intents and purposes, spatially-situated and contextually-bound. But what happens once the state of exception is eradicated, when the refugee camp is dismantled or liberated? For some, especially those who were born and raised in refugee camps, life outside of the camps is unimaginable. Asad Hussein (2016), budding journalist who was born in the Dadaab Refugee Complex in Kenya in 1996, wrote twenty years later that, “I belong to a generation of children who have been rendered stateless. I neither belong to Kenya, where I was born, nor Somalia, where my history begins. Sometimes, I say I am a child of UNHCR.” Asad’s testimony was a response to Kenya’s most recent threat to demolish Dadaab, which has been the world’s largest refugee camp since its establishment in 1991. Despite its “exceptional” status, the threatened existential disruption of Dadaab’s eradication looms heavily for Asad and other camp residents.

Those who have more recently been rendered “stateless”—paradigmatically as a result of the Syrian catastrophe—have experienced devastating psychological effects of escaping harrowing conditions and losing the crucial interpersonal and existential capacity of self-determination in the face of European asylum practices:

The German Federal Chamber of Psychotherapists announced last year that more than 70 percent of refugees who reached Germany have witnessed violence; around 50 percent have experienced violence themselves. That figure holds for 40 percent of children; around a quarter saw violence against members of their family. As far back as 2013, UNHCR found that more than a fifth of Syrians in a refugee camp in Jordan experienced anxiety disorders, with 8.5 percent suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The German study found demand for psychotherapy among refugees just in Germany could be 20 times what is being delivered. (Herman 2016)



Given the inadequacy of refugee camps’—and some host countries’—infrastructure and resources, the very living conditions of these “states of exception” leave researchers and theorists questioning what the future lives of their inhabitants could look like. According to Patricia Mouamar (2015), writing from Lebanon,

More than two-thirds of school-age refugees in Lebanon are being denied an education, either because they cannot afford the expenses or because they are forced to work to help support their families. In some areas, there are simply no schools available, or a lack of transport prevents children from attending classes. For these children, the future citizens and leaders of Syria, it’s hard to maintain hope . . . . The truth, no matter how you view it, is that a whole generation of children is growing up displaced and educated. This will have real, long-term impacts, not just for them but for the future of their country.

These myriad accounts, distinct (and importantly so) as they are, demonstrate a shared feeling of perpetual unease, insecurity, and, fundamentally, *anxiety*. By drawing on these narratives, I have aimed to suggest that the effects of such spatially unstable living are profound in scope, and necessitate not merely ontological classification or structural accounts, but an understanding of the *experiences* of vulnerable subjects, articulated in their own words, in order to be captured fully.

#### IV. EXISTENTIAL INSECURITY AS MODERN POLITICAL SUBJECTHOOD

In a recent article for the *New Yorker*, Hua Hsu (2019) meditates on the “affective turn” in social and political theory, motivated in no small part by the “increasingly precarious times” and “sense of dawning futility” borne of a shifting global order propelled by 9/11. Hsu is here speaking to the general atmosphere in the United States of the Trump era, but we can imagine extending the sentiment beyond U.S. borders amid rising global populism, political polarization, the resurgence of extremism and fundamentalist views, and what seems to be a breakdown in the traditional narratives that allowed so many—including (and perhaps especially) the socially dominant—to make sense of their history, their identity, their existential security. If the era of the nation-state is approaching its end—as journalists and theorists alike increasingly hypothesize—we are witnessing the erosion not only of geopolitical boundaries, but of the economic, political, and cultural hegemonies that have constituted the existential stability of a certain *spatial* ordering of global society. This looming spatial disruption has kindled existential terror within privileged groups as well as oppressed populations, fueling ethno-nationalist populist movements and social justice movements alike. Beyond even the scholarly writings of affect theorists and political philosophers, it is telling that journalists and public figures increasingly characterize modernity as a “new age of anxiety” (Hsu 2019).

Taking a phenomenological approach is, of course, not the only way in which to engage critically with the social and political crises of our present day. It does, however, allow us to highlight the lived experiences of persons living in existential insecurity, so that we might better interrogate and do justice to the realities of these crises. As Widian Nicola (2017) suggests, phenomenological analysis offers a valuable parry against current social and political discourses concerning vulnerable subjects—whether undocumented immigrants, targets of drone strikes and other indiscriminate military strategies, refugees, socioeconomically disadvantaged persons, or those oppressed on the basis of other identity categories—that are “structured around

a need to quantify the worth and value and/or threat of one group versus another,” and which in turn “lead to conversations that attempt to defend the worthiness and credibility of the [subject] to stay or go, instead of attending to the underlying phenomenon at play” (294). At its core, phenomenology helps us move past concepts such as “bare life,” “exception,” and even “law” itself, to more effectively “lay bare” how the consequences of these ideas extend well beyond their abstract contours. From the amplification of deportations to extreme vetting, hyper-policing to technological surveillance, and degrees of political, ethnic, and religious factionalism not seen since the era of the World Wars, it is perhaps time to focus our attention on the phenomenological and existential crises of our current world if we hope for, and strive toward, a better future.

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# SPACES OF BELONGING AND THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF HOME

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On May 20, 2018, the *New York Times* published “Unsheltered,” an article series detailing the ways that New York City landlords abuse the housing court system, one of the busiest courts in the United States with 69,000 cases a year, in order to evict tenants from the apartments they called home (Barker et al. 2018). Capitalizing on the highly profitable housing market in New York City, after evicting the previous occupants, the landlords then renovate these apartments and charge hugely inflated rents to higher-earning tenants. The previous occupants are at best forced to leave their present neighborhoods for another, to leave for another state, or at worst, are made homeless. Such actions, sometimes carried out blocks at a time on behalf of large corporations like the Orbach Group, Thor Equities, or any number of multi-million dollar corporations, consequently carry out the large-scale uprooting of not only specific individuals, but often entire communities that had once called those neighborhoods home.

Such stories of precarious housing, as most of us are likely aware, are not limited to the highly lucrative real estate market of New York City, nor even to low-income tenants, though they have been and continue to be the most vulnerable. In 2016, across the United States, there were 2.3 million evictions filed, no doubt in part because the median asking rent between 1995 and today has increased by seventy percent, adjusted for inflation (Gross 2018). Similarly, the rates of home-ownership have sharply declined for millennials across the West: *The Guardian*, for example, reports that in the UK half as many millennials (twenty-five- to thirty-four-year-olds) compared to baby boomers will own their own house by age thirty (Savage 2018), and the *Huffington Post* reports that home-ownership in Canada is at an all-time low due to rapidly increasing housing prices coupled with relatively stagnant wage growth (Tencer 2017). Personal ownership of one’s housing, it seems, is becoming a luxury and not a necessity, and is becoming an increasingly unlikely one for those who do not have the means to afford down-payments or finance mortgages on increasingly inflated property prices. Such precariousness, I plan to demonstrate here, is precipitated and even made possible by a certain tacit (though sometimes overt) understanding of what housing is, specifically, the notion that housing is not a fundamental condition of human life related to our being “at home” in the world, but a commodity to be bought and sold on the free market, “real estate” or, as is increasingly common, a major financial “investment.”<sup>1</sup> This latter understanding of housing as investment is certainly at play

<sup>1</sup> This understanding, in particular, being the one that led to the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007-2008, which essentially treated individual home-ownership as a secondary concern to capital accumulation, insofar as the banks, and not the homeowners, were given massive bail-outs. It also denotes just how fundamental the value of real-estate is to our contemporary economy.

for real estate corporations, but is also operative at the level of many middle-class home owners who treat their property as their biggest financial asset, which they can use as collateral for their children's student loans or sell to fund their eventual retirement. It is my contention here that this understanding of housing as commodity and investment is complicit in creating a world where fewer and fewer people have adequate housing in the very concrete sense of having a shelter that will guarantee a minimal level of stability for the foreseeable future; furthermore, that the lack of such housing and the way its distribution is organized forecloses the more general possibility of feeling situated or "feeling at home" in the world at all.

Whether or not we want to entertain his conclusions in the face of such facts, I believe Heidegger's critical question during the post-WWII housing crisis in Germany – "what is the state of dwelling in our precarious age?" – remains timely (2001, 158). This question has certainly sparked debate within academic circles of philosophy, but has unfortunately not yet become a fundamental question at either the level of everyday conversation or public policy. For Heidegger, the impetus for his reflections was the shortage of housing after much of the housing stock was destroyed after the war, but for us, there is no such housing shortage. Indeed, in both the United States and Europe, the number of vacant houses largely outnumbers the number of homeless *individuals*, indicating the absurd situation where a vacant house is more desirable, for the company or individual who owns it, than one occupied by the wrong people or for the wrong price.

To be at home is to be situated, to know one's surroundings and what to expect, whereas one's "housing" is an individual (or intimate/familial) space which filters and orients one's engagements with the world. When housing is precarious, we might call it a mere "shelter," a temporary space in which you can rest, but which is essentially temporary. *The Odyssey*, interestingly enough, demonstrates all three modes of inhabitation: from "home," Ithaca itself where Odysseus' family and wealth are, to Calypso's island which afforded comfort and stability, but not "home," to the hole Odysseus covers with leaves on the island of Phaeacia, which offers only a minimal shelter from the elements after he washes up on shore. It is therefore my goal here to consider the experience of being at home with a critical consideration of such issues of precarious housing and to demonstrate, drawing upon and moving beyond the reflections of Gaston Bachelard and Martin Heidegger, how what is at stake in such situations of precarious housing might be a more radical problem than a failure of distributive justice.

I will argue that such precariousness, suffered by specific individuals, communities, or younger generations, denotes a more general foreclosure of the very possibility of feeling at home in the world. To this effect, I will consider various descriptions of loss of housing and feeling out of place or unwelcome, together with a careful analysis of the phenomenological descriptions of dwelling and home. I will claim there are at least two interconnected but distinct aspects of feeling at home: first, the continuity or stability offered by permanent housing, and second, of our being *situated* (and therefore situating the occupant) in a wider social context and "feeling at home" within it. In the contemporary world, the possibilities of both permanent housing and the durable sense of home it enables are increasingly being occluded by an understanding of housing as an increasingly lucrative commodity and capital asset.

## I.

**SOLITUDE, CONTINUITY, AND THE FAILURES OF THE WELFARE STATE**

We begin to address how issues of shelter and the moral and existential stakes of these issues are thrown into relief by first considering the task that Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1994) sets himself. He writes:

I must show that the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories, and dreams of mankind . . . In the life of man, the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. (6-7)

Bachelard understands this to be a challenge to Henri Bergson's metaphysics of time, where time is essentially duration [*durée*], the continuous and indeterminate flow of time that, if described as a specific moment or instant, would no longer constitute "duration," but rather a frozen image of time; that is, the geometrical tracing of the movement of a hand through space, rather than the hand in motion, which never occupies its entire trajectory at a given time. This is crucially important to note because Bachelard's approach, which he calls "topoanalysis," rests upon the claim that "[t]he finest specimens of fossilized duration concretized as a result of long sojourn, are to be found in and through space" (9). Such moments of fossilized time *matter*, but they matter only on the condition of having a space in which they can take shape. Our memories need spaces to "hook on to," and even if we have since left them, these places often come back to us through dreams or when we move through similar spaces.<sup>2</sup> If time requires space to fossilize, then our having a place in the house becomes a crucial phenomenon that contributes to the depth and fullness of human life.

Further elaborating on this point, Bachelard then claims that to form indelible memories we require *solitude* and solitude is always achieved in specific places: corners, garret rooms, crawlspaces, and attics. These are the places that children have moments to themselves, are able to cultivate a personality, coiling in upon themselves like a shell, and discover their own interiority.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, there is good reason to argue that solitude is never sufficient for a sense of complete subjectivity or interiority, as so many authors make clear, but Bachelard is nevertheless correct in saying that "all the spaces of our past moments of solitude, the spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, enjoyed, desired and compromised solitude, remain indelible within us, and precisely because the human being wants them to remain so" (1994,

<sup>2</sup> There are two further places we might look to support this thesis: in Deleuze & Guattari's *What is Philosophy?* they discuss the idea of art as a "monument" of compressed time (1994, 167). Janet Donohoe, in *Remembering Places: A Phenomenological Study of the Relationship Between Memory and Place* (2014), studies at length the way that spaces ground not only memory, but also a sense of connectedness to culture and tradition.

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, too, uses this imagery of "coiling" to describe subjectivity and its relationship to its environment in *Totality and Infinity* (1969, 118).

10).<sup>4</sup> Bachelard understands this psychoanalytically: the spaces of the attic, the crawlspace, etc., all form powerful affective images that shape us, and thereby accrue specific affective valences. No matter what later might come to pass, we will always have been the child who retreated to that attic, who daydreamed in the quiet spaces of the home. We carry our intimate spaces of childhood with us through such indelible images, and because they are indelible, such images assist in giving us a sense of continuity: they anchor us to the world. For the purposes of this paper, we should further emphasize how moments of solitude, of retreating into a familiar and comfortable space, is also a way to gather our energy, to rest. Thus, those who are not afforded the possibility of having such spaces are at the same time not afforded the possibility of solitude, and on Bachelard's account, would not as easily be able to form the indelible images that ground us in the world and maintain us through the world's variability and challenges. To use Bachelard's own vocabulary, instability in our dwelling spaces risks making a human being a "dispersed being," although he quickly passes over this possibility of dispersion as essentially secondary insofar as all being is immediately *well being*. It is, he writes, "already a value. Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house" (7). Unfortunately, from the outset our homes can be places of violence, uncertainty, and contestation, often in ways we might even overlook (as we will see in our treatment of the administration of welfare below). Bachelard's metaphysical reorientation from Heidegger, in other words, overlooks precisely the "thrownness" and contingency involved in the relative stability or instability of one's childhood home, and in so doing, overlooks the contingent and political factors that must be interrogated in any account of dwelling.

We ought to expand Bachelard's point here by saying that the home is more than just an anchor for our memories and a sense of depth or subjectivity, but also serves as a pre-condition for a full participation in democratic political life. Kirsten Jacobson, in her article, "The Experience of Home and the Space of Citizenship" (2010), makes precisely this point, arguing that our existence as civic individuals is made possible by the intimate, interpersonal anchor of the home. Therefore, Jacobson argues, entertaining the liberal idea that we are all isolated individuals is only possible if we take for granted the intersubjective undergirding that fosters the growth of such isolatable individuals. If a liberal society ignores this precondition, Jacobson argues, it risks "the possibility for gross mistreatment of the very citizens it is attempting to describe and cultivate" (245).

I can think of no more revealing example of such mistreatment (though there are certainly more sinister or devastating ones) than the way welfare is administered in the United States. Welfare, at least ostensibly, is meant to guarantee the basic conditions its citizens require to live in a given society, which often (rightly) include providing access to affordable or subsidized housing. In *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), however, Iris Marion Young argues that while welfare might be a good thing, and it might be an important step to guarantee such basic conditions, it nevertheless exercises a form of oppression. There are two crucial flaws in the welfare system on her account: first, it deprives those dependent upon it of certain rights and freedoms that others possess, and secondly, it blocks forms of respect and a feeling of social usefulness (itself a precondition of feeling at home, but one which lies beyond the scope of this paper) due to the stigma attached to receiving welfare benefits. In support of the first claim, she writes:

<sup>4</sup>In *Totality and Infinity* (1969), for example, Levinas' goal is to show the ultimate insufficiency of the coiling-in of subjectivity upon itself. Similarly, Maurice Merleau-Ponty consistently emphasizes throughout his work how the individual is always imbricated within an "anonymous," "general," and "pre-personal" world of intersubjectivity. Interestingly, Bachelard himself claims that it is through returning to the images of home through sleep that "we may perhaps experience a type of repose that is pre-human; pre-human, in this case, approaching the immemorial" (1994, 10).

In meeting needs of the marginalized, often with the aid of social scientific disciplines, welfare agencies also construct the needs themselves. Medical and social service professionals know what is good for those they serve, and the marginals [sic] and dependents themselves do not have the right to claim to know what is good for them. (54)

Due to the highly bureaucratized nature of how welfare benefits are administered, the recipients of such benefits must often subject themselves to authorities with which most of us do not have to concern ourselves. Such authorities place limits on what kinds of food can be purchased with food stamps, or require that the beneficiaries of welfare constantly prove that they are at the same time employed or actively looking for further employment. Even more pointedly, the beneficiaries of public housing are often subjected to stringent security measures. In *City of Quartz* (1990), for example, Mike Davis describes the Imperial Courts Housing Project in Los Angeles, which “has . . . been fortified with fencing, obligatory identity passes and a substation of the LAPD,” and where “[v]isitors are stopped and frisked, while the police routinely order residents back into their apartments at night” (244). To accept welfare, therefore, means to abdicate our decision-making powers in specific areas of our life, even as it guarantees that we can meet our material needs.

In such a situation, the demands of a rational bureaucracy begin to intrude on the intimate space of the home. This consequence of the structure of welfare benefits transgresses the affective qualities of home that both Bachelard and Jacobson reveal to us: if it is only on the basis of the intimate continuity and stability of the home that we can then participate fully in the world, then the constant bureaucratic demands of the welfare state undermine the continuity required by what it aims to guarantee. We may house those who are lucky enough to receive welfare benefits (after negotiating the paperwork requirements), but do we therefore guarantee them a home? Bachelard implicitly illustrates the difficulty here when he writes: “How often have I wished for the attic of my boredom when the complications of life made me lose the very germ of all freedom!” (1994, 16-7). Often stretched thin by an increasingly demanding pace of life, we seek comfort in familiar spaces, but the way welfare is administered makes the human space of retreat and solitude one of the most pressing and complicated affairs in an already complicated life as it makes the intimate space that is supposed to protect and enable us to struggle in the world yet another place of struggle. There is therefore a fundamental *discontinuity* built into the structure of welfare provisions for housing, which undermines the continuity required for such housing to be a full “home” in a Bachelardian sense.

As human beings, we need moments of solitude and retreat, we require a private space to call our own; we need a space where, even if the walls are porous, even if we can hear the neighbors fighting or the traffic on the street, we feel as if we can relax and forget the concerns of the outside world. The human being is “a being who does not want to melt away, and who, even in the past, when [s]he sets out in search of things past, wants time to ‘suspend’ its flight” (1994, 8). Without such a basic structure in which to house ourselves, without our nooks and corners, we are at the mercy of time, caught up wholly in the “duration” of our immediate needs and actions, and we lack a place to gather ourselves before setting out into the world, as citizens, as workers, or even as fully formed subjects.



## II.

## THE SITUATEDNESS OF HOME: DWELLING

We ought to admit, however, the limitations of Bachelard's analysis. For Bachelard, the paradigmatic home seems to be a rural French house, to the point where he claims that city living pales in comparison insofar as it lacks both verticality and cosmicity, a relationship between the house and its natural surroundings. In fact, Bachelard is generally unaware of the specificity of his own idiosyncratic experience of home, claiming, for example:

From my viewpoint, from the phenomenologist's viewpoint, the conscious metaphysics that starts from the moment when the being is 'cast into the world' is a secondary metaphysics. It passes over the preliminaries, when being is being-well, when the human being is deposited in a being-well, in the well-being originally associated with being. (1994, 7)

Substituting "my" with "the phenomenologist's" viewpoint is an all too common slight of hand in the phenomenological tradition. Indeed, Bachelard's hostility towards the idea that human experience involves any measure of being "cast into the world" indicates a discomfort, on his part, with the variability that can occur in our situations of home: our homes can be precarious, or even places of downright hostility. Bachelard, as comfortably housed, suggests that on an ontological level, the most primordial being is well-being. Speaking from a very different worldly position, namely, as a Chicana lesbian, Gloria Anzaldúa, in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) provides a starkly different description of the world:

The world is not a safe place to live in. We shiver in separate cells in enclosed cities, shoulders hunched, barely keeping the panic below the surface of the skin, daily drinking shock along with our morning coffee, fearing the torches being set to our buildings, the attacks in the streets. Shutting down. Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey. (20)

Indeed, Anzaldúa goes on to mention a heterosexual student who believed that homophobia meant fear of going home, which prompts Anzaldúa to think to herself, "how apt. Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We're afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, la Raza, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged" (20). If we are attempting to describe phenomenologically the experience of being a human, we absolutely must include a description of being-at-home, and Bachelard contributes greatly to this discussion. That being said, Anzaldúa points us towards the necessity of being critical of our descriptions of such experiences insofar as they might overlook the determinate historical or political conditions that make this or that experience possible, in this case, insofar as we must make our homes within a cultural milieu that makes them more or less sheltering, more or less homely. For Bachelard, it might very well have been the case that the home was a good home, and that it perfectly served him as place to cultivate the habits and memories that undergird his fuller participation in the world. Not everyone, however, would write that in the experience of home, "[i]t is as though in this material paradise, the human being were bathed in nourishment, as though [s]he were gratified with all the essential benefits" (1994, 7). In Anzaldúa's example, the systematic targeting of women of

color and identifiable queer people in society at large never quite dissipates, even in the intimacy of home. Even if such forces were not motivated enough to destroy the home itself, facing violence and harassment on the street can be enough to make even a well-built house with a loving family take on the valence of a prison. All human beings need solitude, they need spaces to dream in, to be sheltered in, but we are not like the hermit crab: we do not carry our homes on our back, we do not always carry with us the possibility for solitude and retreat, but rather, our homes are situated in neighborhoods, in cities, in nations, in cultures.

Thus far, we have focused primarily on the lack or precarity of “shelter,” but Anzaldúa’s unromantic and precarious description of home points us to the necessity of interrogating the way the physical space of the shelter is situated within a wider social context. Despite her radically different perspective than Heidegger, they would seem to be in agreement upon this point, as “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” begins with a consideration of how feeling at home (which he calls “dwelling”) cannot simply be reduced to a mere shelter. Heidegger brings up the example of saying “[t]he truck driver is at home on the highway, but he does not have his shelter there; the working woman is at home in the spinning mill, but does not have her dwelling place there; the chief engineer is at home in the power station, but he does not dwell there” (2001, 143-4). Such people feel at home in these places because they have the habits and practices that correspond to them, they feel in sync with such places. These examples are, however, gendered, which brings us to the further consideration that certain groups of people are capable or incapable of feeling at home in certain structures, contexts, or situations. Shannon Sullivan, in *Revealing Whiteness* (2006) for example, claims that one of the important phenomenological aspects of being white is what she calls “ontological expansiveness,” the implicit assumption that all spaces are or could be inhabited (10). A white person, in other words, could in principle imagine themselves being at home anywhere, whereas a non-white person might be limited in the spaces they can occupy, and might feel that limitation even in imagining possible places they might want to feel at home. That being said, Heidegger’s goal here is to say that building a road, a spinning mill, or a power station would also be indicative of what he calls “dwelling,” insofar as “building is not merely a means and a way toward dwelling—to build is in itself *already* to dwell” (2001, 144, italics added). We build, we might say, *because* we dwell, and dwell in the sense of “a staying with things” (149). If we substitute our previous use of “feeling at home” with “dwelling,” we gain the crucially important temporal dimension to our inhabitation of the home: to be at home means to dwell there, to *stay* for the foreseeable future.

We dwell insofar as we are the beings that are capable of seizing time and of clearing a space for things to be seen, whether those things be monuments, infrastructure, or a house. A bridge, to use Heidegger’s example, shows us the earth, the sky, and the comings and goings of the people who use it; the bridge reveals a “place” to which we human beings are somehow attuned. Such an example, however, must lead us to ask the further critical question as to *who gets to cross* this bridge, or perhaps, who resides *under* it, as a minimal shelter from the elements, while others pass above. Our buildings might all generate spaces, might all indicate an essential and primordial “dwelling” of our being upon the earth, but such spaces are *determinate*, and as such, are differentially experienced by different people. The new shopping plaza might become a space for young professionals to spend money at shops catered to their tastes, but for those who were evicted from their homes for its construction, for the business owners who once catered to a community that has been displaced, its boutique shopping might announce only the harsh absence of what once was reflected in the space in which they no longer belong.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>I am thinking here of the story of Brooklyn’s Fulton Mall discussed at some length in *The Brooklyn Wars* by Neil deMause (2016, 213-270).

I am interrogating Heidegger here not so much to advance his thesis in “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” but rather as a starting point to indicate the ways in which housing or shelter is caught up in a wider context of what we might call “dwelling” or “belonging.” To be sure, part of what it means to have shelter is that, even if the walls of our given shelters are porous, letting the elements and the comings and goings of other people in, they mark out a space that is *our own*, they allow something special to happen, which allows us a crucial distance from other people and the elements. As Heidegger teaches us, however, this is caught up in a wider context: dwelling opens up onto a world we “inhabit,” forming the habitual modes of interaction that make us feel at home in a space, and from this anchoring space of belonging, we can then venture out into the world. Such spaces form the nexus of our “orientation” towards the world by supplying a “here” to get to “there.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Heidegger’s focus on spaces that are not simply dwelling spaces seems to me to be crucial: the structures beyond the home through which we move, which we share with the people who share our world, which form part of our “neighborhood,” so to speak, are just as much implicated in our sense of belonging. Imagine, for example, if suddenly the bridge we take to work were closed, if our neighbors were forced out of our neighborhood and replaced with strangers: such moments, though not specifically targeting our own specific dwelling or “house,” nevertheless threaten our sense of dwelling. We are thrown back onto our situation instead of fully inhabiting it.

While Heidegger stresses dwelling as a fundamental fact about humans, namely, that to be human is to dwell, given our previous considerations about the precariousness of housing, we should be wary of taking this to mean that all human beings always feel as if they belong in the world. Heidegger himself mentions those who have experienced a “loss of rapport with things that occurs in states of depression,” which “would be wholly impossible if even such a state were not still what it is as a human state: that is, a staying *with things*” (155, italics in original). Feeling a loss of rapport with the world, in other words, is still a mode of being with the world: only the kind of being that expects or feels as if they ought to belong can feel its lack.<sup>7</sup> But depression is not the only form of losing such a rapport, and indeed, it is becoming more and more clear that the political organization of who gets to dwell merits attention. We should not, in other words, treat dwelling as if it were simply a fact about being human, but as something that requires, to use Heidegger’s own terminology, “work,” albeit the explicitly political kind of work that Heidegger is so reticent to mention. Indeed, a large part of the “crisis” of dwelling that Heidegger diagnoses is itself the result of Germany’s instigation of the Second World War, which resulted in the destruction of many of the cities in Germany and their venerable housing stock by allied bombing. Heidegger’s ignorance of this fact, and his treatment of “dwelling” as a primarily metaphysical problem, demonstrate precisely how any proper understanding of dwelling must contend with its historical and political conditions.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” Heidegger repeatedly tries to reverse the seemingly obvious priority between building and dwelling. We do not first build a shelter, and then dwell within it, but it is precisely because we are the kinds of beings that dwell that we build anything at all. But this primordial sense of dwelling in the context of contending with a housing crisis goes too far. It presumes, as Sullivan’s concept of “ontological expansiveness” describes, a subject who could potentially occupy all spaces (or indeed, one who *already does*): whose “belonging” is a necessary consequence or property of their being at all, “for when I

<sup>6</sup> For more on orientation, and specifically how it relates to sexual orientation and others, see Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* (2006). Indeed, much of my emphasis on the limitations of the phenomenological descriptions of Bachelard and Heidegger is inspired by her approach to Husserl in this text.

<sup>7</sup> See the work of Matthew Ratcliffe on how this characterizes the phenomenon of depression, particularly, “The Interpersonal Structure of Depression” (2018).

<sup>8</sup> For more on this point, see W.G. Sebald’s *On the Natural History of Destruction* (1999).

say ‘a man’ I already name the stay within the fourfold among things” (2006, 154). But it is increasingly clear that we, as a society, are not building for everyone as rates of declining home ownership, the increasing development of temporary housing (often in the form of luxury condominiums), and rising numbers of evictions all attest. Our housing crisis is worse than the one Heidegger discusses. He is comforted, at least, by the fact that good houses are being built in post-war Germany, even if they do not guarantee that dwelling occurs in them. For us, however, building, in the form of real-estate development, and dwelling with its aspect of belonging in a place for the foreseeable future, are fundamentally opposed, insofar as development always requires more development in service of the generation of capital.

A particularly troubling example of such incompatibility, and indeed, of the “gross mistreatment” of which Jacobson (2010) warns, is given in the second of the *New York Times* article series, “The Eviction Machine Churning Through New York City” (Barker et al. 2018). In the article, the authors detail the story of Neri Carranza, who had lived in the same apartment on West 109th street since 1956. In 2010, she was facing eviction after the Orbach Group had paid seventy-six million for her building and most of the nearby block. As a rent-regulated tenant, Ms. Carranza could not be evicted without cause, but the Orbach group hired a lawyer to evict her for a supposed breach of lease. In Ms. Carranza’s case, they alleged that she had been using her \$300 a month rent-regulated apartment as a storage space, while she lived with a friend nearby. She denied this and the courts ruled in her favor.<sup>9</sup> Having tried the legal means, the Orbach group resorted to extra-legal means: when Ms. Carranza later asked for repairs in 2014, the company claimed she needed to leave for them to complete the repairs, which she did, and in 2016 the repairs had still not been completed. After years of fighting, and a total of nineteen court dates, Ms. Carranza decided to settle her case for \$100,000, turned over her uninhabitable apartment to the company, and is now living with her niece in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. At the time the article was published, her apartment had been renovated and was being rented for \$3,500 a month by two Columbia University students.

This is a clear case of injustice, and indicates the extra-legal means that large corporations have at their disposal to evict their tenants and maximize their investment in the lucrative housing market. For some, \$100,000 (though *well* below what the apartment is worth) and the prospect of moving to another place might be perfectly acceptable. Ms. Carranza’s reaction to this settlement, however, points us to the heart of the present issue: Ms. Carranza was at home in her Spanish-speaking neighborhood, whereas in Carlisle, Pennsylvania “there is no church with service in Spanish. No grocery catering to Latinos. No old friends to visit. There are not even any sidewalks” (Barker et al. 2018). Feeling at home, dwelling means having a place to serve as an anchor of continuity throughout one’s life, and moreover, a place that is situated in such a way that the world around it feels welcoming, familiar, and inviting. The cynical point of view that might say \$100,000 is a suitable replacement for the roots she had laid down in her neighborhood, or even that the injustice here was that the apartment was worth more than what she was offered, miss the point completely. To be at home is a fundamental condition of human life, and in Ms. Carranza’s case, her apartment and the life that came with it were viewed as secondary considerations (or more plausibly, did not even enter consideration) to maximizing the returns on a seventy-six million dollar investment. We might, in many ways, carry our habits with us, and in so doing, also carry our home with us. Indeed, Anzaldúa, despite her profound apprehension in the face of a hostile world, nevertheless claims, “in leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because *lo mexicano* is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry ‘home’ on my back” (1987, 21). We inhabit the world based on our habits,

<sup>9</sup>This tactic is colloquially referred to as a “fishing expedition.” Once the corporation decides a tenant should be evicted, the corporation’s lawyers then search for any breach of lease that can be feasibly argued.

but these habits, if we are denied a place of our own, if we can no longer lay down our roots with any sense of security, can serve as limitations in a new context, as Ms. Carranza's did in her forced move to Pennsylvania, and indeed, as so many economic migrants experience when they are forced to leave their country due to the global inequality of wealth and opportunity.

Despite his overly sentimental and limited perspective on the problem of dwelling, Heidegger does point us in a valuable direction: for we should ask what understanding of home is operative in these domains where home is made impossible, precarious, or alienating for certain people. Heidegger claims that “[t]he real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell*,” and to transform the “dwelling plight” we must first seek out the ways in which we misunderstand dwelling so as to destroy it or make it impossible (2001, 159, italics in original). This is our crisis today, as more and more people are being dispossessed or denied the opportunity to dwell, as more and more forms of dwelling dissipate in the continuous and rapid world of development for development's sake. The extent of such a crisis should provide all the more opportunity for even those of us who have relatively stable housing situations, relatively stable places in our society, to reconsider our own place in a world that becomes less human by the day.

### III.

#### THE PAST, THE FUTURE, AND “HOW MUCH” HOME WE NEED

Let us now note the qualities that define feeling at home that we have described so far: the first, is a sense of security and continuity, which implies a relatively stable future; the second related point is that such security and continuity extend beyond the scope of the home or shelter itself, into both our politics and culture. To concretize these attributes, we turn now to Heidegger's ideal dwelling and the structures of past and future that characterize it. He describes a house in the Black Forest, its structure designed and situated to weather the elements gracefully, but for our purposes, we should note that:

. . . it made room in its chamber for the hallowed places of childbed and the ‘tree of the dead’—for that is what they call a coffin there: the *Totenbaum*—and in this way it designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time. (2001, 158)

A house that clears space for dwelling is one that makes room for our journey through time: not temporarily, but continuously, from past to future. Another way to say this might be: the house is not subject to some general or abstract time, but itself mediates and makes possible certain experiences of time. Heidegger understands this in a very thick generational sense, as the house of our ancestors and our future children. But we do not need to go so far: we need only remember how Ms. Carranza, residing in her apartment for half a century, had a past there, had laid down roots in the community, who missed seeing her old friends and attending her church. We also need to remember that her future there was cut short: that dwelling place, unbeknownst to her, did not house her future, but rather, the future of those who, in paying 11.6 times more rent than her, were seen as more worthy tenants. The increasing lack of home ownership and the increasingly precarious status of housing, then, at the same time, undermine the possibility



of a human future, insofar as our homes are increasingly subject to the rapid and unforeseen fluctuations of the market and society at large.

How, then, does the past play in to the experience of dwelling if it need not be generational? In the *New York Times* article, Ms. Carranza revisits her unrecognizable renovated apartment and finds her past there, the sedimented memories and sense of ownership destroyed as if they had never happened. Jean Améry, a survivor of the holocaust, describes a similar experience undergone by many Jewish people when the Nazi party relocated them from their homes and communities. In *At the Mind's Limits* (1980), he reflects on what he and other German Jews lost when the Nazi party declared the Jewish people to be no longer “German.” As Améry notes, many merchants and artisans lost not only their goods, money, and home, but also their status as professionals, losing their role in their communities. Such an event not only deprives them of a future as professionals, but also importantly robs them of the past as they are no longer seen as a part of the “community” in which they had a place. Even more revealing is the example of Alfred Mombert, a German-Jewish Neo-Romantic poet who was forcibly relocated to an internment camp. Mombert writes to his friend that he had lost everything, that it all flowed off of him (indicative of an experience of temporality where things fail to cohere), and that it was so unthinkable that such should happen to a “German poet.” Here lies the sad contradiction for Améry. Mombert did not recognize that he was no longer a German poet, because

. . . only someone who writes poetry not merely *in* German but also *for* Germans, upon their express wish, can be a German poet; that when everything flows off, the last traces of the past will also be swept along. The hand that was not raised in his protection cast the old man out. (60)

In the case of the mass forced deportation of German Jews, we can see how this works: the past, which had sedimented into their identities, was taken from them and forever erased, their place in society and the meaning of all their past actions permanently lost. Indeed, in the case of Berlin in the Third Reich, imperial boulevards and grand buildings meant to signal Germany’s glory were to be built over old Jewish neighborhoods, much as luxury condos are popping up today in previously underserved neighborhoods in American cities.<sup>10</sup> If a group of Germans had fought for them, perhaps, there would be some sliver of belonging left, some sense that their past as Germans meant something. Sadly, this was not the case for Alfred Mombert and many others like him. Happily, the *New York Times* article detailing so many tenants’ struggles constitutes some recognition that they have a place, but we must ask ourselves if this is enough to safeguard some small part of the dwelling of the millions threatened with eviction and loss of home, and all the more so when it is precisely our forms of life, as academics, intellectuals, and students (the immense privilege of Columbia University students serving a notable role in Ms. Carranza’s case) that make it profitable to displace such people.

In 1966, when he originally finished the original German text of *At the Mind's Limits*, Améry notes that the destruction of worlds of value might very well make possible a new cosmopolitanism, that, in having the specificity of their homeland taken from them, the Jewish people

<sup>10</sup> See Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (1970). In particular, Chapter 5, “Architectural Megalomania” (50-70).



might have gained the world. This is not at all convincing or comforting to him. He worries that in uprooting a people from their home, which lends a value to things, a change will take place:

The objects of daily use, which at present we still imbue with emotion, will be fully fungible. Already, American city planners are thinking of turning the house into a consumable commodity in the future. One hears that at intervals of twenty to twenty-five years entire sections of the city will be demolished and rebuilt, since house repairs will be as little worthwhile as certain auto repairs already are. (1980, 56)

Améry's worries here show us two things: first, that Améry, writing in Europe in 1966, believes this is a phenomenon on the horizon. In other words, the idea that housing is ultimately a replaceable commodity is a relatively new idea in the history of the world. The house, which should be a space for values to inhere, which should be (on our analysis, here) a space *for* time, is made a victim of time, made essentially *temporary*. If such a world comes to pass, Améry asks: "how would one still be able to form the concept of home at all?" (56). If it is not already, then our world is quickly advancing in this direction. Can we still form this concept? With the help of a careful phenomenological analysis, I believe we can, and even though Heidegger and Bachelard, established European intellectuals writing in the 1950's, do not seem to grasp the true precariousness of housing, they are right to emphasize its importance in rendering our worlds cohesive, stable, and in lending them a sense of continuity. Unfortunately, forming the concept is not enough because home requires actual spaces, it requires activities of building, and indeed, it also requires us to raise our hands in the protection of others whose houses and homes are at stake.

If both our enmeshment in the past and our continuity into the future are at risk, if we no longer have the space to form memories, or a space that is our own to give some shape to our future, then we are living in a world where we treat human beings more and more, to cite Mombert, as if "everything flows off," or to use Bachelard's phrasing, as if we were "dispersed" beings, as if we had no spatial or temporal thickness to us, as if our lives, along with the intimate and public places we live them out were mere commodities, capable of being tossed aside like "old food cans," or worse yet, as less than commodities, as the mere potential for capital investment (Adorno 2005, 67). And if we do not raise our hand in protection for those who are dispossessed now, whose ways of life, solitude, and daydreams are counted for nothing, we give too much over to an understanding of home that treats it as an impermanent commodity, or even worse, one of many ticking numbers in the rapid flow of investment capital.

In spite of this, we might say that things are hopeful: for even when it occurs minimally, even in spite of everything, dwelling can and does occur. We might certainly eke out an existence in precarious positions, and indeed, may even find a home there. The refugee (or, increasingly, detainee) might decorate their tent or temporary room to their taste, and others might make spaces for dwelling in homes known to be temporary. As Améry's somewhat puzzling question, "How much home does a person need?" teaches us, this is because "home" is something of which we can get more or less; it is never "complete" or "finished." I find myself agreeing with Améry that, in the face of home becoming more and more precarious, the answer to that question is that we need much home, indeed, as much as we can get. But what determines who gets

more or less home? And how do we build more together? I contend here that the first step in such an enterprise is to recognize what is at stake when we talk of housing and home, and to be honest about the fragility and contested nature of dwelling implicit and explicit in our forms of social, economic, and political organization. And if we agree with Améry's uncomplicated and earnest conclusion, that "it is not good to have no home," we must build ourselves and others a different future, or rather, we must take the preliminary step of making space for the future to happen in the intimate spaces of belonging we call "home."

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BOOK REVIEW ARTICLE  
**FEMINIST EXPERIENCES:  
FOUCAULDIAN AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
PERSPECTIVES**

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Johanna Oksala's 2016 book is, broadly speaking, a sustained defense of feminist philosophy defined as a form of social critique, that is, as pursuit of better forms of knowledge as well as better forms of society (3). Feminist philosophy is therefore not a simple aggregate of philosophy and feminism construed respectively as a pure contemplative and critical inquiry and a socially engaged and politically motivated ideology. Oksala seeks to preserve the methodological rigor and the transcendental aspirations of feminist *philosophy*, and she therefore defends a feminist metaphysics grounded in conceptual schemas as thematized by Kant, but she historicizes the transcendental project by situating it in the historical moment of the present time; she thus exposes the relative stability as well as the radical contingency of current normative and conceptual configurations. The historicity of conceptual schemas serves as an opening to critical reflection, resistance, and revolt against socially oppressive power arrangements, and it addresses the concern with social critique and social change of a *feminist* philosophy as Oksala defines it. The author selects classical phenomenology and Foucauldian genealogy as the two philosophical traditions that in various ways assume the historically produced hence revisable conceptual schemas both at the level of theory and practice. While her sympathies seem to lie with Foucault, she concedes that the phenomenological reduction is an invaluable resource for critical reflection insofar as it breaks with naturalism and suspends everyday attitudes. Surprisingly perhaps, Oksala thus opts to mine texts that do not expressly grapple with questions of gender and sexual difference as major resources for a feminist *philosophy*; she tends to not read texts from *feminist* philosophy, notably feminist phenomenology, with comparable care and does not foreground them as potentially rich theoretical resources for thinking conceptual schemas in their historical specificity. In my review, I will therefore raise the following guiding questions to *Feminist Experiences*:

1. Does Oksala construct her philosophical library of references in a way that prominently features a classical corpus of texts, and places others on a lower shelf, where they are catalogued as a failure to think complex philosophical issues? Do the already canonized founders of philosophical traditions (phenomenology, genealogy) dominate the author list, at the expense of those who still need to make a case for philosophical legitimacy insofar as they are feminists?

2. Are there omissions of references from the feminist philosophical library that are significant insofar as they may affect Oksala's argument, especially her assessment of phenomenology as a tradition in need of radical revision if it is to be of merit to an emancipatory project? Is phenomenology construed too narrowly because of the choice of readings, and would it emerge as a more politically productive approach (and closer to Foucault's genealogy) if the library of references included key texts from feminist phenomenology?

In what follows, I will make the case that both sets of questions can be reasonably answered in the affirmative, and that, as a result, Oksala's laudable goal of rehabilitating feminist philosophy as a form of social critique would benefit from including feminist phenomenological works in its philosophical library, and from bringing phenomenology and genealogy into a greater rapprochement than her current argument allows. Thematically, I will focus especially on the interrelation between experience and language, the recovery of experience as a site of social contestation of oppressive norms, and the interrelation between genealogical and phenomenological methods. I will therefore read part I ("Feminist Metaphysics") and II ("Feminist Phenomenology") relatively closely, and only offer a brief glimpse into the concluding part III ("Feminist Politics"). Overall, I approach *Feminist Experiences* as a sympathetic reader who may be more optimistic regarding the emancipatory potential of feminist phenomenology than the author.

In her plea to recover experience for feminist purposes, Oksala revisits Joan Scott's 1991 influential dismissal of first person accounts of experience ("The Evidence of Experience"), and drawing chiefly on McDowell (1994) develops the idea that experiences are conceptually structured and thus not altogether removed from language. The conceptuality or discursivity of experience provides a powerful rejoinder to Scott's critique: if women may feel a sense of disorientation and dissatisfaction with the dominant cultural norms, this gap between experience and cultural representation "can generate critique as well as create new discourses capable of contesting and contradicting the old ones" (45). It is the conceptualizable and communicable dimension of experience that provides therefore a rich site of feminist contestation and critique. Oksala does not provide specific examples but one can think in this context of the experience of injustice and violation women would have felt before the term *sexual harassment*, *date rape*, or *marriage rape* became coined, socially conventionalized, and legally enshrined. I would have found some philosophical analysis featuring concrete instances of women's experience whose conceptual edge and communicative potential provides an opportunity for critical reflection and social and political reform useful in this regard. Such an analysis would have made Oksala's argument directly relevant to feminist emancipation, as well as more concrete. Instead the reader is offered a reassessment of Linda Alcoff's influential critique of Foucault's account of sexuality that reevaluates Foucault's position on experience as a theoretically fruitful resource for feminist thought – despite the male and adult pattern of epistemic ignorance in *The History of Sexuality* documented by Alcoff (chapter 3). Oksala offers a refined reading of Foucault's surprising (if one accepts a poststructuralist categorization of his work, and the opposition between poststructuralism on the one hand and the "philosophies of experience," that is, existentialism and phenomenology, on the other hand) focus on lived experience. She compellingly argues that, for Foucault, experience should not be construed traditionally as a subjective self-relation but rather as a paradoxical notion, irreducible to either its subjective or objective dimensions. "It is constituted by practices of knowledge and power – as we know from Foucault's influential studies of madness, delinquency, and sexuality—but it also important-

ly contains a self-reflexive and meaning-constitutive dimension, the modes of self-awareness” (57). Not a philosophy of the subject, Foucault’s study is therefore situated within the *field of experience* that subjects and objects form and transform (58). While subjective experiences are effects of games of truth and power, crucially they can modify these practices in turn (59). If Foucault is interested in the transformative potential of limit-experiences like sexuality and madness, it is because he locates a potential for transformation and resistance in ordinary everyday experience as well. Oksala demonstrates how Foucault deploys first person narratives of experience (by Alexina Barbin in *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*; of Pierre Rivière in *I, Pierre Rivière, Having Slaughtered My Mother, Sister, and Brother*) in a productive juxtaposition with the expert third person medical and psychiatric discourses. Foucault’s critique of dominant discourse from the point of view of subjugated knowledges of “abnormal subjects” thus rests on the assumption that subjective experience is at odds with objective knowledges and norms. Oksala concludes that “the constituted experience and its critical transformation must not be assumed to be two categorically different things. Rather, they are both aspects of the historically heterogenous and self-reflexive nature of experience” (66). She suggests that feminist theorists adopt the Foucauldian conception of experience, with its emphasis on self-reflexivity and critical transformation, as an alternative to the phenomenological conception that is—according to Foucault at least—“foundational and epistemically self-sufficient” (67). This suggestion rests, however, on the hasty assumption that phenomenology defines experience exactly like Foucault says it does, and that the corpus of phenomenological works is devoid of studies of experience that are close to Foucault’s understanding. I will argue that Beauvoir’s phenomenology, read through Butler’s lens, challenges this assumption and provides a perspective on experience as being both constituted and critically transformative, hence broadly compatible with Foucault.

Oksala proceeds to consider the interrelation between experience and language in more depth in chapter 4. She opens with a critique of Sonia Kruks’ appeal to retrieve immediate lived experience (such as pain) as being overly naïve, and predicated on a problematic disjunction between linguistically articulated and prediscursive experience (72-75). The reader is then guided through the technicalities of a debate regarding the status of noematic *Sinn* in Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*—is linguistic meaning identical with noematic *Sinn* and hence resistant to phenomenological reduction, as per Fink’s interpretation? Or are meanings immediate and fundamentally prediscursive, as per Frege? (81-82)—and then through the Heidegger–Natorp debate about the accessibility, if any, of immediate experience to reflection, and the risk of objectifying experience within phenomenological description (84). These somewhat formal considerations lead to the conclusion that

... feminist phenomenology should not identify itself too narrowly as a form of theorizing that examines experiences in terms of their prediscursive, grasped, or felt meaning. Rather, it should face up to the philosophical challenge posed by language and mine the rich heritage of phenomenological thought on language and linguistic meaning for its own objectives (87).

A feminist phenomenologist like myself has no qualms accepting the discursive dimension of lived experience, and is happy to rise to the challenge raised by language; I am, however, unconvinced that mining the Husserlian and Heideggerian legacy is sufficient to the task and wonder if it may detract from it considering that the reading exercise takes place at the expense



of mining relevant texts from the feminist philosophical tradition, such as Kristeva's or Irigaray's corpus, for insight regarding the interrelation between experience and discursivity. To be sure, in chapter five, the reader finds a comprehensive account of a "phenomenology of birth" that foregrounds a generative phenomenology and a phenomenology of the event, and carefully reads Christina Schuess' argument for a transcendental understanding of natality (1997) and Françoise Dastur's emphasis on the *event*-like (rather than *experience*) quality of being born (2000). However, ultimately Oksala advocates a move beyond phenomenology to a Foucauldian genealogy, arguing that "further modifications are necessary if we want to phenomenologically account for gender," and noting intriguingly that the challenge faced by feminist phenomenology lies in destabilizing rather than consolidating phenomenological thinking, possibly at the risk of losing a firm footing in the field (96). I will press both the assumed understanding and the need to transcend phenomenology in order to meaningfully address the complexities of gender.

Oksala explicitly takes up "phenomenology of gender" in chapter six, where she proposes four possible readings of phenomenology: the classical reading (incapable of addressing gender due to its transcendental omission of body and sex); the corporeal reading (grounded in the body but incapable of capturing the complexities of culturally constituted gender); the intersubjective reading (incapable of deciphering the constitutive importance of culture, language, and historicity), and the post-phenomenological reading. "Postphenomenology" consists in a partial bracketing of ordinary experience and remains mindful of complex ways through which experience is tied to cultural normativity via language, history, and culture. Postphenomenology would thus open a realm of transcendental investigation without seeking to attain transcendental purity; it would engage with psychological reports and ethnographic studies, and not be narrowly confined to first person experience of embodiment (108).

In my guiding questions to *Feminist Experiences*, I wondered how the author constructs her library of references, and whether any significant omissions affecting her argument result from this construction. My review above suggests a construction that tends to privilege a recovery of foundational texts in Foucauldian genealogy as well as Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology, and a featuring of feminist works chiefly as objects of critique. While Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and *The Use of Pleasure*, Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, and Heidegger's "Die Idee der Philosophie," are carefully mined for conceptual resources for feminist theory, the corpus of feminist philosophy is deemed a "boomtown that was built rapidly with contagious energy and enthusiasm," and is currently in need of restructuring if it is to respond to contemporary political challenges, notably neoliberal capitalism (17). As a reading practice, this restructuring process leans heavily on the European canon, and it reads the works of Christine Battersby, Sonia Kruks, and Linda Alcoff as *essays* in need of conceptual tightening and refining (with the help of Foucault). Since Oksala seeks to restructure feminist philosophy, she is interested in the meta-level questions regarding the possibility and limits of philosophical inquiry understood as a transcendental investigation of historical and social arrangements, and she may therefore prefer "higher-order" discourses to the ones mired in the realities themselves. However, this reading practice risks reaffirming a general trend of devaluing feminist works and not recognizing them as being properly philosophical, as if they did not contain a transcendental dimension and a reflection on historically and socially contingent realities that may be brought out by a careful reading.

The undesirable if unintentional effect of such an approach may be a dismissal of *feminist* philosophy. One wonders if the restructuring process must take place *ab ovo*, and the boomtown replaced with foundational texts by non-feminist philosophers? Specifically, I am wondering about the omission of foundational texts from the feminist phenomenological tradition in a study concerned with feminist experiences. I submit that the all too brief mentions of Beau-

voir's *The Second Sex* (97), and the unexamined endorsement of Sara Heinämaa's reading of it (100), lead to a significant omission of the founder of feminist phenomenology's work that affects the overall argument in the book. In a nutshell, to use the distinction from my "Subject and Structure in Feminist Phenomenology" (in *Rethinking Feminist Phenomenology*, 2018), I propose that Oksala assumes a conservative construal of phenomenology and glosses over a *transformative* understanding that is in fact close to her proposal for a "radically modified" phenomenology (13). In her assessment of the corporeal reading of phenomenology, Oksala references Heinämaa's appropriation of Beauvoir's thought as a phenomenology of sexual difference where the latter is a difference between two embodied styles of being (100). Insofar as the philosophical meaning of gender cannot be reduced to the phenomenological analysis of embodiment, Beauvoir's philosophy falls short of capturing gendered complexities. However, this point rests on the acceptance of Heinämaa's interpretation of Beauvoir *whom Oksala does not read*. Nor does she read *about* Beauvoir more broadly, to establish whether other readings may align with her own commitment to feminist philosophy as a philosophy of social change. I revisit my understanding of transformative phenomenology to remedy this potential oversight.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* offers detailed descriptions of the socially situated experience of women within patriarchy and constitutes an exemplar of a feminist phenomenological approach. Beauvoir herself clearly identified her project as a study in phenomenology, with a particular focus on the lived, experiential body understood as a situation, that is "our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects" (2011, 46). She also adopted a non-naturalist perspective on the body according to which the body is a "historical idea" (45). This perspective is, in agreement with Oksala, indispensable to a feminist study of gender since it introduces socially contingent, historicized norms and ideals into the analysis. However, its source can be located in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, notably his study of sexuality, and in Beauvoir's understanding of "woman" and any gender as a historical situation (Butler 1988, 520). A direct expression of Beauvoir's view that a gendered body should be understood as a historical situation rather than a fact of nature can be found in the famous motto that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (2011, 283). As Butler explains, to be a woman is therefore to be continually engaged in the project of *becoming* one: "it is not a matter of acquiescing to a fixed ontological status, in which case one could be born a woman, but, rather, an active process of appropriating, interpreting, and reinterpreting received cultural possibilities" (Butler 1986, 36). Becoming a woman is not to be construed, however, as an unimpeded, voluntary undertaking by an individual subject. For Beauvoir, becoming one's gender mobilizes social pressures as well as subjective acts; importantly, "becoming" a gender reconciles the internal ambiguity of gender as both 'project' and 'construct'; therefore, it makes sense that gender is both received and invented (37).

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir describes how dominant social norms and stereotypes tend to socially position women in a servile role in relation to men as the subordinate "second sex." She exemplifies such gendered stereotypes by the (formerly) widespread yet ultimately illusory notion that woman is a mystery, an undecipherable sphinx who by nature eludes rational grasp (2011, 270). She argues the mythical notion of an enigmatic woman is a product of masculine consciousness that sets up its own relative worldview as being absolute (269). This notion ultimately denotes woman's subjugated social and material position: a woman will no longer be perceived as mysterious if her material situation improves (271). Fixed gender norms should therefore be understood as a false objectivity, a mirage—an ideological projection indicative of power inequities in the social world, which men and women maintain through bad faith (271-72). To understand gendered identities from an existential point of view means then to demystify such seemingly objective notions and to highlight the actively undertaken (and reiterated

over and over) project of assuming one's gender.

For Beauvoir, the phenomenological description of the process of becoming-woman needs to be taken in the existential sense of a freely undertaken project but it must take into account her "total situation," including dominant social arrangements and power structures already in place. She notes: "For us a woman is defined as a human being in search of values within a world of values, a world where it is indispensable to understand the economic and social structure; we will study her from an existential point of view, taking into account her total situation" (2011, 61). Beauvoir's phenomenological description of gendered identity combines an account of the subjective acts (and their reiterations) *and* the structured systems within which these acts are situated (and which they shape in turn). Beauvoir integrates the phenomenological-existential emphasis on lived experience with a structural approach, notably a study of elementary kinship structures as developed by her contemporary Claude Lévi-Strauss. In agreement with Lévi-Strauss, she notes that the elementary kinship structure produces an asymmetrical relationship between the sexes, and situates women in a sexually, socially, and materially subordinate position within human society (81). Woman's *total situation* is shaped by a pre-existing distribution of power and prestige; woman's situation may be deciphered by a broad analysis of her economic role and social position within the dominant social institutions, such as the family.

As she integrates the complex category of "woman" into the field of phenomenological description, Beauvoir adapts her approach to accommodate the phenomenon itself. She does not simply expand the subject matter to include the feminine in addition to the already existing set of transcendental and existential categories, but enacts a methodological transformation of phenomenology itself. By approaching gendered identity on its own terms, Beauvoir tackles a phenomenon which depends to a degree on a subjective constitution of meaning (becoming a woman as a freely undertaken project in the existentialist sense) and which is informed by the "total situation" of social structures, power disparities, and dominant gender norms with their concomitant economic status. Therefore, the phenomenological conception of gendered identity calls for a complex category of a *situated subject* who undergoes as well as constitutes meanings, and whose freedom is enabled and constrained by a social-structural positioning in the world. For example, a woman may *feel* deeply passive in the interiority of her consciousness but the felt passivity is not a fixed trait of feminine consciousness and social equality will "bring about an inner metamorphosis" (2011, 764).

I previously argued that Beauvoir's emphasis on the socially situated, historically contingent and henceforth revisable quality of gendered identity calls for an appropriately transformed phenomenological method. "Becoming woman" acknowledges that a gendered subject is effected by as well as co-constituting a shared world of meanings. As Butler argued:

Though phenomenology sometimes appears to assume the existence of a choosing and constituting agent prior to language (who poses as the sole source of its constituting acts), there is also a more radical use of the doctrine of constitution that takes the social agent as an *object* rather than the subject of constitutive acts." (1988, 519)

In Butler's reading of Beauvoir's phenomenology, the more radical notion of constitution is coupled with a more comprehensive understanding of experience. Contrary to Joan Scott's narrow conception of subjective experience as an end-product of an underlying social process

(1991), Butler proposes (drawing on Beauvoir) that the relation between subjectivity and social structure is dual and reciprocal, and should be understood as a “dialectical expansion of both of these categories” (1988, 523). The dialectical view does not simply oppose acculturation to modes of inventiveness, appropriation to agency, and social constraints to choice, but regards them as being interdependent and mutually constitutive. Specifically, Butler notes that in Beauvoir’s phenomenology “to become a gender means both to submit to a cultural situation and to create one, and [that] this view of gender as a dialectic of recovery and invention grants the possibility of autonomy within corporeal life” (1986, 48). Beauvoir’s feminist phenomenology (as read by Butler) thus accommodates the possibility of social change, of a re-structuring of the existing distributions of power and privilege from within, by a series of unprecedented acts.

I believe that the radical notion of constitution entailed by situated subjectivity, a social agent who is both a subject and an object of constitutive acts, and the dialectical expansion of subjectivity and structure suggested by Butler in her reading of Beauvoir, closely resemble Foucault’s understanding of the field of experience as a paradoxical notion, irreducible to either its subjective or objective dimensions, that Oksala describes. While Foucault is interested in limit experiences of “abnormal subjects” such as madness, delinquency, and sexuality, and Beauvoir in women’s objectified subjectivity within patriarchy, they both rely on subjugated knowledges as sites of reflection and critique of dominant social norms. Neither is developing a philosophy of the subject in a classical phenomenological sense where experience is “foundational and epistemically self-sufficient”; for both, subjectivity is socially and historically effected *and* it effects and modifies social norms and ideals in turn. For both, ordinary everyday experience carries a capacity of transformation and resistance; if subjective experience jars with objective representations, the friction generates social malaise as well as provides an opportunity for reflection and revolt. I propose therefore that the constituted character and its critical transformation figure as aspects of the historically heterogenous and self-reflexive experience for Oksala’s Foucault and for Butler’s Beauvoir (66). On this reading, Foucault’s genealogy and Beauvoir’s feminist phenomenology are broadly compatible, and the goal of social transformation grounded in feminist experiences can be realized by drawing on both traditions of inquiry. Furthermore, Beauvoir’s feminist phenomenology engages empirical studies and reports of women (notably biology and psychoanalysis) as the author of *Feminist Experiences* projects post-phenomenology would, and it is therefore broadly congruent with Oksala’s proposed alternative.<sup>1</sup>

In sum, while I agree that phenomenology needs to be transformed to accommodate the complex phenomenon of gender, I propose that this transformation is already underway within key texts in feminist phenomenology, such as Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. What must be modified then is the operative understanding or *definition* of phenomenology itself, and I proposed to accomplish this task by pluralizing phenomenology into a *conservative* one that seeks to expand, deepen, and correct phenomenological accounts by supplementing them with analyses of gendered experience without modifying the phenomenological method—Oksala assumes this understanding when she follows Linda Fischer (2000, 88)—and the *transformative* one: a Beauvoirian/Butlerian alternative. The latter understanding is much closer to postphenomenology and to Foucauldian genealogy than *Feminist Experiences* suggests. If my point is well taken, then the good news is that Oksala’s project can be partially carried out on the grounds of feminist phenomenology itself. In fact, I regretted that Oksala apparently left the phenomenological grounds behind in the concluding part III devoted to feminist politics. While part III offers a provocative portrait of the “neoliberal subject of feminism” and concludes with a visionary “feminist politics of inheritance,” the neoliberal subject is framed as a site of constituted ex-

<sup>1</sup> For critiques of Butler’s reading of Beauvoir as unduly assuming a sex-gender distinction, and a response, see Stawarska 2018.

perience more than critical transformation of neoliberalism. Perhaps Oksala doubts that such transformations are possible, or believes that they would only reaffirm the neoliberal logic of entrepreneurial subjectivity already in place. The politics grounded in remembrance (a disruption of the received history of collective suffering, an altering of this history in our historical present) says little about wherein women can find a source of strength and solidarity today. I would have been curious to hear more about the following: if feminist experiences transcend the affective spectrum of *ressentiment*, suffering, and powerlessness, what other affects, attitudes, and actions can the feminists imagine and enact as we move into an uncertain future? Critical work in phenomenology can provide some clues about the links between suffering and struggle.

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## REPLY TO BEATA STAWARSKA

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I want to begin by thanking Professor Stawarska for her careful reading of my book *Feminist Experiences* and for her critical insights on some of its key ideas. Before I go into a more detailed discussion of the two guiding questions she poses for me, I would like to clear one possible misunderstanding. Stawarska suggests in various places that my book is intended as a critique of phenomenology from the external perspective of Foucauldian genealogy. She writes, for example, that my “sympathies seem to lie with Foucault” (Stawarska 2019, 33); I advocate “a move beyond phenomenology to a Foucauldian genealogy” (36); I leave “phenomenological grounds behind” (39); and I advocate “the Foucauldian conception of experience . . . as an alternative to the phenomenological conception” (35).

I would like to make clear that my intention is not to side with Foucault against phenomenology. I have written extensively on the important continuities between phenomenology and Foucault’s thought elsewhere (e.g., Oksala 2005). In this book, my central argument is that immanent social critique must take the form of transcendental philosophy and that “both phenomenology and Foucault’s genealogy can be understood as engaging in transcendental philosophy in this historical and critical sense” (Oksala 2016, 5). I contend that “they can therefore contribute important methodological insights and conceptual tools to the project of feminist philosophy” (2016, 6).

In other words, when I engage in critical investigations of the phenomenological method, its conception of the subject, and understanding of language, I see my project as immanent critique. The book is an attempt to contribute to the phenomenological tradition and to apply its methods and insights for philosophical questions of gender as well as for contemporary feminist political theory. As Gayle Salamon generously writes on the back cover, my aim is to help bring “phenomenology into the twenty-first century.” As far I understand, Salamon, Stawarska, and many other feminist philosophers share this project with me. Stawarska writes that “phenomenology needs to be transformed to accommodate the complex phenomenon of gender” and its conception of the subject needs to be more radically historicized and politicized than many phenomenologists have been prepared to do (39). Whether we call this project transformative phenomenology (Stawarska), post-phenomenology (Oksala), or perhaps critical phenomenology or political phenomenology, debating such labels should not be the decisive issue. Rather, the decisive issue should be what this transformation entails philosophically and politically. And that is what my book attempts to investigate.

## I.

I have to object to Stawarska's first question which suggests that I am guilty of venerating canonical male philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger, at the expense of feminist thinkers who still need to make a case for philosophical legitimacy insofar as they are feminists. Stawarska accuses me of adopting a problematic reading strategy, which places feminist philosophy and feminist philosophers "on a lower shelf" (33), reaffirms "a general trend of devaluing feminist works" (36), and contributes to a "dismissal of *feminist* philosophy."

It is difficult for me to respond to this accusation except by repeating here that the book explicitly defends the importance and contemporary relevance of feminist philosophy. The very first sentence is: "The purpose of this book is to provide a sustained defense of feminist philosophy" (2016, 3). I explain what I mean by feminist philosophy – it is a form of social critique attempting to undertake a philosophical and critical analysis of the world we live in – and then, again, sum up my aim: "My aim is thus not just to defend the importance of feminist philosophy in the above sense, but also to identify a series of fundamental questions and challenges that such an understanding implies and that feminist philosophers have to face down (4).

I wrote this book because I firmly believe in the importance of feminist philosophy, particularly in this politically troubling time when many people believe that feminism is no longer relevant. The book is an attempt to contribute to the endeavor of feminist philosophy by trying to strengthen some of its foundations and by posing critical questions about its future. In other words, I want to make very clear that my aim is not to argue that the boomtown of feminist philosophy should be "replaced with foundational texts by non-feminist philosophers" (Stawarska 2019, 36). My interlocutors are not dead male philosophers, but rather, my fellow travelers in contemporary feminist philosophy: Christine Battersby, Joan Scott, Linda Alcoff, Sara Heinämaa, Sonia Kruks, Wendy Brown, and Christine Schuess, just to name a few seminal contemporary feminist thinkers whose work I engage with. I am not treating their works "chiefly as objects of critique"; they are my interlocutors (35). In other words, the aim of the book is not "a recovery of foundational texts in Foucauldian genealogy as well as Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology" (36). The book is first and foremost a contribution to the debates and discussions in contemporary feminist philosophy, and more specifically, to feminist appropriations of and engagements with phenomenology and Foucault. The contention that my book would "benefit from including feminist phenomenological works in its philosophical library" is thus somewhat difficult for me to accept (34).

## II.

Stawarska's second question requires a more complex response. She formulates her second problem as a general question on whether these omissions of references from the feminist philosophical library affect my argument, especially my "assessment of phenomenology as a tradition in need of radical revision if it is to be of merit to an emancipatory project" (34). Later, Stawarska specifies that the key problem is the omission of one particular reference: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. She contends that because I do not read this work, but merely "adopt an unexamined endorsement of Sara Heinämaa's reading of it," this leads to "a significant omission of the founder of feminist phenomenology's work that affects the overall argument in the book" (37).

I would first like to note that it is not self-evident that Beauvoir is "the founder of feminist phenomenology" or that *The Second Sex* is "an exemplar of a feminist phenomenological approach" (Stawarska 2019, 37). Feminist scholars such as Sara Heinämaa, Eva Gothlin, Beata Stawarska,

Debra Bergoffen, Bonnie Mann, Gail Weiss and Megan Burke have done groundbreaking work in identifying phenomenological influences in Beauvoir's work and in spelling out her various contributions to the field of feminist phenomenology. However, it is also well-documented that Beauvoir herself did not identify as the founder of feminist phenomenology. Instead, Beauvoir had a complex and conflicted relationship, not just to phenomenology, but to philosophy more generally, and even to feminism itself. The scope of her philosophical interests and references was exceptionally broad. Positioning her as the founder of feminist phenomenology is an interpretative claim that can only be made retrospectively by her commentators. She can, and has been read also through other interpretative frames than phenomenology.

Barbara S. Andrew, for example, situates Beauvoir in philosophical thought by placing her work in four areas of contemporary philosophy where her ideas remain influential: existentialism, phenomenology, social and political philosophy, and feminist theory. Rather than using one philosophical method of analysis in *The Second Sex*, “she combines phenomenology, existentialism, psychology, historical materialism, and liberal political concerns to come up with a unique and comprehensive view of women's lived reality” (2003, 42). I, too, understand Beauvoir's position in the canon of philosophy as being more complex than Stawarska assumes. I read Beauvoir as doing something different and more radical than “enact[ing] a methodological transformation of phenomenology” (Stawarska 2019, 38). Beauvoir does not discuss how we should understand the reductions, or whether we should give up the first-person perspective as the exclusive starting-point of phenomenological investigation into the constitution of gender. She does not pose questions about the importance generative phenomenology, or take a stance on what we should understand by transcendental intersubjectivity. Rather, Beauvoir attempts to completely redraw the borders of philosophy itself: she poses searching questions about what philosophy is.

As Claudia Card writes, Beauvoir consistently refused the label “philosopher” on the grounds that she did not offer a systematic comprehensive theory. Her topics were “not conventional among philosophers when she took them up...: psychoanalysis, biology, sexuality, gender, women, lesbians, prostitution, marriage, love” (Card 2003, 2). Perhaps even more importantly, her methodology was unconventional for philosophy. She used novels, diaries and memoirs as vehicles for doing philosophy, but also as the means of exposing the limitations of rational argumentation. For her, academic philosophy was a form of discourse which was incapable of making space for moral ambiguity, political complexity, and partial agency. She appropriated what today would be called interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary methodologies and discarded the standard formats of philosophical writing. Hence, when I attempt to investigate whether phenomenology as a philosophical method can account for gender in chapter six, I do not discuss Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in detail because I do not read it as an application of the phenomenological method or even as an explicit problematization of it.

This is not the right context for debating our respective readings of Beauvoir, however. The relevant question here is how my book could be improved and my central arguments transformed if I foregrounded *The Second Sex* as a central reference. And although Stawarska claims that my “omission of the founder of feminist phenomenology's work . . . affects the overall argument in the book,” she also seems to admit that, had I made *The Second Sex* a central reference, the main philosophical conclusions of my investigations would have remained essentially the same (39). Stawarska contends that although my critique of the phenomenological method fails to recognize the compatibility of Foucault's genealogy and “Beauvoir's feminist phenomenology (as read by Butler),” a more careful study of these thinkers would show that “Oksala's Foucault and Butler's Beauvoir” are essentially making similar arguments (39). Both “my Foucault” and “Butler's Beauvoir” argue that the subject is constituted and critically transformative; they both insist that it is necessary to theorize the dialectical expansion of subjectivity

and structure; they emphasize the significance of subjugated knowledges as sites of reflection and critique of dominant social norms, as well as adopting the methodological imperative of engaging with empirical studies (39). In other words, a Butlerian reading of Beauvoir would essentially bring us to the same philosophical conclusions as my reading of Foucault and phenomenology does in *Feminist Experiences*.

In sum, Stawarska and I agree that “the goal of social transformation grounded in feminist experiences can be realized by drawing on both traditions of inquiry”—feminist appropriations of Foucault’s historical ontology, as well as feminist phenomenology (39). I look forward to reading more of Stawarska’s work on transformative phenomenology, as well as to learning how Beauvoir’s work, and transformative phenomenology more generally can contribute to our contemporary feminist critiques of neoliberalism. I also appreciate the “good news that Oksala’s project can be partially carried out on the grounds of feminist phenomenology itself,” since this is what I attempt to do in my book (39). However, I would also like to suggest caution regarding the idea that making a book on gender written by a woman the central reference is necessarily going to make our projects of developing feminist phenomenology more feminist or philosophically relevant. And I cannot help thinking that Beauvoir would have unequivocally agreed with me on that point.

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