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# PHENOMENOLOGY AND CRITIQUE

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In the fall of 2022, the philosophy department at Loyola University Chicago hosted a conference around the theme "Phenomenology and Critique" in association with Marquette University. On November 4, 2022, there was an atmosphere of bustle as people started to fill the room. It was one of the first large in-person events organized by the philosophy department at Loyola since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. We welcomed the return to hosting conferences with both anticipation and caution, having made sure that the conference would be held in a hybrid format. We were especially delighted to welcome our two keynote speakers, both renowned phenomenologists spearheading the critical turn in phenomenology, affiliated with two Canadian universities: Professors Alia Al-Saji of McGill University, and Lisa Guenther of Queen's University. The motivation for this conference was not only to collaborate with a neighboring Jesuit university—where phenomenology is also a strong interest of both faculty and students—but more importantly, to bring scholars from around the world together to talk about phenomenology and its critical potential, scholars who are representative of classical phenomenology and those who are now leaders of the critical phenomenological movement.

The topic of the conference and this special issue, "phenomenology and critique," was intended to respond to a need for methodological clarification within phenomenology, particularly with respect to critical phenomenology. The "critical turn" that phenomenology is presently undergoing is an attempt for phenomenology to describe and analyze social and political phenomena, especially phenomena that pertain to oppressive structures of the social world such as sexism, white supremacy, and colonialism. This critical turn has been especially driven by debates concerning critical phenomenology. Critical phenomenology is commonly understood to be both a philosophical project that attempts to make visible and analyze certain oppressive structures that are latent in the everyday world of experience and a political practice—a struggle of emancipation from these oppressive structures. Its proponents claim this sort of endeavor necessitates a step beyond the scope and methodology of classical phenomenology, especially Husserlian phenomenology. Although some figures of classical phenomenology might offer methods

and insights into certain experiences relevant for the desired realm to be investigated, classical phenomenology cannot by its own methods achieve the desideratum critical phenomenologists are after. Consequently, some critical phenomenologists have opted to collaborate with other philosophical traditions such as critical theory, hermeneutics, decolonial theory, and post-structuralism, as well as other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology.

In response to these shifts, classical phenomenologists have issued a bevy of critiques of the emerging movement. They have determined that at least some of the aims of critical phenomenology can already be fulfilled within classical phenomenology, such as the description and analysis of complex socio-political phenomena. They have also insisted, for example, that description already involves normativity and can therefore be critical and that we should continue to use eidetic phenomenology, which critical phenomenology mostly rejects. They have also suggested that critical phenomenology does not understand phenomenology or critique correctly.

These philosophical questions and debates prompted us to organize the conference on phenomenology and critique at Loyola. We felt that if critical phenomenology was going to withstand the test of time and prove to be a movement that led to philosophical breakthroughs and brought about changes in our understanding, it had to clarify its own phenomenological grounds. The questions that needed to be posed were: what exactly makes critical phenomenology phenomenological? What makes it critical? And how can we understand its relationship to classical phenomenology? It also seemed clear to us that classical phenomenology could no longer ignore experiences of oppression. If phenomenology were to remain a relevant philosophical method, able to contend with the distinctive phenomena of our time, experiences of oppression needed to be grappled with and faced head on. Phenomenology had to develop tools for addressing experiences of gender, sexual, white supremacist, and colonial domination. How, then, could a primarily descriptive enterprise such as phenomenology advocate political change? Put differently, how could we theorize the articulation of phenomenological scholarship with political praxis and activism? In sum, the central tenet in convening the conference and in compiling this special issue was the commitment to questioning the meaning of "critical phenomenology": to not take it for granted, but to ask fundamental questions about its methodology, its task, and its place in the broader phenomenological tradition. In particular, we wanted to ask what new theoretical tools the critical turn in phenomenology might require.

The papers in this special issue provide a range of perspectives on these interrogations. The uniting thread between them consists in their methodological focus, and in the authors' attempts to thematize phenomenology's appeal to critique, its justifications, presuppositions, and limits. These contributions thus are situated within the project of defining and arguing for a clear and original method for critical phenomenology.

First, Peter Antich's "Mitigating Tensions between Phenomenology and Critique" proposes a mapping of four sites of tension between the projects of phenomenology and critique: (1) the eidetic character of phenomenology in contrast with the concrete character of critique; (2) phenomenology's transcendental orientation in tension with the social and political orientation of critique; (3) the descriptive nature of phenomenology

counter to the normative aims of critique; and lastly, (4) phenomenology's "naïve" character against critique's commitment to exposing the shaping of phenomena by social forces and power relations. Antich suggests that these points of conflict can be mitigated: while the tensions between phenomenology and critique cannot merely be dismissed with a sweep of the hand, they are not entirely irreconcilable either. First, phenomenology's eidetic goal of discovering essences needs to be understood as a historically-situated enterprise where essential structures of experience can be contingent, yet invariant within the particular world we inhabit. Second, critical phenomenology requires a move from a transcendental register to a "quasi-transcendental" one, as proposed by Lisa Guenther. Thirdly, while phenomenology is traditionally considered a descriptive method and critique implies a normative orientation, Antich suggests that critical phenomenological projects need not necessarily articulate concrete prescriptions in order to count as critical. And finally, phenomenology's potentially naïve and presentist character can also be overcome: phenomenology begins with experience, but experience always requires careful interpretation, as well as the acknowledgment that it is necessarily partial and perspectival. Consequently, there is space for critical phenomenological projects which do not radically break with the phenomenological method but rather practice it in transformative ways.

In the second paper, "Towards a More Critical Phenomenology of Whiteness," Jesús Luzardo argues that a critical account of whiteness must consider not only the construction of whiteness as an ideal, but also its failures and contradictions. While critical phenomenologists tend to collapse whiteness and white subjects, a genuinely critical phenomenological account of whiteness needs to examine the complex relationship between white subjects and whiteness. The author first provides a brief overview of a foundational text for critical phenomenology, Frantz Fanon's engagement with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body schema in chapter five of *Black Skin, White Masks.* To conceptualize whiteness, critical phenomenologists have mainly inverted Fanon's framework: from his account of Blackness as fragmented and objectified, they derive an account of whiteness as coherent, motile, and comfortable. Sara Ahmed's and Lisa Guenther's works both exemplify this tendency. Ahmed considers whiteness as an inherited sense of ease in one's inhabitation of space. Building on Cheryl Harris's work, Guenther differently regards whiteness as a kind of property relation through which white subjects invest in their whiteness. For both authors, the relation between white subjects and whiteness is almost exclusively capacitating. What becomes problematic is that such accounts cannot adequately address cases of white failure, where the promise of white privilege is forestalled. As Luzardo shows, scholars explain such cases by exporting contradictions in the experience of whiteness to other facets of identity, such as class, gender, or sexuality. Whiteness itself remains coherent and materially beneficial for subjects who embody it. Nonetheless, Ahmed's and Guenther's analyses do contain the seeds of a more critical phenomenological account of whiteness. Ahmed suggests, for instance, that the threat of expulsion from whiteness is not incidental but central to whiteness, and Guenther begins to theorize whiteness as a kind of parasite haunted by the anxiety of being revealed for what it is. Luzardo thus contends that resources to address whiteness both as a position of privilege and one permeated by contradiction can be found in the work of Fanon. We should refer to what Fanon explicitly says about

whiteness, that it is a relation in which both Black and white subjects find themselves alienated. As Fanon shows, whiteness alienates white subjects, since it is predicated on an internalized, subconscious negrophobia. It is an inherently unstable, structurally fraught position. For Luzardo, critical phenomenology can then continue to shed light on the unstable, contradictory relationship between whiteness and white subjects by articulating the subjective experiences generated through this contradictory relation.

The third paper by Jennifer Gaffney is entitled "A Praxis of Facticity for Critical Phenomenology." It investigates critical phenomenology's definition of political praxis, arguing for the relevance of the Heideggerian move to a hermeneutics of facticity, subsequently rethought by Hannah Arendt. What the author contends is that the grounds of critical phenomenology's calls for action must be clarified: a phenomenological investigation into the conditions which make possible emancipatory political praxis is necessary. Supporting her argument with Mariana Ortega's criticism of Guenther, Gaffney suggests that critical phenomenology needs to recognize the situatedness and fallibility of its own political demands. She proposes that resources for taking full account of this factical limitation of our political actions can be found in existential phenomenology rather than in transcendental Husserlian phenomenology, particularly in Martin Heidegger's thought. Heidegger contended that to achieve understanding of our factical situation did not require us to become more distant from it but rather to face the inevitable, concrete situatedness of any inquiry. Thus, phenomenology should become a "hermeneutics of facticity." As Gaffney shows, this Heideggerian notion is further developed by Arendt into a "praxis of facticity." Arendt reminds us that it is never guaranteed our political acts will not reinforce and perpetuate oppressive structures, even as we strive to overturn them. Though we can never escape from this factical limitation, it should not lead to political apathy: instead, critical phenomenology's task must be to investigate phenomenologically its own factical limits, the conditions which structure and make possible our calls to political action.

The fourth paper, Steffen Herrmann's article, "Horizons of Critique," thinks transcendental, critical, and political phenomenology alongside one another to show that each kind of phenomenology is compatible with political critique. The author starts by outlining the three kinds of consciousness horizon intentionality as defined by Husserl, namely the internal horizon, external horizon, and life horizon. He shows, through the example of the racist algorithmic effects of AI used by the police in the United States, that transcendental analysis of consciousness's horizons of intentionality can be a means of critique. In a different vein, critical phenomenology can be used to expose the phenomenologist's "horizon of givenness," the background assumptions which the phenomenologist takes for granted even as they suspend their natural attitude. By uncovering structures implicit within the mundane horizon of givenness, such as white supremacy, critical phenomenology makes them available for critique as well as for political action. Lastly, the author leans on Arendt and argues that political phenomenology leads to the task of keeping the field of democracy open to foster conversation and debate between different political horizons of givenness. Political phenomenology seeks to contrast different, incompatible political horizons, to keep the conflicts between them alive, and to

examine what political options are available to us within our conditions. In sum, each strand of phenomenology can then become compatible with politicization.

The fifth paper, "From Description to Transformation: A Deconstructivist Investigation of a Phenomenological Method," puts in dialogue deconstructivist approaches to language with phenomenology's method of description. In the paper, Leyla Sophie Gleissner argues that critical phenomenology must treat language not only as a tool for pure description, but it must also acknowledge language's transformative capacity. The author first begins by problematizing Merleau-Ponty's claim that the world is available to us for direct description, prior to any linguistic mediation. As the author suggests, critical phenomenologists have attempted to overcome this view of naïve description shared by classical phenomenologists. They have called into question our ability to describe experience in pure terms and have shown that perception always takes place in the context of socially constituted differences. For Gleissner, these theoretical developments in critical phenomenology call for a shift in how we define the task of description. What she proposes, building on Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, is that for description to be used as a phenomenological tool for social critique, language needs to be recognized in its polysemous and inextricably social character. The author notes that Derrida's view of language is further extended in Butler's work on modes of "address"; there, Butler highlights language's role in shaping subjectivities as well as language's capacity to perpetuate violence. Language not only constructs subjects and our relationship to the world; it also *undoes* us by referring to social structures and power relations which transcend our grasp on the world. Ultimately, Gleissner contends that taking language seriously as a mode of address has important implications for phenomenological description: we must always consider the conditions under which we describe our experiences, reflect on what our descriptions might enable, and on which voices they may foreclose.

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# MITIGATING TENSIONS BETWEEN PHENOMENOLOGY AND CRITIQUE

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How exactly should we measure the distance between phenomenology and critique? Can there be a "critical phenomenology"? Can there be a "phenomenological critique"? This is not to ask whether phenomenological methods and insights can be valuable for critique, nor whether critique can enrich phenomenology—I assume the answer to both of these is affirmative—but whether a properly phenomenological project can be critical. This paper will work within this question space. I will consider four major areas of tension between the basic commitments of these two traditions. My position is that these tensions are not merely illusory. As we will see, it is a matter of fact that there have been tensions between phenomenology and critique in these very regards, but they are also mitigable. In each case, I will argue that there is room for a method properly termed "critical phenomenology," i.e., a critical project that really is phenomenological.

What do I mean by "phenomenology" and "critique"? As with any philosophical tradition, definition is to some extent artificial. As a matter of historical fact, there is no univocal articulation of phenomenology. The matter is even more vexed in the case of critique, which does not comprise a single movement. By "critique," I refer to a set of lineages engaged in projects of social critique, encompassing not only critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, but also thinkers like Michel Foucault and Frantz Fanon, and fields of study such as feminist philosophy, critical race studies, or critical disability studies. Rather than firm definitions, then, it would perhaps be more precise to say that we have certain continuities of tropes, styles, or concerns animating each tradition. But if we want to give to critical phenomenology a definite sense, we will need to do better than this. We need to discern certain contours within each tradition by which their compatibility can be determined.

I will start by noting three defining (though again, not univocally articulated) features of phenomenology. First, phenomenology is a *descriptive* discipline.[1] What it describes are

[1] See Husserl's claim that phenomenology is "a purely descriptive discipline, exploring the field of transcendentally pure consciousness by pure intuition" (1982, 136).

structures of experience, i.e., of phenomena or what appears to us. According to Edmund Husserl, this descriptive project is guided by two reductions: the phenomenological and the eidetic (1982, xix–xxi).[2] In virtue of the phenomenological reduction, phenomenology is, second, a *transcendental* inquiry, by which I mean, loosely, that it is concerned not so much with worldly realities *per se* as with the structures of experience according to which those worldly realities appear to us. Third, in virtue of the eidetic reduction, phenomenology's description is *eidetic*: it aims to yield *essences* of experience; it is interested in *universal* and *necessary* structures. Phenomenology presumes that, for each domain of experience, certain structures will necessarily occur wherever that domain is present. Where there is visual experience, for example, certain structures of visual experience will obtain. To a provisional approximation, then, phenomenology amounts to a descriptive, transcendental, and eidetic investigation of experience.

Again, I take "critique" in a broad sense, encompassing a wide variety of projects that differ considerably in their methodologies and orientations. Nevertheless, I think projects such as those referred to above are united by various features. Take as a starting point Foucault's articulation of a "philosophical ethos consisting in a critique of what we are saying, thinking, and doing through a historical ontology of ourselves" (1996, 416). Such an ethos involves the description and analysis of the ways in which meanings (such as "white," "able-bodied," "woman"), through which we encounter ourselves and the world around us, are historically situated in social and political contexts. In this sense, critique is concerned not with the description of trans-historical structures that condition all human experience, but with the analysis of historically situated social and political structures. Unlike the structures described by phenomenology, these structures, precisely because they are historically specific, are *not* universal and necessary. Indeed, critique will often be skeptical of claims to articulate trans-historical essences since our access to such putative structures will itself be socially and politically conditioned. More, critique's description of the historical construction of meanings is distinctly normative. Max Horkheimer, for example, claims that the aim of the critical attitude is no less than "man's emancipation from slavery" (1972, 246).[3] Even if we needn't characterize every critical project in these exact terms, at least the practice of critique does not simply describe social structures; it identifies their social and political contingency and normative polarization. In other words, it problematizes them.[4] Provisionally, then, I'll say that critique problematizes

[2] Very basically, the phenomenological reduction requires us, by suspending our unreflective acceptance of the reality of the world, to attend to the way in which the phenomenon of reality is constituted in our experience. The eidetic reduction requires us, through the free variation of a phenomenon's characteristics, to attend to its essential structure rather than to its contingent, concrete differentia.

[3] See the Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory's claim that "critical theory is interested in why human society has (in its eyes) failed to live up to the promise of enlightenment and become what it is today, unequal, unjust, and largely uncaring" (Buchanan 2010). Or James Bohman's (2005) claim that, for Horkheimer, critical theory, "must be explanatory, practical, and normative, all at the same time. That is, it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation."

[4] Foucault, for example, writes that critique asks: "in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?" (1996, 416).

the historically situated and socially and politically conditioned structures by which we encounter our world.

These provisional definitions yield obvious tensions between the two traditions. I will consider four of these that I see as basic concerns in the literature: first, the eidetic character of phenomenology as opposed to the historically situated character of critique; second, the transcendental orientation of phenomenology as opposed to the social and political orientation of critique; third, the descriptive nature of phenomenology as opposed to the normative orientation of critique; and fourth, the possibly "naïve" character of phenomenology with respect to the shaping of phenomena by social forces.[5] In each case, I will not try to show that there is *no* space between phenomenology and critique; rather, I suggest that these tensions can—and should—be mitigated in such a way as to make room for a critical phenomenology. But, as we will see, there are many ways to spell out each of these basic characteristics, and whether the two projects are compatible depends largely on how exactly we do this. As many critical phenomenologists have done, I will turn to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty for what I take to be the most acute articulation of phenomenology and the one most amenable to critique.

To be clear, though, my aim is not to assimilate critical phenomenology to what is often called "classical phenomenology"—which we might define as a particular though amorphous lineage of phenomenology running from Husserl to, say, Jean-Paul Sartre and Merleau-Ponty—nor is my aim to demonstrate the critical *bona fides* of this classical phenomenological lineage. While I think it's helpful to draw attention to the critical heritage of classical phenomenology,[6] such projects can elide the important differences in style, orientation, and results of contemporary critical phenomenology. Instead, my relatively narrow aim here is to show that *there is indeed* room for a properly phenomenological project that is also critical. In what follows, I take up each of these four tensions in turn. In each case, I will argue that the tensions between phenomenology and critique are not insuperable, and that we do not need to jettison phenomenology's core commitments in order to engage in critique.

[5] There are other areas of tension we might consider. For instance, Lisa Guenther suggests that classical phenomenology privileges subjectivity over intersubjectivity in a manner that a critical project could not accept (2013, xiii). As Johanna Oksala points out, though, Husserl's mature thought identifies the transcendental role of intersubjectivity in just the way a critical phenomenology would seem to require (2022, 3–4). Or consider Theodor Adorno's (2015) claims in *Against Epistemology* that Husserl's phenomenology as a bourgeois philosophy is overly interested in epistemological questions.

[6] See, for example, David Carr (2022), Lanei Rodemeyer (2022), and Dan Zahavi and Sophie Loidolt (2022). I am suspicious of a step that sometimes gets made in this genre from a) phenomenology being critical in the sense of criticizing certain theoretical assumptions, such as realism, materialism, and physicalism, or the natural attitude, to b) phenomenology being critical in the same sense that critical phenomenology is. While critiques of the former type are, I think, useful for (perhaps even intimately connected with) those of the latter type, they are also importantly different: critical phenomenology criticizes something much more like the hierarchical social structures that organize the ways in which we make sense of the world.

## I. THE EIDETIC REDUCTION

First, there appears to be a tension between phenomenology's commitment to the eidetic reduction and critique's engagement with contingent historical structures. As Husserl puts it in the introduction to *Ideas I*, one of the key differences between psychology and phenomenology is that the latter is not a science of matters of fact, but of essences; it is an "eidetic science," and so methodologically, it involves an "eidetic reduction" (1982, xx). Husserl claims that through imaginative variation, we can bring about an eidetic intuition that does not depend on any matter of fact to deliver universal and necessary structures of consciousness (xx, §3–4).[7]

But critique does not seem to describe eidetic structures in this manner. Critique engages with concrete historical structures, which are not necessary features of experience: by the very fact that these structures form within a particular historical juncture, not only *could* they not obtain, but they in fact *have* not obtained. For example, we would be hard pressed to construe Foucault's work on penal systems in *Discipline and Punish* as eidetic description. Likewise, Johanna Oksala points out how the eidetic reduction fails in the case of gender: "If any first-person description by a woman is understood as a phenomenological account and then generalized by turning it into a description of eidetic female embodiment, we end up with a female body that is essentialized" (2016, 99). This is a problematic outcome given that "the way in which we classify bodies into types, give them value and meaning depends on historically and culturally specific practices" (101).

There are various ways we might try to deal with this tension between the eidetic and the concrete.[8] First, we might argue that critique does involve the description of essential structures. For example, when Fanon describes a "historical-racial schema," he is describing a structure common to diverse experiences of oppression (2008, 91). Of course, the history that informs historical-racial schemata will differ substantially, but this should not lead us to deny that historical-racial schemata underly bodily schemata for a wide variety of experiences of oppression. To my mind, critique can involve description of such common structures along with elucidation of the particular forms they take in concrete historical situations. Consider Lisa Guenther's (2013) analysis of solitary confinement. She shows both how this experience is substantially differentiated socially (e.g., along lines of race), and how it manifests a coherent structure, one that consistently violates certain norms of "animal ontology"—even nonhuman animal ontology (127). Of course, solitary confinement as a form of punishment is a contingent historical event, one that shifts in its meanings and arrangements over time, but where it occurs, it manifests certain common (though differently manifested) phenomenal structures.

To be clear, it would not do to object here that not all people experience solitary confinement or historico-racial schematization. This is because universal and necessary

[7] In imaginative variation, the features of a phenomenon are altered in imagination in order to discern its essential structures.

[8] See Julia Jansen's distinction between multiple senses of pure description (2022, 47–48).

phenomenological structures need not be experienced by all persons. For example, certain structures of visual apprehension (e.g., the relation between color and shape, or visual simultaneity at distance) are plausibly not experienced by some people who are blind, but we would not conclude that they are therefore merely arbitrary or contingent. Rather, "universal and necessary" means that wherever a particular domain of experience occurs, it is structured by certain contours of experience.

A second option would be to follow Merleau-Ponty's claim that phenomenology is a philosophy that "places essences back within existence" (2012, lxx). In other words, while phenomenology is concerned with essential structures, it discerns these necessary features of experience precisely by tracing their manifestation within diverse contingent particulars. A rich description of necessary structures will not, then, be oblivious to particulars, but will gain its evidence precisely through engagement with them. As Bonnie Mann puts it, a phenomenological project like Simone de Beauvoir's in *The Second Sex*, "does not so much succeed at separating the general features of human existence from their contingent, empirical formations, as one begins to note how they are entangled" (2018, 57). In this case, while the projects of phenomenology and critique may be oblique, the former is plausibly enmeshed with the latter.

One might insist against these points that, as Foucault says, critique analyzes ensembles of power and knowledge *not* "as universals to which history, with its particular circumstances, would add a number of modifications," and that what it recovers,

> are not incarnations of an essence, or individualization of a species, but rather, pure singularities: the singularity of madness in the Western world, the absolute singularity of sexuality, the absolute singularity of our moral-legal system of punishment. (2007, 62–63)

While it is true that with such historical systems we are not dealing with atemporal essences, neither are we dealing with particulars; rather, we are analyzing generalized structures that govern the appearance of particulars. What we might try to do here, then—though this option is not without difficulty—is to think of certain essences as historically situated. Either there are certain essences that pertain only to particular time periods *or* certain essences can themselves undergo historical transformation.[9] On this approach, a particular historical situation might involve certain invariant experiential structures. While such historically situated eidetic structures would not be globally necessary features of experience, they might be necessary local to a historical phase. And there is plausibility to this suggestion; again, critique is not history or biography—it is not interested in particular

[9] See Guenther's consideration of a historical a priori (2021, 11). While on its face the term appears oxymoronic, we should consider that many thinkers have attempted to articulate such a sphere of investigation. For his part, Merleau-Ponty does speak of a "historical a priori," consistent "within a given phase . . . provided that the equilibrium of forces allows the same forms to remain" (2012, 90; emphasis in original). See also M.C. Dillon (1987). Husserl (1970), too, speaks of an historical a priori (e.g., in "The Origin of Geometry"), as does Foucault (1972), though these would take us in other directions. For more on this point, see James Dodd (2016).

events, but in general structures that develop and manifest within particular events. We might think of these general, characteristic structures as historically situated essences.

But even if there were localized essences, could phenomenology be interested in them? While Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological work is not focused on such local eidetic reductions, I think there is a sense in which he opens a space for this kind of inquiry. Far more deeply, he wants to challenge the very relation between the contingent and the necessary in experience. For him, a priori structures of experience are themselves founded on the contingent fact of inhabiting the world that we do. As he puts it, for example:

> The unity of the senses, which was taken as an *a priori* truth, is no longer anything but the formal expression of a fundamental contingency: the fact that we are in the world. The diversity of the senses, which was taken as an *a posteriori* given, including the concrete form that it takes in the human subject, appears as necessary to that world, that is, to the only world that we could think of with any importance; the diversity of the senses thus becomes an *a priori* truth. (2012, 266)

We are no longer speaking of an entirely abstract, atemporal a priori then, but an a priori given the particular world that is given to us within experience.[10] Now, this is still quite far from talking about essential structures of experience local to a historical era, but we might think of it as pointing to the "deep history" or "deep time" that engenders the essential structures of the kind of world we inhabit as the kinds of bodies we are. Or, at the least, if Merleau-Ponty is right in this regard, it undermines the tension between the eidetic character of phenomenology and the contingent character of critique.[11]

## II. TRANSCENDENTAL STRUCTURES

Second, it's unclear whether critique is compatible with a transcendental philosophy like phenomenology. Phenomenology aims to describe the structures of experience within

[10] See the claim by the editors of the inaugural issue of *Puncta*: "if the 'essences' of phenomena are revealed as being 'impure,' structured by socio-political institutions . . . then this broadens the scope of the conditions of the possibility of phenomenology: insofar as those conditions include particular social contexts, phenomenology ceases to be a strictly a priori and value-neutral discipline" (Ferrari et al. 2018, 3).

[11] In this vein, Gayle Salamon has even suggested that phenomenology's conception of essences is in fact especially appropriate for the description of social phenomena like gender: phenomenology requires us to "possibilize" essences, in the sense of being open to continual revisions to them, such that we have not so much a "fixed idea of a fixed essence" but essence as "an open unity" (2018a, 46).

which worldly realities appear, i.e., transcendental structures. But critique seems at odds with such a project. Consider Foucault's claim that criticism is not

> practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying. In that sense, this criticism is not transcendental. (1996, 113)

From a phenomenological perspective, then, critique might be conceived as simply describing historical aspects of reality constituted *according to* transcendental structures: the two projects appear oblique to one another.

Now, certainly critique does not *need* to operate in a transcendental register. But, perhaps it can do so. Guenther (2019), for instance, contends that critical phenomenology describes "quasi-transcendental" structures, i.e., structures of the social world which shape the emergence of meaning within our experience. According to Guenther, structures like patriarchy or white supremacy "are not a priori in the sense of being absolutely prior to experience and operating the same way regardless of context, but they do play a constitutive role in shaping the meaning and manner of our experience" (12). These contingent structures are not objects seen but "*ways of seeing*" or of "*making the world*"; they "generate the norms of the lifeworld and the natural attitude of those who inhabit them" (12; emphasis in original). Such a critical project would not seek to disclose conditions of all possible experience (and so would not be transcendental in a Kantian sense), but it *would* disclose the ways in which our experiences are conditioned by meaningful structures, and in this sense is "quasi-transcendental."[12]

One might worry that this approach involves a kind of materialism or realism which is incompatible with phenomenology, one in which the social world exerts a causal efficacy over experience. However, we do not need to understand the relation between the social world and experience in these terms. This is the point of Merleau-Ponty's long footnote on historical materialism in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, in which he argues:

> there is never a purely economic causality because the economy is not a closed system and because it is part of the total and concrete existence of society. But an existential conception of history does not strip economic situations of their power of *motivation*. (2012, 176; emphasis in original)

That is, the social world does not exert a causal efficacy over experience, since it exerts its influence precisely by being taken up in experience. Consciousness and world here exist in a reciprocal relation of sense-making: the social world shapes the way I give the world

[12] Depending on how we understand "transcendental," it's not clear we even need the "quasi-" here. For instance, if we take Oksala's definition of the "transcendental" as based on the recognition that "reality cannot be understood independent of the historical and cultural community of experiencing subjects" Guenther's addition of "quasi" could be considered redundant (2016, 5).

meaning precisely in terms of the way I give it meaning. Thus, while not determinative, the social and historical world is central to the factual situation that our experience takes up. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

> The external becomes internal and the internal becomes external precisely because economics is not a closed world and because all motivations intersect at the center of history, and no part of our existence can ever be wholly transcended. (2012, 177)

Is a "quasi-transcendental" project like critical phenomenology compatible with a transcendental one like phenomenology? As Guenther (2021) puts it, critical phenomenology differs from classical phenomenology insofar as the former needs an archive, and not just first-personal reflection. Studying this archive of "statements, events, and expressions that are not directly accessible in the first-person, but only through the mediation of language, writing, images, documents, artifacts, and so forth," allows the critical phenomenologist to study the "sedimented structures of a situation that they inhabit, but which they cannot access through personal memory or perception alone" (12).[13] This distinction between classical and critical phenomenology is, however, not so straightforward. The archive is not irrelevant for classical phenomenology: just consider the way Merleau-Ponty (2012) draws on archives of psychology (e.g., the patient Schneider) to illuminate essential features of embodied experience. As he puts it: "The situation of the patient whom I question appears to me within my own situation and, in this phenomenon with two centers, I learn to know myself as much as I learn to know the other person" (353). Now, it may be that critical phenomenology *depends on* the archive in a way that classical phenomenology does not; however, it does not necessarily follow that this recourse to the archive radically modifies the transcendental character of the inquiry.

## III. DESCRIPTIVE AND NORMATIVE

Third, put crudely, we might take the project of phenomenology to be descriptive, while the project of critique is normative.[14] Martin Heidegger (2008), for example, famously claims that his account of authenticity is not a moralistic account.[15] In contrast, Fred Rush (2004) points out that critical theory "is not merely descriptive, it is a way to instigate

[13] See Foucault's characterization of the archive: "we have in the density of discursive practices, systems that establish statements as events (with their own conditions and domain of appearance) and things (with their own possibility and field of use). They are all these systems of statements (whether events or things) that I propose to call archive" (1972, 128). Again, see Dodd (2016) for more on this point.

[14] Though I will not take up this suggestion here, Jansen (2022) persuasively argues that phenomenology should not be merely descriptive, but that when properly executed, phenomenological description is also critical.

[15] "In relation to these phenomena . . . our own Interpretation is purely ontological in its aims, and is far removed from any moralizing critique of any everyday Dasein" (Heidegger, 2008, 210–11).

social change by providing knowledge of the forces of social inequality that can, in turn, inform political action aimed at emancipation (or at least at diminishing domination and inequality)" (Rush 2004, 9).

This distinction between the two projects is difficult to work out in a compelling manner. For critique, too, is a descriptive project insofar as it describes the normative dimensions of social arrangements. And phenomenological descriptions, for their part, have normative dimensions. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, for example, draws our attention to the emergence of normative structures within perceptual experience (such as the experience of optimal and sub-optimal viewing conditions) (2012, 312–18). Various other phenomenologists have further described moral normativity within our experience, e.g., de Beauvoir gives a compelling account of the normative tensions that arise through our experiences of others in a social world.[16]

A more promising way to articulate the tension would be to define the difference between the projects according to the difference between description and prescription: on this account, phenomenology merely illuminates how things are, while critique identifies how we should act. However, it is not clear that this is a good description of critique. Of course, critique may have as its *motive* the realization of a world in which things are as they should be, but generally speaking, critique, like phenomenology, takes as its subject how things are: it identifies the complex structures undergirding the patterns of the social world, which evade a superficial glance.[17] Guenther argues compellingly that "critique calls for collective action," and that critical phenomenology requires reflection not just on what an experience is like but on "what [it] would . . . take to transform the situation" (2021, 7, 12). Would, then, a phenomenological inquiry on a structure like ableism, for example, cease to be critical if it failed to identify actions we can take to transform the situation of the disabled vis-à-vis ableism?[18] This is doubtful as such a project would still yield a normative analysis of social structures even if it refrained from outlining definite prescriptions.

Thus, I think we should distinguish the motive of inquiry from its content. We might suggest, then, that critical projects are motivated by the goal of social change, although this does not entail that every critical project prescribes action items. Such a conception

[16] On this point, see Oksala (2022, 145).

[17] On the other hand, it might also be more accurate to say that critique is less descriptive than explanatory (think of genealogical projects, for example); in contrast, a long legacy suggests that phenomenology is descriptive rather than explanatory. Here, too, while much of critique is explanatory, I doubt that all critique must be explanatory. On the other hand, phenomenology can provide descriptions of a number of things we might, in some sense, call explanatory, e.g., phenomenology can describe the way in which certain attitudes and habits become sedimented and then exert an influence over how the social world is constituted.

[18] See Loidolt's (2022) account of critique. Now, the kind of inquiry I just mentioned might fail as an ethical endeavor. Guenther (2022) has pointed out how critique can harmfully become an end in itself, but not, I think, as a critical phenomenological endeavor. Mérédith Laferté-Coutu cites Alia Al-Saji's *Collegium Phaenomenologicum* lectures as suggesting that "no practical program or hopes of 'changing the world' should guide critical phenomenology" (2021, 90).

of critical phenomenology is articulated by Bonnie Mann, who proposes that critical or feminist phenomenology

> admits its own active, ethical motivations. It seeks not just to describe the world in other words, but to change it—particularly to intervene in those power relations that have sedimented into conditions of injustice. Beauvoir takes as her object of concern, not sexual difference as such, as if there were such a thing, but sexual difference as it is constituted through injustice. (2018, 55)

Here, critical phenomenology really does seek to change the world, but it does so precisely *by* analyzing the way in which injustice constitutes our social world, rather than by yielding prescriptions. Or, consider the case of someone who pursued a critical phenomenological project purely out of the motive of, say, curiosity about the human condition. Such a case would be troubling, but I do not think it would be troubling because of a methodological failure.[19]

Guenther's view is nuanced. She describes critical phenomenology insofar as it is a political practice as "a struggle for liberation from the structures that privilege, naturalize, and normalize certain experiences of the world, while marginalizing, pathologizing, and discrediting others" (2019, 15). In contrast, critique is "more interested in responses and response-ability than in definitive answers or solutions. . . . Its aim is not to put an issue to rest, but rather to (re)open horizons of indeterminacy, possibility, and becoming-otherwise" (2021, 9). On the one hand, I do not think it is too much of a stretch to say that phenomenological practice (even of the "classical" sort) is a struggle for a parallel kind of change, namely the removal of theoretical clichés that obscure the rich and ambiguous character of our experience. And theoretical baggage that privileges certain experiences while marginalizing others very much does fall within the category of cliché that obscures the character of experience. One could, with some justice, interpret these projects as of a piece. But on the other hand, Guenther writes:

> As a transformative political practice, critical phenomenology must go beyond a description of oppression, developing concrete strategies for dismantling oppressive structures and creating or amplifying different, less oppressive, and more liberatory ways of Being-in-the-world. (2019, 16)

*This* kind of normativity does strike me as distinct from the core of the phenomenological project (and something for which phenomenology lacks a method), though a very natural

[19] In other words, I think what makes this phenomenologist problematic is not a failure to properly enact phenomenological method, but something more like a failure of human empathy. Of course, this latter failure may very well obscure certain phenomena, but this obscurity is not what most bothers us about this case.

and compelling outcome of phenomenological results.[20] But again, I doubt that a project really does require this kind of concrete strategizing in order to count as critical.[21]

This brings us quite close to a third way of articulating a potential critical shortcoming of phenomenology. Alia Al-Saji (2022) has argued that critical phenomenology should not pursue mere description or observation—which risks splaying out, for instance, colonized subjectivity before phenomenological vision—but instead should pursue something like touching or dwelling-with wounds, such as the wounds of colonialism.[22] Is this kind of "dwelling-with" phenomenological? Certainly, I think traditional descriptions of phenomenology would be inadequate to it. We can easily imagine the ways in which an affect like wonder (which has often been linked to the phenomenological reduction) could seriously fail to register the wounds of colonialism. But this should encourage us to expand the affective registers in which phenomenology is pursued. There may be features of experience to which wonder is not particularly well-attuned.[23] On the other hand, much depends on how we think about what it takes to dwell-with. At its best, phenomenology is often a labor of allowing attentive space and time to be taken by a matter, and this is, in some ways, what we might want dwelling-with to do.

Let's try a final way of articulating the tension between description and normativity. Rather than prescriptive, perhaps critique is diagnostic (i.e., rather identifying presciptions for action, perhaps it merely identifies and explicates the underlying conditions that in which normative failures are rooted). If this is right, then I do think we have a tension between classical and critical phenomenology. Diagnosis is a normative project, but even

[20] Here, we should emphasize just how tightly entwined phenomenology can be in a project of suggesting solutions. To give a crude example, if phenomenology shows that racism perpetuates itself through perceptual modalities, then shifting back and forth between phenomenological description of the various modes in which perceptual sense is made and critical prescriptions for transforming perception would be a very natural, almost inevitable, approach. Nevertheless, description and prescription are distinct registers within this kind of project, and it would confuse matters simply to conflate them.

[21] One might also think of critical phenomenology as a compound method, including phenomenological methodologies as well as a variety of other methodologies (e.g., Marxism, Foucauldian genealogy, etc.), which make it possible for critical phenomenology to formulate concrete recommendations. This, I take it, is part of the point of Guenther's claim that critical phenomenology is a "hybrid method" (2021, 8). By definition, such a compound method is not strictly phenomenological. If this is what we mean by critical phenomenology, then my claim is better framed as follows: a critical project need not be prescriptive, and so there is room for a project that is both genuinely phenomenological and genuinely critical.

[22] It would be interesting to compare this to Ocean Vuong's remark: "I was once foolish enough to believe knowledge would clarify, but some things are so gauzed behind layers of syntax and semantics, behind days and hours, names forgotten, salvaged and shed, that simply knowing the wound exists does nothing to reveal it" (2019, 62). In contrast, his mother's massaging a customer's phantom limb has the effect of "revealing what's not there, the way a conductor's movements make the music somehow more real" (83). I wonder if we could think here that there are some wounds which cannot be revealed through mere description, and which can only be revealed through something like dwelling-with. However, it may be the case that for Al-Saji that we must move past the very desire to reveal.

[23] Note that Anthony Steinbock has argued that phenomenological reflection can be incited by a discernment of the heart (2022, 166). This may be an avenue by which to connect description and dwelling-with, as long as we are careful not to elide all differences between the two.

when phenomenology describes experienced norms, such description is not obviously aimed at diagnosing normative shortcomings.

Once again, though, matters are not quite so clear cut. For phenomenologists do, at times, adopt projects that might well be described in diagnostic terms. For example, Husserl's (1970) project in *Crisis* can be considered diagnostic insofar as it identifies the phenomenological and historical roots of a certain problematic situation, namely our relationship to knowledge and rationality. Indeed, this project could even be considered therapeutic as it aims to correct misunderstandings that have led to this problematic relationship. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty often describes phenomenology as a transformative encounter with our experience. He writes: "It is not a question of reducing human knowledge to sensation, but of assisting at the birth of knowledge, to make it as sensible as the sensible, to recover the consciousness of rationality" (1964, 24). I doubt that these projects can be classified simply as descriptive as opposed to normative.

## IV. PRESENTISM

Fourth, as Gayle Salamon (2018b) points out, critique could, with some justice, accuse phenomenology of being presentist: phenomenology takes experience or appearance as its starting point; however, critique points out the various ways in which appearance is shaped by social and political forces. We might worry that, far from providing access to transcendental structures of experience, phenomenology merely lays claim to universality for the subjective and contingent features of the phenomenologist's own culturally situated experience. Mann (2018), for example, shows how phenomenological analyses of shame as an abstract, eidetic feature of human experience, are naïve about the role of gender in experiences of shame. Further, Oksala points out that precisely for this reason, the universalizing step of the eidetic reduction will appear problematic for critical phenomenology (2022, 141).

While I share this concern about presentism, I think there are ways of assuaging it. First, phenomenology does not have to handle experience naïvely. That phenomenology takes appearance as its starting point does not mean it attaches ultimate authority to any particular set of experiences. Indeed, part of the point of the eidetic reduction is to resist attaching inflated importance to any particular experience. Here, particular experiences are treated as *exemplars* that serve as bases for imaginative variation.

On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty points out that our capacity for imaginative variation is not unlimited but is itself situated within a particular personal and historical frame such that we cannot expect variation to yield perfectly universal and necessary structures. As he puts it:

> A pure essence which would not be at all contaminated and confused with the facts could result only from an attempt at total variation. It would require a spectator himself without secrets, without latency, if we are to

> be certain that nothing be surreptitiously introduced into it . . . Every ideation, because it is an ideation, is formed in a space of existence, under the guarantee of my duration . . . My incontestable power to give myself leeway (*prendre du champs*), to disengage the possible from the real, does not go as far as to dominate all the implications of the spectacle and to make of the real a simple variant of the possible. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 111–12)[24]

Merleau-Ponty is not rejecting eidetic variation as a phenomenological method. Rather, he is noting its limitations and situation within a larger philosophical project.[25] Doing so allows us to be critical about eidetic variation itself and notice that it is something that phenomenology can do more or less well. Phenomenology that mistakes a contingent cultural arrangement for an essential feature of human experience—a phenomenology that, perhaps, describes a body schema while overlooking the polarization of this schema by a "historical-racial schema"—has fallen short not merely from the perspective of critique, but precisely as phenomenology. Husserl, too, makes remarks that indicate the potential limitations of our imaginations for eidetic variation, for example, when he notes the value of history, art, and poetry for eidetic research.[26] I do not think one could attach value to this kind of archive if one naïvely thought of the imagination as straightaway delivering universals. While phenomenology does indeed face the threat of presentism, it does not do so naïvely, but is explicitly meant to be self-critical in this regard. I think we should take Merleau-Ponty's critique of eidetic variation, and insistence on a kind of "hyper-reflection" (which would reflect on the very methods of reflection), at least partly in this vein.

Thus, we need to be careful with how we understand the claim that phenomenology starts with experience. For, further, phenomenology allows that experience requires interpretation.[27] Often the character of experience is opaque to us, and the naïve way of

[24] Merleau-Ponty is also explicit that ideation is culturally limited as well:

> There is no essence, no idea, that does not adhere to a domain of history and of geography. Not that it is confined there and inaccessible for the others, but because, like that of nature, the space or time of culture is not surveyable from above, and because the communication from one constituted culture to another occurs through the wild region wherein they all have originated. (115; emphasis in original)

[25] This larger philosophical project requires moving beyond eideitic variation. Merleau-Ponty writes:

> There is no guarantee that the whole of experience can be expressed in essential invariants, that certain beings—for example, the being of time—do not in principle elude this fixation and do not require from the start, if they are to be able to be thought by us, the consideration of the fact, the dimension of facticity and the hyper-reflection, which would then become, at least in regard to them, not a superior degree at the ultimate level of philosophy, but philosophy itself. (46)

[26] "Extraordinary profit can be drawn from the offerings of history, in even more abundant measure from those of art, and especially from poetry, which are to be sure imaginary but which . . . tower high above the products of our own imagination" (Husserl 1982, 160).

[27] This is not to deny the methodological priority of experience: correct interpretation is ultimately a matter of precisely expressing the character of experience.

understanding experience, which enjoys a superficial "obviousness," expresses a contingent "common sense" interpretation. Part of the labor of phenomenology is to describe experience carefully and precisely and in a way that expresses its character beyond the obvious or cliché. To say that phenomenology starts with appearance should not, then, be taken to mean that it starts with the "obvious," but that it takes up experience carefully. Here, too, phenomenology can be more or less successful in breaking through cliché to describe experience precisely on its own terms, and so, in this sense as well, runs the risk of presentism. But, again, the point is that a phenomenological investigation blinkered by contemporaneous interpretations fails precisely as phenomenology. And for that matter, critique, too, can be burdened by ideological conceits.

Merleau-Ponty (2012) raises this point in his analysis of hallucination. He emphasizes that neither through their language nor through my own experience can one coincide with the experience of a patient suffering hallucinations. But neither, he argues, should I imagine that my own consciousness can be reduced to the phenomenon in question. He writes:

> What is given is not myself here and others over there, nor my present here and my past over there, nor healthy consciousness and its *cogito* here and the hallucinating consciousness over there—with the former being the sole judge of the latter and reducing it to its internal conjectures—rather, what is given is the doctor *with* the patient, me *with* another person, and my past *on the horizon of* my present. I distort my past by evoking it at present, but I can take these very deformations into account. They are indicated to me through the tension that subsists between the abolished past that I aim at and my arbitrary interpretations. I am mistaken about the other because I see him from my point of view, but I hear him object and finally I have the idea of another person as a center of perspectives. The situation of the patient whom I question appears to me within my own situation and, in this phenomenon with two centers, I learn to know myself as much as I learn to know the other person. (353; emphasis in original)[28]

The phenomenologist must, on the one hand, take up the fact that their present perspective offers limited access to the situation onto which it opens. On the other hand, there is no question of the present being cut off from the past, or myself being cut off from the other, since the past is on the horizon of the present, and the other's situation is disclosed "in this phenomenon with two centers." My perspective is open to challenge from that on which it is a perspective: the phenomenologist's task is to render this challenge acutely. As

[28] See Mann's claim that the feminist phenomenologist "has to enter into the perspective of an other and allow it to work on her. She has to travel between the particularities of this shame, this life, this situation, and the generalities in a constant, oscillating motion. The phenomenon gives itself precisely in the intensified space between general features of human existence and radically particular specifications that are historically situated, bound up in material interests, ensconced in structures of injustice." (2018, 71; emphases in original)

such, a phenomenology which does not take the perspectival limitations of the present into account has failed precisely as phenomenology.[29]

## V. OVERVIEW

I have tried to show that there are meaningful tensions separating phenomenology from critique. However, it makes a considerable difference how one understands phenomenology, and I have argued that on a nuanced understanding of phenomenology, there is room for a project that is both phenomenological and critical. This is not to say that there is nothing new in critical phenomenology, nor is it an attempt to appropriate the novel accomplishments of critical phenomenology on behalf of Husserl or some other figure—undoubtedly, there are significant tensions in results, methods, and orientations between critical and classical phenomenologists. My argument is rather that this new project does not *need* to break with the fundamental methodology of phenomenology. When Guenther contrasts a method that accords primacy to subjectivity with one that accords it to intersubjectivity, for example, I think we could take this to be a matter *not* of dividing phenomenology from critical phenomenology, but of sorting out what phenomenology itself is (2013, xiii). We should allow that articulating the latter has never been a straightforward matter, and I would suggest we can consider critical phenomenology as a novel, and perhaps transformative, articulation of phenomenology—albeit in a specific set of domains of phenomenological questioning, rather than as a non- or post-phenomenological method.

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[29] The difference between the two, then, might be that critique takes up the historical and cultural situatedness of its investigation explicitly, whereas phenomenology does not. But this need not be such a stark contrast. Phenomenology, in methodologically resisting received interpretations of experience, is implicitly critical of historical and cultural situatedness. Nor is it clear that phenomenology cannot take up this situatedness explicitly. Here, too, we can consider Merleau-Ponty's advocacy of a kind of hyper-reflection that examines how the phenomenological reductions themselves arise within our experience.

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# TOWARDS A MORE CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF WHITENESS

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Grounded in and influenced by the work of thinkers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Frantz Fanon, Iris Marion Young, and Lewis Gordon, critical phenomenologists have in the last decade produced numerous groundbreaking analyses of the lived experiences of racialization and racism, disability, misogyny, and transphobia. Additionally, thinkers such as Lisa Guenther, Linda Martín Alcoff, George Yancy, and Sara Ahmed have also approached whiteness through a phenomenological lens. Yet rather than proceed by primarily describing and analyzing the lived experience of any given white individual, these analyses proceed by revealing how whiteness operates and is reproduced not only through laws and political institutions, but also more "locally" through the habits and perceptual practices of white and white-adjacent people. Thus, unlike Blackness, which for W.E.B. Du Bois (2007) stands out as a "problem," whiteness is that which is seldom considered, and which thus operates as a "transcendental norm," a "background to experience," a "natural attitude," and a "sociogenic force." Whiteness remains invisible while structuring the world, its benefits, and its privileges in favor of those who consciously and unconsciously participate in it, and through the exclusion of everyone else. However, in this article, I want to suggest that such accounts ultimately collapse whiteness and the white subject, imagining the latter simply as an embodiment of the former, and for this reason, lack explanatory power. I argue that a critical phenomenological account of whiteness must go further by looking more closely at the relationship between white subjects and whiteness, and more specifically, at the tensions, gaps, and contradictions between them, as these are not accidental but central to the very constitution of whiteness and to the power it wields over its subjects.

I begin by reflecting upon critical phenomenology as a method and orientation by briefly looking at one of its foundational texts: Fanon's (1967) discussion of the corporeal schema of Blackness in chapter five of *Black Skin, White Masks.* Then, I sketch Ahmed's (2006; 2007) and Guenther's (2019) critical phenomenological analyses of whiteness. I

show that Ahmed and Guenther do not adapt or expand Fanon's analysis to account for whiteness so much as they simply *invert* it, thereby collapsing the relationship between the white subject and whiteness. In both accounts, that is, the white subject, as the inversion of Fanon's Black subject, is taken to successfully embody and fulfill the norms of whiteness: a sense of motility, of being at ease in the world, a constant sense of "I can." Finally, I show that Ahmed's and Guenther's accounts do not sufficiently account for the contradictions between white subjects in their whiteness, for the failure of white subjects to achieve the ideals of ease and motility constitutive of whiteness, and for the failure of whiteness to deliver upon its promises to white subjects. I argue that these analyses, while insightful, fail both as readings of Fanon and as accounts of the operations of whiteness and the experiences and actions of its subjects.

Here it is important to clarify that in making this argument, I am not asking for or pursuing a more sympathetic analysis of whiteness, nor is the goal to center injustices faced by white people. Rather, my argument is that the failure to account for white failure—for the contradictions immanent to whiteness—leaves us with an account that cannot sufficiently explain its operations, functions, and pathologies. Thus, I am pursuing here not a more sympathetic account, but a more precise, materially-grounded, and ultimately, more explanatory analysis of whiteness. A more critical analysis, that is.

## I. WHITENESS AND THE "I CAN"

Before focusing more specifically on Guenther's (2019) and Ahmed's (2006) analyses of whiteness, I provide a brief overview of what I take critical phenomenology to be and to do. In the introduction to *Solitary Confinement and its Afterlives*, Guenther defines critical phenomenology as "a method that is rooted in first-person accounts of experience but also critical of classical phenomenology's claim that the first-person singular is absolutely prior to intersubjectivity and to the complex textures of social life" (2013, xiii). Critical phenomenology, as we will continue to see, might be said to consist of two principal and simultaneous moves: 1) the use of a phenomenological approach to describe and analyze domination and oppression along the lines of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and class (understood as connected and intersecting in multiple ways) as they are lived and experienced, indeed, as they structure the world as it appears for differently-positioned subjects, and 2) as a critical and reflective approach to phenomenology itself as both a tradition and as a method. These moves are mutually supportive, as classical phenomenology—and here, "classical" is both a historical and methodological marker—has failed to analyze and account for such experiences precisely because it has so seldom been performed by those in a position to describe them, and is thus methodologically insufficient for analyzing, indeed even for being able to see and conceive of the many varieties of experience it has ignored thus far. Such analyses thus require a rethinking of the method itself and vice versa.

With these broad parameters in mind, I want to briefly look at what might be considered one of the foundational moments for the development of critical phenomenology,

namely, chapter five of Fanon's (1967) *Black Skin, White Masks*, "The Lived Experience of the Black Man." His brief but groundbreaking development of the "Historico-Racial" and "Racial Epidermal" schemas continues to influence and inform the concepts and argumentative moves utilized by critical phenomenological analyses of race in general and of whiteness more specifically. Through an engagement with Merleau-Ponty's (as well as Jean Lhermitte's) notion of the bodily schema, Fanon's analysis uncovers a constitutive contradiction at the heart of Black existence between a nonnormative (Black) subject and the norms and structures that objectify him. Such norms constitute whiteness and the white world as a quasi-transcendental structure that "generate[s] and consolidate[s] meaning by normalizing some habits of perception, cognition, and comportment while pathologizing others" (Guenther 2021, 6).

This engagement begins with Fanon's description of the body schema as it *should* function:

> I know that if I want to smoke, I shall have to reach out my right arm and take the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table. The matches, however, are in the drawer on the left, and I shall have to lean back slightly. And all these movements are made not out of habit but out of implicit knowledge. A slow composition of my *self* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world—such seems to be the schema. It does not impose itself on me; it is, rather, a definitive structuring of the self and of the world—definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world. (1967, 110–11; emphasis in original)

So far so good, it seems. Yet, Fanon's corporeal schema—his awareness of his body as it moves towards its task—is interrupted, indeed has always already been interrupted, by the white gaze and by the ongoing process of racialization. "In the white world," he says, "the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema" (110). Whereas for Merleau-Ponty the bodily schema is what Gail Weiss has usefully called an "enabling phenomenon that facilitates a dynamic rapport between myself and the world" (2015, 86), for the Black subject, "consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity" (Fanon 1967, 110). Thus, Fanon explains that

> below the corporeal schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me not by "residual sensations and perceptions primarily of a tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, and visual character," but by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories. (111)

There is thus a contradiction at the heart of the lived experience of the Black subject: between self and world, between the body's motility and its imprisonment in and through the political regimes and thousand details and stories which constitute the colonial world. This tension and the Black subject's internalization of the historico-racial schema constitute the emergence of the racial-epidermal schema (rather than being their result in a causal

chain) and the Black subject's fragmentation. "Then," Fanon says, "assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema . . . I existed triply" (1967, 112). What matters here is the way that this structure forecloses Fanon's enjoyment of his bodily intentionality and of the dynamic relation between self, body, and world which Merleau-Ponty's analysis promises. But further, it opens him up (or, more specifically, renders him vulnerable) to a set of experiences and ways of being in the world which Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the corporeal schemas essentially misses and cannot properly account for. As Axelle Karera explains,

> the racial epidermal schema explains the failure of Merleau-Ponty's concept in its attempt to provide an account of the co-constitution of self and world. It also reveals that, for the black, the conditions under which intersubjectivity yields self-knowledge are radically compromised." (2019, 291)

Thus, while Fanon himself does not use this formulation, Ahmed argues that

> if classical phenomenology is about "motility," expressed in the hopefulness of the utterance "I can," Fanon's phenomenology of the black body would be better described in terms of the bodily and social experience of restriction, uncertainty and blockage, or perhaps even in terms of the despair of the utterance "I cannot." (2007, 161)

What does this approach look like when applied to whiteness, to the site of the white norm from which Fanon is excluded? As I show, Ahmed and Guenther invert Fanon's analysis in their respective accounts, deriving from his account of Blackness as fragmented and objectified an account of whiteness as—by definition—coherent, motile, and comfortable. And while their analyses of Fanon's Blackness rightfully emphasize the gap and failures between the Black subject and the white norm, their accounts of whiteness deemphasize and, ultimately, collapse the gaps between this norm and the white subject, thus leaving little space for an account of failure or contradiction within whiteness. A phenomenology of whiteness is therefore primarily a phenomenology of the "I can." But for this reason, Ahmed and Guenther are unable to account for instances of white failure: when the white subject, qua white, finds herself in the position of the "I cannot."

For Ahmed, Fanon's experience is that of having his body "'stopped' in its tracks" and rendered disoriented by the white world (2006, 110). With his corporeal schema crumbled and replaced by the historico-racial schema below it, Fanon finds himself interrupted and unable to move seamlessly in the world or to project himself forward toward his task. "The disorientation affected by racism," explains Ahmed, "diminishes capacities for action" (111). Whiteness, on the other hand but by the same logic, emerges as the inverse of this disorientating incapacitation, as that which has the power to orient and disorient, to enable and incapacitate. It is not merely an orientation among others, but rather, "the 'starting point' for orientation" (121). It designates "what is 'here,' a line from which the world unfolds,

which also makes what is 'there' on 'the other side'" (Ahmed 2006, 121). If Fanon's body interrupts and is interrupted by the white world, whiteness is that which gives this world coherence.

In *Queer Phenomenology,* Ahmed (2006) argues that the coherence of whiteness is maintained through a logic of sameness and proximity, which whiteness works to maintain, reproduce, and expand. In thinking about how whiteness reproduces itself and how it is inherited, Ahmed moves away from biological understandings of reproduction, inheritance, and likeness. Rather than thinking about whiteness as a biological or phenotypical property of bodies (though, she explains, it behaves *as if* it were), Ahmed suggests

> another way of thinking about the relationship between inheritance and likeness: we inherit proximities (and hence orientations) as our point of entry into a familial space, as "a part" of a new generation.

That is to say, what makes someone recognizable as white, which *appears* as an in inherited likeness, is first and foremost an inherited proximity to whiteness. Ahmed thus reverses the apparent causal order of reproduction: "likeness is an effect of proximity rather than its cause" (123). Through proximity, whiteness renders difference (phenotypical and otherwise) into sameness.

White people are thus rendered white by their inherited proximity and thus, their orientation towards and around whiteness, which represents for Ahmed a "bodily and social orientation that extends what is within reach" (129). Fanon, as we saw, is stopped from being able to move freely towards the objects and tasks around him, made instead into an object among other objects. Whiteness, by contrast, reproduces and thus extends *itself* by enabling the white subject's capacity to extend *themselves* and reach towards objects and goals, while also extending, and rendering available, those objects towards them. Such extensions are both actualized and naturalized through the work of habit as "dispositions and tendencies, acquired by the frequent repetition of an act" (130). As with likeness and proximity, what are, in fact, repetitive actions and habits take on the appearance of identities. "[T]he repetition of the tending *toward* is what identity 'coheres' *around*," argues Ahmed, and thus, "to describe whiteness as a habit, as second nature, is to suggest that whiteness is what bodies do, where the body takes the shape of the action" (129; emphasis in original). Such habits, finally, shape and *racialize* the space in which they take place, and such spaces, in turn, welcome, enable, and naturalize the habits of such bodies. Whiteness, on this view, manifests itself as bodily comfort, as being at home in one's body and in one's space. "To be comfortable," says Ahmed,

> is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins . . . White bodies are comfortable as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape. (134)

Whiteness capacitates such bodies in their ability to extend themselves and to reach their intended objects, rendering such objects reachable for them. "We can hence redescribe the phenomenology of the 'I can'," Ahmed concludes,

> as a phenomenology of whiteness. Such a phenomenology, in other words, *describes the ease with which the white body extends itself in the world through how it is orientated toward objects and others*. (Ahmed 2006, 138; emphasis in original)

Whiteness is thus that which goes unnoticed, but which renders white subjects mobile and comfortable in the (white) world.

We find a similar, albeit more violent, phenomenological account of whiteness in Guenther's (2019) essay, "Seeing Like a Cop." Whereas Ahmed frames whiteness around notions of sameness and reproduction, Guenther—who grounds her argument in the relationship between property, gentrification, and policing—conceives of whiteness in terms of expansion and protection with all their violent genealogies and implications. Following Cheryl Harris's (1993) groundbreaking article, Guenther aims to provide "a critical phenomenology of whiteness as property and as collective investment in state violence to protect white property interests" (2019, 191). For Guenther, this entails thinking about whiteness not just as a "piece" of property, but more specifically, as a "property right," one which permits and incentivizes the violent policing of whiteness and its various entitlements against perceived threats. Whiteness so conceived represents a *sociogenic force*, "a material, historical power to generate and intensify particular forms of social being, including individuated subjects and the spatiotemporal order that Fanon calls 'the white world'" (192). Notably, Guenther clarifies that such an analysis is not the same as and does not entail a phenomenological description of "the thoughts, feelings, perceptions, or desires of white people, understood as individual subjects" (191). And like Ahmed, Guenther moves beyond an idea of whiteness as a simple identity, as something that a given individual *is*. Instead, Guenther conceives of the relationship between the white subject and whiteness as one of *investment*. Whiteness, as a sociogenic force, protects and expands itself as a property right, and produces white subjects who constitute themselves as white through their investment in and protection of this property. As stated above, such an investment manifests itself in the complicity and active participation in the policing and expansion of whiteness, in collective forms of state violence, and the more individual and habitual practices of "seeing like a cop."

Guenther (2019) moves on to a closer examination of this mutually supporting and mutually beneficial relationship, of this investment and its returns. She asks,

> how are white people—even or especially white people in relatively marginalized positions with respect to gender, class, and ethnicity —recruited to police the boundaries of a social order that promises advancement in return for complicity with racist state violence? What forms of emotional and material investment does this recruitment demand as a condition for feelings of safety, belonging, and propriety?

Here, Guenther turns to and reverses Fanon's account, asking "to what extent might the basic structures of Fanon's analysis help us understand how whiteness as property (re)produces the lived experiences of those who think they are white?" (198). We recall,

once again, Fanon's account of the corporeal schema: its interruption and its breakdown in a white world. How, then, would a *white* corporeal schema operate within a world made for it? Guenther argues,

> while the white world disrupts the corporeal schema of those who are racialized as black, it supports the coherence of white corporeal schemas and facilitates their operative intentionality, or their implicit sense of "I can." (2019, 198)

Thus, as in Ahmed's account, Guenther's critical phenomenology of whiteness conceives of the white subject's relationship to whiteness primarily—indeed, *exclusively*—as an enabling and capacitating relationship. Guenther thus states,

> the naturalized, normalized schema of white embodiment posits an ideal of unimpeded capacity—a fluid passage from *I want* to *I can* and *I do*–that facilitates a sense of comfort and ease in a wide range of different situations and spaces. It even fosters a sense of *entitlement* to feel comfortable and capable in the (white) world. (199; emphasis in original)

The white subject thus invests in and polices whiteness as property, in the ideal of unimpeded capacity, and is thus enabled to attain this ideal. It not only produces the white world, but furthermore, it promises the white subject that the world is theirs—and indeed, fulfills this promise.

## II. WHITE FAILURE

But can such promises ever fail to materialize? Can the white subject fail to meet the norms and ideals of unimpeded capacity and the feelings of belonging and security constitutive of the white world? I think it's clear that the answer is yes. We need not look far for examples of failure, despair, misery, violence, and death among and between white subjects, even as they maintain their privileged position in a white world. Here, I want to show that both Ahmed's and Guenther's analyses fail to adequately address such failures as well as the gaps and contradictions between white subjects and whiteness. To the extent that Ahmed and Guenther acknowledge such contradictions, I show, they either export the contradiction to a different category—such as gender, sexuality, or class—so as to maintain the purity of their accounts of whiteness, or, in Guenther's case, misidentify its character, and thus miscast it as a primarily *moral* contradiction rather than a material one.

Following the spatial language of her account, Ahmed (2006) thinks about the inheritance and accumulation of resources as an inheritance of *behinds*, in the sense that these resources—which are often naturalized and invisible—make possible certain orientations and certain possibilities. Thus, "*we accumulate 'behinds,' just as what is 'behind' is an effect of past accumulations*" (137; emphasis in original). We can think about class differences, even

between white people, as differences between "behinds," which make possible their greater accumulation. "If you inherit class privilege," she says, "then you have more resources behind you, which can be converted into capital, into what can 'propel' you forward and up" (Ahmed 2006, 137). Those who do not have class privilege cannot as easily accumulate capital and move forward *or* up as whiteness tends to. Thus, whiteness here appears not to be enough to achieve success or upward mobility, and not every white subject will be equally comfortable in a white world. Ahmed explains:

> Becoming white as an institutional line is closely related to the vertical promise of class mobility: you can move up only by approximating the habitus of the white bourgeois body . . . Moving up requires inhabiting such a body, or at least approximating its style, whilst your capacity to inhabit such a body depends upon what is behind you. Pointing to this loop between the "behind" and the "up" is another way of describing how hierarchies get reproduced over time. (137–38)

Here, we can begin to think about whiteness a bit differently, for we are faced with the possibility of a white subject who is excluded from, or who fails to approximate, the "white bourgeois body," and thus fails to receive the upward mobility promised by whiteness. In what sense is their experience characterized by an unimpeded "I can?" But before we can ponder such questions for too long, Ahmed explains in a note that "this is why white working-class bodies can be seen as not 'really' white" (198n19). Indeed, as she goes to argue, we may think of such white bodies who do not meet the norms of whiteness, and who fail to move "up," as bodies whose whiteness is called into question. Thus, she says,

> we could say that bodies "move up" when their whiteness is not in dispute . . . when somebody's whiteness is in dispute they come under "stress," which in turn threatens bodily motility or what the body "can do." (138)

What I hope to highlight here is a logic whereby the category of whiteness—which we saw is characterized by its motility and capacity—must remain pure and coherent, such that any account of failures and contradictions internal to it must be overlooked, or in this case, must be externalized, such that it becomes a contradiction *between* whiteness and some other category, in this case, class. In such cases, the white working-class subject fails or suffers qua working-class, rather than qua white, and in his or her failure to reproduce whiteness, the white subject *fails* to be white, and thereby, puts their whiteness in dispute. Insofar as he is white, he does not fail, and insofar as he fails, he ceases to be white. Thus, whiteness maintains its internal coherence and its promise.

Guenther's (2019) account is in my view much closer to theorizing the contradictions immanent to whiteness, which suggest themselves throughout her analysis. She speaks, for instance, of white subjects' investment in whiteness as a choice to "*continue to invest in whiteness as property* in the face of multiple tensions, disruptions, and contradictions" such as their relative marginalization along non-racial lines (194; emphasis in original). And, as she clarifies during her analysis of a white corporeal schema, her view does not

imply "that nothing can ever go wrong for white people, or that we never experience any friction between ourselves and the world that has been constructed to serve our interests" (Ahmed 2006, 199). "Rather," she explains, "it means that the *logic* of whiteness as property normalizes the smooth coordination of (masculine, straight, middle-class) white bodies with a spatiotemporal context that affirms and supports their existence" (199; emphasis in original).[1] Guenther gives us room to think about the gaps and the friction between white subjects and the norms and promises of whiteness. Things do in fact go wrong for white people, but the *logic* of whiteness as property tends towards motility, capacity, and success. Much like Ahmed, furthermore, Guenther argues that whiteness alone is not enough, that the promise of motility is tied to a broader intersection of categories: whiteness, masculinity, straightness, and a middle-class status. But here again, the white subject's failure would result from their poverty or their queerness, and whiteness would always have a protective and supportive power, standing as a bulwark against these deficiencies. Thus, following Harris, Guenther (2019) explains that "whiteness has continued to function as a property interest that protects white people from being at the bottom of a social hierarchy, even if they are otherwise marginalized on the basis of class, gender, sexuality, or ability." Notably, though, protection here does not mean success or comfort in an unqualified sense. "An investment in whiteness as property may not guarantee financial stability to individual white people," she explains, "but it does pay what W. E. B. Du Bois calls the "'public and psychological wages' of whiteness" (191). An account of Du Bois's famous concept is beyond our scope,[2] but suffice it to say that Guenther's invocation of the concept speaks to a more complicated view of whiteness and its promises than Ahmed's view, one in which whiteness helps stabilize (and not always in material terms) the experience of the white subject without fully overcoming the gaps and failures immanent to whiteness, and without such failures putting the subject's whiteness in dispute.

Guenther follows these gaps and tensions until she reaches, in her final remarks, what she finds to be a "fundamental contradiction" generated by "the corporeal schema of whiteness as property" between two divergent tendencies felt by the white subject who invests in their whiteness: a tendency towards enclosure, and a tendency towards expansion (199). Like the Black subject in Fanon's analysis, Guenther argues that the white subject is also constructed as an object in and by the white world and through the operation of a racial epidermal schema. Yet this objecthood is not the source of immobility and incapacity, as it is for Fanon, but rather a property relation, the white subject constituting a form of "self-owning property that inherits and invests in its own value" (201). And yet, it is this relationship of self-ownership and self-valorization that produces a contradiction in the experience of the white subject. Guenther states that "the spatiotemporal effect

1 It is not clear, however, why Guenther and Ahmed focus on "middle-class bodies" as normative rather than "ruling class" ones, especially given that Ahmed also refers to such bodies as "bourgeois" (2006, 137–38).

2 It is important to clarify that Du Bois does not imply that these so-called "public and psychological wages" are equal to, or make up for a lack of, financial stability (1998, 700). Rather, Du Bois theorizes these "wages" as a political tool through which the former plantocracy recruited poor whites in the postbellum South into a cross-class alliance to foreclose any cross-racial solidarity between workers and former slaves. This analysis in fact points us to a central tension within whiteness, and to the fact that whiteness cannot be theorized apart from a materialist analysis of capitalism.

of this construction is not imprisonment," as it is for Fanon, "but rather self-seclusion in a securitized zone that is served and protected by racist state violence," and which nevertheless continues to expand (Guenther 2019, 201). The white subject thus experiences a contradiction between the desire for security and for expansion: "How can I both secure my investment and also take the risks that will allow my investment to grow?" (202).

But, as we know, in a capitalist society people do indeed protect *and* expand their property. And though the attempt to expand might expose one to risks and render them less secure, there is nothing logically or empirically contradictory between these two desires. Thus, it is not a *material* contradiction which Guenther offers, that is, a contradiction between the promises of whiteness and what it ends up delivering. Rather the contradiction is experienced in *other* areas of the white subject's experience as a result of this pursuit of secure and expansive property—in this case, in their capacity for social and ethical relations. Guenther thus explains that

> while there are many material benefits to be drawn from this construction, and while the white world is structured to normalize and incentivize the fusion of personhood with property, whiteness is a (very privileged) form of "corporeal malediction" in the sense that it degrades others and diminishes its own social capacity for ethical connection and community. (201)

The "fundamental contradiction" generated by whiteness is thus a kind of moral contradiction, and this malediction does not represent a failure for whiteness but is rather the price it pays for its success. And this conception of whiteness and its contradiction, finally, has clear and important implications. For Guenther, the choice to invest in, or to divest from, whiteness is a *moral* choice which white people must make. It is a choice between property, security, and belonging, on one hand, and humanity—both the humanity of oppressed non-white people and white people themselves—on the other (194).

Thus, in Ahmed's and Guenther's critical phenomenological accounts, whiteness—as orientation, habitus, sociogenic force, and property—constitutes the world as a white world, made for the comfort and movement—the "I can"—of its white subjects, whom it forms and recruits into maintaining, protecting, and expanding it at the cost of the exclusion and domination of non-white people. Though there are tensions within whiteness, especially in its relations to other social categories and identities—such as class, gender, sexuality, and ability—whiteness remains coherent and materially beneficial for its subjects. The white subject's failure to attain or to achieve the sense of being at ease in the world, which whiteness promises, primarily represents a failure to be a proper white subject. If there is any hope for the abolition of white supremacy, then it lies in part on white people's willingness to make a moral choice: continue to reap the guaranteed benefits of whiteness or surrender them and stand with its victims.

While these accounts are insightful and helpful, they are, I argue, one-sided insofar as they export or displace the tensions and contradictions, which are immanent to whiteness, thus isolating the "logic" of whiteness—its ideal and its promise—from its

concrete operations and from the lived experience of the subjects it produces. But for this reason, these accounts remain incomplete. To equate, as Ahmed does, a phenomenology of the "I can" with a phenomenology of whiteness is ultimately to claim that classical phenomenology has already (albeit unbeknownst to itself) theorized whiteness, and that what is needed is simply to name and make apparent the whiteness that was previously latent. Similarly, in her clarification that she is focusing on whiteness as a sociogenic force rather than on the consciousness and experience of individual white subjects, Guenther points us to the insufficiency of her analysis and to what is yet to be done by a critical phenomenology of whiteness.

Yet we can already find the seeds of a more critical analysis in Ahmed's and Guenther's accounts. As we saw, Ahmed (2006) argues that the subject who fails to embody whiteness thereby fails to be white. But to take this analysis seriously is to realize that the threat of expulsion from whiteness is not incidental, but central to whiteness, structuring the white subject's relationship to it. At the same time, we must complicate the nature of this threat. In the same note in which she claims that the white working-class subject can be seen as not "really" white, Ahmed clarifies that nevertheless "the white working classes are not 'on the same line' as the black working classes" (198n19). That is, they can be seen as not "really" white, but not to such a degree that they truly become not-white. Thus, Ahmed's own account of the ease and mobility of whiteness cannot help but lead us to its inherent instability: to a white subject who must work to maintain their whiteness under the threat of expulsion, and to a space *within* whiteness for subjects who have failed to meet the norm of whiteness, white subjects who in some sense can be considered not "really" white in comparison to more successful white subjects.

Guenther does not deny that there are tensions and contradictions within whiteness, but ultimately locates them in what she takes to be the divergent tendencies towards security and expansion, and finally in the moral choice to invest in one's whiteness, in giving up one's humanity in exchange for the material and psychic benefits of whiteness. Yet, the account would seem to overflow the moral and voluntaristic framing that Guenther gives it here. For if, as Guenther argues, whiteness "diminishes its own social capacity for ethical connection and community," then this would also represent a diminution of its capacity to "partake in a transcendental intersubjectivity," that is, to constitute and to participate in a world in the first place (2019, 201; 2013, 34–35). The white corporeal schema that Guenther theorizes would thus operate contradictorily, generating a set of the capacities that would ultimately be the ground for their own diminution and undoing.

In a key moment towards the end of "Seeing Like a Cop," Guenther describes the "predicament" of whiteness as that of "the parasite that misperceives itself as a host: even as I extract wealth from others to strengthen my own fortifications, I *continue* to feel insecure" (2019, 202; emphasis added). But this undermines any simple equation of whiteness and the white subject's experience with a sense of comfort or ease, with the motility of the "I can." Here we must take seriously Guenther's phrasing: whiteness is not originally comfortable and then comes to feel insecure, any more than the police (or the property owner) merely react to external and contingent threats. Rather—and despite the world it has amassed for itself—whiteness is, from the beginning, insecure, anxiously seeking out and generating the

threat from which it must protect itself. Thus, behind the ideal that it posits for itself, we find a more complex and ultimately more dangerous truth: that whiteness is always already in crisis, that it is never enough.

## III. SEALED IN THEIR WHITENESS

As I have shown, Ahmed's and Guenther's respective accounts collapse, to different degrees, the gaps and contradictions between whiteness and the white subject, casting the latter as the embodiment of the ideal generated by the former. Ultimately, however, these accounts betray the instability of the white subject's position within the white world, which continues to undermine the ability to embody and fulfill the promise of whiteness. But we must still think through what this apparent instability tells us about whiteness as a quasi-transcendental structure, its functions, and how critical phenomenology might help in theorizing it. Here, by way of conclusion, I want to return to Fanon, whose work, read more expansively than critical phenomenologists have tended to, can help us to conceive of whiteness in terms of both its privileged position *and* the instability and contradictions immanent to this position.

We began with a brief overview of Fanon's critical engagement with the phenomenological concept of the corporeal schema, which has served as a model for much work in critical phenomenology and certainly for Ahmed's and Guenther's analyses of whiteness. Fanon provides us with both a critique of the latent whiteness of traditional analyses of the corporeal schema, which in its ideal (white) form cannot properly account for the lived experience of the Black subject, and furthermore, with his own phenomenological analysis of this experience, which in a white world is always fraught and contradictory. But as I stated at the outset, the issue is not that Ahmed and Guenther adapt this approach for an account of whiteness, but rather, that they do so insufficiently. That is, because they begin from *within* Fanon's account of Blackness, Ahmed and Guenther cannot help but merely invert his categories when accounting for the lived experience of the white subject. If the Black subject is objectified, fragmented, and arrested, then the white subject must be the ideal subject, must be whole and mobile. The Black subject stands out in, and has their corporeal schema interrupted by, the white world, while the white subject is coterminous with it and recedes into it; the Black subject is pathological while the white subject embodies the norm. Although both accounts depart from a dichotomy between the "I can" and the "I cannot," which is taken to capture the opposition between Blackness and whiteness, and between the experiences they generate for their subjects, ultimately, they continue to reproduce this dichotomy under different conceptual guises.

Instead of deriving a conception of whiteness from Fanon's conception of Blackness, we should look at what he himself says about whiteness. This requires that we go beyond the fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* (which philosophers have tended to overemphasize

in their readings),[3] and especially beyond Fanon's engagement with phenomenology, towards psychopathology. Indeed, the dichotomous view of whiteness and Blackness along the lines of the "I can"/"I cannot" appears as the logical result of centering the fifth chapter of the text. There—precisely in an analysis of the lived experience of the Black subject—the white subject appears primarily in the form of the white gaze which assails and objectifies the Black subject from a place of power and stability. Yet as Robert Bernasconi explains,

> the sixth chapter ["The Negro and Psychopathology"] goes beyond the account of lived experience found in the fifth chapter to address the "unreflected" mechanisms that lay behind the experiences of individuals described there. Accounts of the lived experience of Blacks are indispensable to an understanding of the impact of a racist society, but, however genuine these accounts may be, they are incomplete to the extent that they do not investigate the mechanism of the system that produced those experiences. (2020a, 390)

Thus, while a more systematic account of Fanon's own account of whiteness is beyond our scope, here it will suffice to show how he complicates the dichotomous view presented above (without thereby collapsing the opposition between white and Black subjects).

Fanon's purpose throughout the book is to investigate the alienation and the contradictions immanent to Black existence in a colonial society within which subjecthood is coterminous with whiteness, that is, to track the Black non-subject's failed attempts to become a subject in a world that has always already foreclosed this possibility. Though Fanon presents an intractable and hierarchical opposition between the white and Black subject throughout the text— what he at one point calls a relation of transcendence between them (1967, 138)[4]—the white subject's position within it is not characterized primarily in terms of comfort or capacity. Rather, it is a relation within which both subjects find themselves alienated, and thus, in which both experience what Alia Al-Saji calls, "the pathological effects and affects of racialization" (2021, 180).[5] As Fanon explains in a key passage in the text's introduction: "The white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness. We shall seek to ascertain the directions of this dual narcissism and the motivations that inspire it" (1967, 9).

The fact that both Black and white subjectivity appear here to be sealed in their positions need not, indeed cannot, lead us to equate the experiences or struggles of Black and white subjects in a white supremacist world. Rather, it confirms the fact that race

[3] See Robert Bernasconi (2020b) for an account that posits the sixth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* as central to understanding the text as a whole.

[4] See Jesús Luzardo (2023) for an account of Fanon's use of "transcendence" in this moment in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

[5] It would be productive to think through this account of racialization and its pathological effects alongside the work of Karen Ng, who equates ideologies with *social pathologies*, and defines them as "at once social practices and forms of rationality that distort the relation between life and self-consciousness and block the full actualization of human reason and freedom" (2015, 393).

itself, as an always violent colonial formation, produces a variety of contradictory and pathological forms of life for all who are subject to it. Thus, as Al-Saji explains,

> if colonization and its aftermaths touch our psyches and affect our bodily selves, then, in societies built on the legacies of colonialism, slavery, or settlement, both racializing and racialized subjects will experience alienation, *albeit in structurally different ways*. (2021, 178–79; emphasis added)

In what sense, then, is the white subject alienated within this structure? At the root of this alienation, and of whiteness itself, is a pervasive and unconscious anti-Blackness anchored by "the Negro [as] a phobogenic object, a stimulus to anxiety" (Fanon 1967, 151). But while this negrophobia might manifest as a reaction to the presence of actual Black people in the world, what is more important here is the internalization of "the Negro" as myth by the white unconscious. "At its extreme," explains Fanon, "the myth of the Negro, the idea of the Negro, can become the decisive factor of an authentic alienation" (204). Thus, while both Ahmed and Guenther articulate this relationship of repulsion and fear of the Black subject by the white subject, the former is conceived mainly as an *external* threat to the (previously stable) comfort of whiteness, which must therefore be policed and protected against. And while this is indeed how the white subject consciously experiences their negrophobia, we find here that the call, as they say, is coming from inside the house, destabilizing the white subject from within.

As Fanon (1967) shows throughout his analysis in the sixth chapter, Blackness, as phobogenic object, serves as the depositary for a variety of anxieties and fantasies: hatred, fear, desire, identification, envy, etc. (179). And this relation manifests in a variety of contradictory and pathological presentations, which do not hew to the dichotomous views discussed above. We find a striking example in Fanon's brief discussion of the Southern writer Joel Chandler Harris, best known for his Uncle Remus stories. He writes:

> It was the very essence of the man that made it impossible for him to exist in the "natural" way of the Negro. No one had barred him from it; it was just impossible for him. Not prohibited, but unrealizable. And it is because the white man feels himself frustrated by the Negro that he seeks in turn to frustrate the black, binding him with prohibitions of all kinds. And here again the white man is the victim of his unconscious. (175)

Here, then, we see how Fanon complicates any simple identification of whiteness with ease, comfort, and with the ideal of unimpeded capacity to be found in classical phenomenology. We see, too, that for Fanon the white subject is no less alienated and no less pathological by virtue of her supremacy, for this position is grounded in and subtended by a negrophobic fixation to which both white and Black subjects are differently beholden. "This work," Fanon declares,

> represents the sum of the experiences and observations of seven years; regardless of the area I have studied, one thing has struck me: The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation. (Fanon 1967, 60)

Thus, Guenther (2019) is right to say that the white subject is also, in her own way, objectified through a racial epidermal schema, which constitutes her as white—though objectified in such a way that does not negate her status as subject. But, as I've shown, this process of objectification—despite diminishing the subject's capacity for community—is still cast as otherwise unambiguously beneficial and capacitating for the white subject. But what Fanon's analysis shows us is that whiteness can be both beneficial and alienating, insofar as it benefits white subjects *within* a broader structure that tends to immiserate and consume them. Thus, he clarifies early on in *Black Skin, White Masks*: "I am speaking here on the one hand of alienated (mystified) Blacks, and on the other of no less alienated (mystifying and mystified) Whites" [*de Noirs aliénés (mystifiés), et d'autre part de Blancs non moins aliénés (mystificateurs et mystifiés*)] (29; 1952, 23; my translation). In this sense, whiteness is not only morally, but more importantly, *structurally* fraught. This inherent instability—which whiteness itself both perpetuates *and* attempts to mitigate—is part of what renders the white subject recruitable to its purposes in the first place. The failures and contradictions of whiteness are thus not exceptions to the rule of its benefits, but rather, central to its operations and its ability to rule our world. The experiences, behaviors, and actions of white people—who are increasingly militant and violent in their protection of national and global white supremacy—thus cannot be sufficiently described and explained through a framework that primarily attributes to them comfort, ease, and motility.

Rather, just as Fanon uncovered the contradictions specific to Black embodiment in a white supremacist world, and articulated the materially grounded psychopathological mechanisms which generate them, the task of a critical phenomenology of whiteness must be to describe and analyze the specific shapes that the relationship between white subjects and whiteness can take. A relationship which may be simultaneously or alternately supportive, capacitating, disappointing, and frustrating, but has always been pathological and unstable, and is always, either latently or manifestly, in crisis on an exponentially-increasing scale. Critical phenomenology can deepen our understanding of this relationship precisely by analyzing the *experiences and subjectivities generated by its contradictions*: the experience of failing to receive that which you feel entitled to *qua white*, of the loss of something that appeared promised by virtue of one's whiteness, or the experience of inadequacy—of *lack*—that inevitably awaits behind every fulfillment of this promise. Such an analysis would thus take us beyond the realm of motility and comfort, of success, of the "I can," and make available for analysis a more expansive, generative, and explanatory set of concepts and experiences: failure, loss, insecurity, frustration, disappointment, melancholy, resentment, nostalgia. Such concepts will help us to better understand the structures and operations of our present white supremacist world, though it might prove sobering in disclosing what it would take to change it and make us more pessimistic about the future to come.

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# A PRAXIS OF FACTICITY FOR CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

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The emergent field of critical phenomenology is perhaps best characterized by two interrelated aims: first, to rethink phenomenology as a method of social critique and, second, to envision new possibilities for political action, activism, and emancipatory praxis in response to this. There has been much debate about the first tendril of this project, leading scholars to interrogate the scope and phenomenological basis of its critical method.[1] This has proven indispensable for establishing critical phenomenology as a philosophical endeavor that offers a rigorous and distinctive approach to social critique. My aim is to suggest that the same methodological rigor, clarification, and grounding must now be given to the second tendril of this project—namely, its call for action, activism, and emancipatory praxis.

Lisa Guenther describes this second tendril as "the most important for critical phenomenology" (2021, 17). Critical phenomenology, she argues, does not simply describe structures of oppression but also offers "a way of approaching political activism" (2020, 15). While Guenther most explicitly connects critical phenomenology to transformative political praxis, she is one among many who suggest that critical phenomenology must go beyond mere description to intervene in oppressive quasi-transcendental structures like white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler colonialism.[2] The purpose of this paper is neither to deny the urgency of the calls to action that Guenther and others issue nor to question whether critical phenomenology has relevance to the sphere of action. Yet, I maintain that if critical phenomenology is to offer a distinctive approach to praxis, then it must undertake phenomenological inquiry into the conditions that make transformative political action possible in the first place. By developing the scope, limits,

[1] See Gayle Salamon (2020), Johanna Oksala (2023), and Lisa Guenther (2021).

[2] See Martina Ferrari (2020), Duane Davis (2020), Gail Weiss et al. (2020), and Mérédith Laferté-Coutu (2021).

and responsibilities of action that such an analysis entails, critical phenomenology can do more than merely issue calls to dismantle oppressive structures. It can also establish a unique method for understanding these calls and tempering the impulse to issue them uncritically.

In an effort to ground critical phenomenology's method of social critique more rigorously, Johanna Oksala (2023) has emphasized the methodological import of Edmund Husserl's *epoché*, turning to Simone de Beauvoir to show how his reduction can be modified and appropriated to this end. I wish to do something similar in the context of critical phenomenology's calls to action. Yet, rather than drawing on transcendental phenomenology, I maintain that the resources for grounding these calls are better found in existential phenomenology and, specifically, in Martin Heidegger's factical turn in phenomenology. With this, I argue that Hannah Arendt's critical appropriation of Heidegger's notion of facticity in the context of political action offers a decisive example of how this factical turn can inform a rigorously critical and distinctly phenomenological method of praxis.

In his early formulation of the project of fundamental ontology, Heidegger turns to the notion of facticity to show that when we look inward to understand the structures of experience, we do not find a conscious subject whose transcendental characteristics can be discerned in abstraction from its involvement in the world. Instead, we find only that we exist in a factically limited and situated context and that this existence, no less than our inquiry into it, is always already prefigured by the world in which we find ourselves (Heidegger 2010, 11, 56–57). Many in critical phenomenology have drawn on related insights in existential phenomenology to problematize Husserl's *epoché*.[3] Yet, what is most significant about Heidegger's analysis is not that it questions the *epoché* but that it shifts the task of phenomenology altogether. Heidegger is led by his discovery of facticity to insist that phenomenology should be guided not by an attempt to think of ways to escape or mitigate these factical limits, but by an effort to attend phenomenologically to the fact that this is something we can never do. Phenomenology, he thinks, thus gives way to a "hermeneutics of facticity" that consists not in finding a way out of one's factical limits and the interpretive circle it creates, but rather in unending interpretation that enables one "to get into [the circle] in the right way" (148).

While Arendt is among the most incisive critics of Heidegger, her analysis of political action nevertheless takes seriously this foundational phenomenological insight. Whereas Heidegger shifts the task of phenomenology toward a hermeneutics of facticity, I argue that Arendt develops what might be described as a praxis of facticity that critical phenomenology is well positioned to adopt. To demonstrate this, I consider her account of the irreversibility and unpredictability of human action in *The Human Condition*, as well as her analysis of what it means, in light of this, to understand and resist oppressive political structures like totalitarianism in "Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)." Arendt, like Guenther, recognizes the urgency of action in the face of systemic oppression. Yet, her analysis indicates that if critical phenomenology's calls to

[3] See Alia Al-Saji (2014), Guenther (2021), and Mariana Ortega (2022).

action are to remain properly phenomenological and not merely ideological, its method must attend to the fact that while it may be necessary to act, human action is irredeemably vulnerable to reinforcing, extending, and recreating the very structures that it seeks to abolish. For Arendt, then, the task is not to get out of this predicament but to think praxis in terms of our responsibility to confront it directly in political life.

While Guenther and others take seriously this insight in the context of social critique, its implications for issuing calls to action have yet to be fully articulated. As Mariana Ortega (2022) has argued, this omission is problematic as it risks obscuring the situatedness of political praxis and imposing a logic of purity on oppressed and marginalized groups. For Ortega, what is missing from these accounts is a notion of "critical criticality" that attends to the ways in which even the most critical projects and political aims remain vulnerable to extending oppressive logics (24–25). By considering how Arendt utilizes the factical turn in phenomenology to initiate her inquiry into transformative political praxis, my aim is to offer an important nuance to the calls to action in critical phenomenology that is responsive to this concern.

## I. THE PRAXICAL TURN IN CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

Critical phenomenology is distinguished by its openness to a variety of methodologies and traditions, and as an emergent field, it would be overly reductive to suggest that it could be defined along singular, unified lines. Mérédith Laferté-Coutu explains, however, that while there continues to be much debate about what critical phenomenology is, "a consensus has nevertheless emerged: this 'critical turn' involves a commitment to something more than description, namely, to a practice with specific, situated ends" (2021, 89). The critical turn in phenomenology is therefore often and increasingly understood as a praxical turn, giving rise to the question of what it means to issue calls to action from within a critical phenomenological framework (90; Weiss et al. 2020, xiv).

As Laferté-Coutu notes, two divergent perspectives have emerged in response to this question. The first is epitomized by Lisa Guenther who insists that critical phenomenology should become a transformative political praxis. The second comes into view in the work of Alia Al-Saji, who casts suspicion on the transformative potential of liberatory praxis. Guenther, for her part, takes critical phenomenology to distinguish itself from classical phenomenology by focusing not merely on the transcendental structures of experience but also on what she describes as quasi-transcendental structures—structures like white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler colonialism, which, though historically contingent, nevertheless shape the meaning and materiality of experience in particular lifeworlds (2021, 12). Guenther maintains, however, that the mere identification and description of these quasi-transcendental structures is not enough. Instead, she says:

> Critical phenomenology must go beyond a description of oppression, developing concrete strategies for dismantling oppressive structures and creating or amplifying different, less oppressive, and more liberatory

> ways of Being-in-the-world. In other words, the ultimate goal of critical phenomenology is not just to interpret the world, but also to change it. (Guenther 2020, 16)

Guenther thus interprets critical phenomenology as a political praxis that works to transform and abolish oppressive quasi-transcendental structures. While Al-Saji agrees with Guenther that structures like white supremacy demand liberatory praxis, she disagrees that critical phenomenology should be guided by the belief that this praxis can transform the world (Laferté-Coutu 2021, 89–90). Al-Saji follows Frantz Fanon's analysis of the aporetic structure of liberation, resisting the call to make critical phenomenology a transformative praxis and arguing instead for a "phenomenology of racialized affect that proposes to dwell on, even touch, as Fanon writes, the wounds of colonialism" (90).[4]

Both perspectives offer important insights on the extent to which it is possible to intervene in the quasi-transcendental structures that critical phenomenology interrogates through its method of social critique. Yet, before considering whether liberatory praxis is transformative or aporetic, a more fundamental phenomenological question nevertheless remains unanswered. This question concerns the conditions under which these calls to action, activism, and transformative praxis become possible in the first place. Without answering this question, it remains unclear how critical phenomenology can become a distinctive method of political praxis in its own right and not just a method of social critique that assumes its praxical turn.

Significant work has already been done to address a parallel concern in the context of critical phenomenology's method of social critique. Oksala, for instance, has argued that while critical phenomenology should be defined by its philosophical method of critique and not merely by the topics it covers, it has not done enough to ground this method. In Oksala's view, critical phenomenologists have tended to set aside too quickly Husserl's phenomenological reduction, leaving the field without a "credible philosophical method for investigating *how* the social world fundamentally constitutes experience" (2023, 140; emphasis in original).[5] She maintains that while it may be necessary to challenge the universal and essentialist assumptions of Husserl's eidetic reduction, the *epoché* remains an indispensable methodological step for critical phenomenology. By initiating a radical break with naïve realism, the *epoché* resists naturalist assumptions about phenomena like race and gender while exposing the "historical, intersubjective, and perspectival nature of all experience" (140). Oksala then turns to Beauvoir to show how this methodological step can be deployed in the service of social critique. She explains that the phenomenological reduction is a precondition of Beauvoir's critique of femininity insofar as it remains grounded in the idea that "the intersubjective conditions constitutive of experience can never be rendered totally transparent and explicit. . . . This means accepting the always

[4] Al-Saji's argument against Guenther appears in her unpublished lecture courses from the 2019 *Collegium Phaenomenologicum*, which is what Laferté-Coutu is referencing to distinguish their perspectives. For Al-Saji's phenomenology of racialized affect, see Al-Saji (2014).

[5] Oksala further problematizes these rejections for overlooking Husserl's later writings on intersubjectivity (2023, 140–41). See also Guenther (2013).

fragmentary, fallible, and preliminary character of any social critique concerning ourselves" (Oksala 2023, 144). Oksala thus insists that if critical phenomenology allows the reduction to initiate its methodological process, it can establish itself as a rigorous method of radical social critique.

Whereas this kind of methodological inquiry has proven indispensable for grounding the critical turn in phenomenology, it is now necessary to do the same in the context of its praxical turn. Yet, rather than drawing on Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, the resources for grounding critical phenomenology's method of praxis are perhaps better found in existential phenomenology and, specifically, in the factical turn in phenomenology as it is initiated by Heidegger and appropriated in the context of political action by Arendt.[6] Significantly, Arendt's appropriation of this factical turn takes seriously in the context of action an insight already present in critical phenomenology—namely, that social critique is a situated and interested interrogation of power that is always already implicated in the very structures it interrogates (Guenther 2021, 11–12). Yet, as central as this insight is for defining its method of social critique, it tends either to be left behind in the context of action or treated as evidence that it is necessary to go beyond phenomenology to think the possibilities for emancipatory praxis.

We see this, for instance, in Guenther's (2021) essay, "Six Senses of Critique for Critical Phenomenology," where she recognizes the centrality of this insight in the context of social critique without fully articulating its implications for political praxis. Here, Guenther argues that critical phenomenology's method of social critique must be directed toward one's own critical concepts as much as it is the quasi-transcendental structures it identifies as oppressive. In her view, critical phenomenology is best understood as "a practice of *immanent critique*," whereby one is moved to think critically by a particular relation to what is given as well as the history in which one is implicated (14; emphasis in original). This, however, does not mean that critical phenomenology merely attends to particular contexts and situations. Beyond this, it must proceed from the assumption that "there is no outside to capitalism, heteropatriarchy, or colonialism from which to critique these structures and forces from a distance." Guenther thus insists that the method of social critique in critical phenomenology also requires self-critique, remaining open to its own horizonal limits in order to unlearn and transform sedimented habits of thought and being. She calls this "problematization," which does not simply critique and prescribe solutions to unjust structures but also critically engages "the very terms with which one formulates a question" (15). In the context of the prison industrial complex, for example, Guenther argues that problematization means more than the finite goal of shutting down carceral institutions. It also demands inquiry into the broader social and historical conditions that make such institutions possible in the first place.

Yet, while Guenther is clear that social critique requires problematization, she is less clear about what this means for issuing calls to action. Upon offering this analysis, Guenther turns quickly to praxis, stating that it is necessary to "dismantle the carceral,

[6] For more the relation of Heidegger's early writings to questions of praxis, see Steven Crowell (2013, 261–81).

capitalist, colonial, patriarchal, white supremacist logics that form the prison state's conditions of emergence" (Guenther 2021, 18). She then calls for a "praxis of freedom" that is "rooted in community organizing . . . explicitly oriented towards resistance, resurgence, emancipation, liberation, or some other way of trying to get (a little more) free" (17). To be sure, Guenther insists here and elsewhere that such a praxis must remain critical and imaginative, open to alternative possibilities for resistance, and responsive to the needs of particular communities (2013, 254–56). Yet, she does not undertake inquiry into the conditions that make transformative political praxis possible, nor does she consider what it means to issue calls to action if, by her own lights, there is no "outside" to one's social and historical situation and no pure objective perspective from which to issue these calls.[7]

Critical phenomenology is well positioned to address these questions and distinguish its approach to praxis accordingly. Without answering them, however, the field remains vulnerable to the criticism Mariana Ortega (2022) has raised regarding the dangers of obscuring the situatedness and fallibility of even the most well-intentioned political aims. Ortega raises this criticism in response to Guenther's (2022) essay "Abolish the World as We Know It." In this essay, Guenther draws on Denise Ferreira da Silva's abolitionist refusal of critique to argue that critical phenomenology should become an abolitionist praxis. In order to do this, however, Guenther suggests that critical phenomenology may have to abolish its own method of critique and perhaps even phenomenology itself. Following da Silva, Guenther rejects methods of critique rooted in the Kantian tradition that presuppose a universal, self-determining subject who reflects on and affirms its own ahistorical transcendental structure in the shape of "the world as we know it" (2022, 30). Guenther argues that da Silva's abolitionist praxis of Black feminist poethics, which issues a call to think beyond critique and perhaps even abolish it, is instructive for critical phenomenology insofar as its own indebtedness to the Kantian tradition of critique risks extending and reinforcing the world as we know it. Guenther thus asks: "What would it take for a praxis of phenomenology to become *abolitionist*, beyond and against the Kantian tradition of critique that phenomenology has inherited" (32; emphasis in original)? To this, she responds that critique must become a praxis that not only acknowledges the limits of the world as we know it but also refuses these limits by "traversing and transgressing the boundaries of space-time, flouting the law of necessitas, and signifying 'in the raw,' beyond the mediation of transcendental a priori categories" (38).

While da Silva's abolitionist praxis of Black feminist poethics is undoubtedly compelling, Ortega highlights a danger that arises from presuming that it is possible to refuse or overcome these limits in the way that Guenther suggests. This approach, Ortega explains, risks "[covering] up the complexity and multiplicity of experience, and a resurgent methodological abstraction from the very conditions that wound racialized beings and uphold dominant being's existence" (2022, 25). While Guenther acknowledges that certain quasi-transcendental structures like white supremacy cannot be bracketed entirely,

[7] Guenther comes close to doing this when she turns to Jarett Zigon's (2017) critical hermeneutics. Yet, she only emphasizes the way in which this contributes to opening horizons of possibility for political praxis (Guenther 2021, 19). She does not consider what it means for praxis that there is no objective perspective from which to issue calls to action.

Ortega turns to María Lugones to show that Guenther nevertheless remains vulnerable to reinscribing a logic of purity into her critical phenomenology of race by failing to "elaborate on the ways in which the bracketing is different for selves that are differently situated in the structure of white supremacy" (Ortega 2022, 23). That is, Ortega says: "To ask a marginalized, oppressed person of color to carry out such a suspension amounts to asking her to suspend her own body, which carries the wounds of coloniality as well as her history" (22). Ortega then turns to Guenther's discussion in "Abolish the World," arguing that while she welcomes Guenther's move toward the aesthetic, the same concern arises in the context of her approach to praxis. Ortega asks:

> How does critical phenomenology transform into an "abolitionist praxis of Black feminist poethics"? The question of the "who" returns again. Who is to perform this praxis? What affective tonality does it depend on? And . . . for whom are we doing what we are doing when we do critical phenomenology of race? (24–25)

What is missing from Guenther's account, Ortega thinks, is a practice of "critical criticality" that acknowledges how a logic of purity may remain present no matter how staunchly one refuses the limits of the world as we know it. Ortega says:

> In the face of the intransigency of the logic of purity, even within critical phenomenological projects, I call for the nurturing of an attitude and practice of *critical criticality* that takes seriously the possibility that even already critical and self-critical projects may contain traces of purity that need to be discovered and assessed in light of methodological commitments, explanatory aims, and praxical, political aims. (25; emphasis in original)

Guenther's own analysis of the situated nature of social critique raises the question of whether it is possible simply to refuse the situation, inheritance, and tradition to which one is beholden. Even in challenging the Kantian method of critique, Guenther seems to reaffirm the very method she seeks to abolish, a method which may very well extend the structures of oppression that constitute the world as we know it. So, given Ortega's criticism, perhaps the question is not about how critical phenomenology can escape, bracket off, or refuse these limits—a move that may be closer to Husserl than Guenther would like to admit—but about developing a method of praxis that confronts the fact that this is something we can never do.

Ortega is led from her analysis to say that "a critical impure phenomenological approach might suggest a movement to postphenomenology," and she, like da Silva, makes a compelling case for why a move beyond phenomenology may be necessary (2022, 25). Yet, if critical phenomenologists wish to develop an approach to praxis that remains rooted in a rigorous phenomenological framework, there are resources to do this without relinquishing their own insights into the situatedness of social critique. In what follows, I argue that Heidegger's factical turn in phenomenology has underappreciated methodological import in this regard insofar as it refuses the presumption that there will

come a day when critical criticality is no longer necessary. Arendt's critical appropriation of this factical turn in the context of political action demonstrates how this can initiate a methodological process for issuing calls to action that are oriented by, rather than evasive of, the intransigency of these logics of purity.

## II. HEIDEGGER'S FACTICAL TURN IN PHENOMENOLOGY

While there is much to be said about the development of Heidegger's notion of facticity throughout his corpus, my aim is merely to outline the basic structure of his early formulation of this concept, as it is here that he most directly connects the problem of facticity to the aims of phenomenological inquiry.[8] Heidegger's factical turn stems from his attempt to critically reconsider Husserl's phenomenological reduction, a critical reconsideration that many, from Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012) to Dan Zahavi (2017), have challenged as overly reductive of Husserl's project, especially in light of his later writings on intersubjectivity.[9] What is most important for our purposes, however, is not whether Heidegger succeeds in overcoming Husserl but how this factical turn repositions the task and critical weight of phenomenological inquiry.

Though Heidegger agrees with Husserl that the modern sciences have failed to account for the ground of their knowledge, his ontological rather than epistemological orientation leads him to suggest that the conditions for the possibility of scientific inquiry run deeper than the structures of consciousness, the transcendental ego, and its eidetic structures (Crowell 2013, 67–68). Instead, he believes that they are rooted in existence itself, and, specifically, in the structures that comprise human existence or Dasein. For Heidegger, then, the task of phenomenology is to understand these structures of existence, structures which have their basis in what he calls facticity (*Faktizität*).

Facticity, as Heidegger conceives of it in his early writings, refers to the fact that Dasein's existence is fundamentally constituted in and through the world, or the social and historical nexus of meaning, in which it finds itself (2010, 11, 56–57). There is nothing prior to or more original than this factically situated existence as this takes shape in Dasein's care (*Sorge*) or concern for the things and others with which it is involved. As Heidegger explains in his 1922 essay, "Indication of the Hermeneutical Situation," facticity is so fundamental that the very effort to step outside of factical life in order to achieve a clearer and more objective perspective on the world is conditioned by Dasein's pre-thematic understanding

[8] For more on Heidegger's development of the concept of facticity between 1917 and the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927, see Scott Campbell (2012; 2013), Leslie MacAvoy (2013), and John Kress (2006). For more on Heidegger's later move away from his hermeneutics of facticity, see Thomas Sheehan (2019; 2011).

[9] Though Merleau-Ponty is often paired with Heidegger in this regard, Zahavi notes how strange this is given that Merleau-Ponty himself did not take Heidegger to do more in *Being and Time* than "[explicate] . . . Husserl's notion of the lifeworld" (2017, 54; Merleau-Ponty 2012, xxi). For a defense of Heidegger's critical engagement with Husserl, see Crowell (2013).

of itself as burdened by its existence and the factical situation that constitutes it (Heidegger 2009, 38). That is, he says: "Factical life has a character of Being such that it finds itself difficult to bear. The most unmistakable manifestation of this is factical life's tendency toward making things easy for itself" (41). Even when we try to avoid it, facticity nevertheless remains conditioning of every attempt we make to understand ourselves and the world and is therefore the most proper object of phenomenological inquiry (40).

For Heidegger, this means that phenomenology must shift the emphasis of its methodological approach. As Steven Crowell explains:

> The understanding of being that makes ontological inquiry possible is not first of all a matter of what takes place in an individual mind but is, rather, an intelligibility that resides in the shared ontological practices prevalent at a particular historical moment . . . For Husserl, this entailed unacceptable relativism; for Heidegger, it is a necessary consequence of the fact that Dasein is "care" (*Sorge*) before it is reason. (2013, 68)

Heidegger maintains that phenomenology should not proceed as if it could abstract from this factical situation. Instead, it should become "a philosophical hermeneutic of facticity" that offers an "explicit interpretation of factical life" as this comes into view through Dasein's concrete involvement in the world (2009, 54). This, however, does not simply mean that phenomenology should inquire into concrete and situated experiences. Beyond this, phenomenology itself must begin from the assumption that even its own inquiry is beholden to these factical limits. In other words, Heidegger contends that phenomenology must "[make] its own beginning within its factical situation, doing so within an already given particular interestedness of factical life that first sustains the philosophical hermeneutic itself and that can never be completely eradicated" (54). He thus insists that phenomenology should not be guided by an attempt to escape or mitigate these factical limits, but should instead attend phenomenologically to the fact that this is something we can never do.

Heidegger gives further contour to the implications of his notion of facticity for phenomenological inquiry in his 1927 masterwork, *Being and Time*. Here, he makes explicit Dasein's existential constitution as being-in-the-world, clarifying how Dasein's involvement in its particular social and historical context conditions every understanding, inquiry, and interpretation it undertakes. Prior to any scientific or theoretical knowledge, Dasein already understands itself and its world even if this understanding has not yet come into view in a clear way. When things do become clear and intelligible, it is not because Dasein has achieved an objective perspective on the world that is no longer obscured by its factical situation. On the contrary, Heidegger says: "When something is understood but still veiled, it becomes unveiled [*Enthüllung*] by an act of appropriation that is always done under the guidance of a perspective which fixes that with regard to which what has been understood is to be interpreted" (2010, 145). That things come to appear in their

significance is a function not of having successfully bracketed off one's natural attitude but of already having the world and being involved in it in a certain way. He says:

> The interpretation of something as something is essentially grounded in fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception . . . every interpretation operates within the fore-structure which we characterized. Every interpretation which is to contribute some understanding must already have understood what is to be interpreted. (Heidegger 2010, 146–47)

In other words, as James Risser explains: "Interpretive explication takes place in relation to the antecedent forehaving, with the way in which life has been taken hold of in advance" (2000, 75).

Heidegger concedes that this poses a serious problem for achieving objectivity in the sciences. Scientific inquiry rests on the assumption that what counts as proof or evidence "must not already presuppose what its task is to found." He thus asks: "If interpretation always already has to operate within what is understood and nurture itself from this, how should it then produce scientific results without going in a circle" (2010, 147)? For the scientists, this interpretive circle appears vicious, violating the most elementary rules of logic and foreclosing the possibility of any kind of objective perspective on the objects of scientific inquiry. Heidegger maintains, however, that phenomenology should not follow the sciences in assuming that it is necessary to avoid this circle. Instead, it should question the assumption that this circle is vicious and ask why we seek to avoid it in the first place. He says:

> *To see the vitiosum in this circle and to look for ways to avoid it, even to "feel" that it is an inevitable imperfection, is to misunderstand understanding from the ground up*. It is not a matter of assimilating understanding and interpretation to a particular ideal of knowledge . . . Rather, the fulfillment of the fundamental conditions of possible interpretation lies *in not failing to recognize* beforehand the essential conditions of what is being done. (148; emphasis in original)

Rather than attempting to achieve even greater distance from this circle, Heidegger argues that phenomenological inquiry must instead take its point of departure from it. In other words: "What is decisive is not to get out of the circle, but to get in it in the right way" (148). With this, he reiterates his claim that phenomenology must become a hermeneutics of facticity that confronts directly the concrete situatedness of all inquiry, understanding, and interpretation. By locating facticity at the center of his analysis, Heidegger thus shifts the methodological weight of phenomenological inquiry, suggesting that it must not give into the naïve assumption that it is possible to escape the situatedness of factical life. Instead, it should initiate a methodological process that remains vigilant of the intransigency of these factical limits no less than the biases and prejudices that they entail.

Of course, we might wonder what, if anything, this has to do with developing a method of praxis in critical phenomenology. Afterall, Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity has

proven most influential for fields like philosophical hermeneutics, which focus principally on matters of knowledge, truth, and interpretation.[10] Moreover, Heidegger's involvement in National Socialism may caution against adopting any part of his project for the purposes of developing a method of praxis in critical phenomenology.[11] Yet, as Crowell argues, it is precisely because Heidegger refuses the possibility of a pre-social subject and centers his analysis on factical life that he opens the door to questions of action (2013, 262). Significantly, Arendt takes seriously the practical and political potential of Heidegger's analysis. Though she does not believe that he fully realizes this potential in *Being and Time*, she nevertheless allows the methodological import of his factical turn to guide her inquiry into transformative political action. In so doing, Arendt offers an analysis that attends to the situatedness of experience in the ways that Ortega suggests critical phenomenology must do, while suggesting an approach to praxis that remains vigilant of what this means for issuing calls to action.

## III. ARENDT'S PHENOMENOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATIVE PRAXIS

Much has been said about the influence of Heidegger on Arendt's thought, no less than the myriad ways in which she critically engages his existential analytic of Dasein.[12] Yet, while some have considered how Arendt challenges and modifies Heidegger's conception of facticity, few have emphasized the methodological significance of his factical turn for orienting her approach to political action.[13] Arendt may be interpreted in *The Human Condition*, and especially in her analysis of natality and plurality, as undertaking phenomenological inquiry into the conditions under which the kind of transformative action that Guenther calls for becomes possible.[14] Yet, by turning to Arendt's account of the unpredictability and irreversibility of human action, we find that the possibility for

[10] See Günter Figal (2010); James Risser (2012), Gert-Jan Van der Heiden (2019), and Theodore George (2020).

[11] I would argue, however, that Heidegger's political commitments, no less than the hubris with which he enacted them, only serves to further emphasize importance of developing a method of praxis that remains attentive to the factical limits of existence and the fallibility this entails. See Richard Wolin (2016) and Andrew J. Mitchell and Peter Trawny (2017).

[12] See, for instance, Dana Villa (1995), Jacques Taminiaux (1997), Seyla Benhabib (2003), Peg Birmingham (2006), Roger Berkowitz (2018), Sophie Loidolt (2018), and Kimberly Maslin (2020). Arendt (1994) offers her most direct challenge to the political dangers that she perceives in Heidegger's project in "What is Existential Philosophy?"

[13] Veronica Vasterling (2011) and Loidolt (2018, 77–82) are notable exceptions, though even they focus primarily on how hermeneutic phenomenology shapes Arendt's view of understanding rather than action itself.

[14] While Arendt takes all action to have transformative potential by virtue of being born of natality and plurality, this does not mean that politics itself is always emancipatory and transformative. Instead, as Andrew Schaap (2021) notes, Arendt often treats the political as a limit on the boundlessness of action. Whereas Schaap believes this is important for preserving the political against extreme violence, radical democrats like Sheldon Wolin and Jacques Ranciére argue that it reflects Arendt's conservativism and unwillingness to associate political action with the abolition of social inequality.

transformative political action cannot be thought apart from the factical limits of human existence, limits which render even the most just and emancipatory political aims vulnerable to recreating the oppressive structures they seek to dismantle. Rather than presuming that action can overcome these limits, Arendt instead offers what might be described as a praxis of facticity that proceeds from the assumption that this is something we can never do. For Arendt, then, the task is not to avoid or mitigate these limits but rather to envision a praxis that confronts them directly in political life.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt conceives of natality and plurality as the fundamental conditions of human existence, conditions which themselves make possible transformative political action. Together, these concepts displace Heidegger's emphasis on death and the self, illustrating that each newcomer who enters the world is at once irreducibly singular while, at the same time, irrevocably embedded within the fabric of communal life. Natality, Arendt argues, marks our native capacity for new beginnings and constitutes the source of our freedom (1998, 9). In turning to natality, Arendt wishes to show that the distinguishing feature of human existence resides not in our sameness, but rather in the irreducible singularity that is bestowed upon us by the fact of our birth (Birmingham 2006, 12). She writes: "Each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. With respect to this somebody who is unique it can be truly said that nobody was there before" (Arendt 1998, 178). Yet, in keying this irreducible singularity to the relationality of birth rather than the radical separation of death, Arendt maintains that it is impossible to think this singular uniqueness apart from the relations that constitute it. In being born anew, we are also born into a world with others on whom we depend for our singularity. Human existence is therefore marked not just by natality, but also by plurality, or "the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (7).

Though the human conditions of natality and plurality are implicit in every human activity, Arendt argues that they come to appear most fully through speech and action in the space of politics. "In acting and speaking," she says, "men show who they are . . . make their appearance in the human world . . . The disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is . . . is implicit in everything somebody says and does" (179). Through action, we enact our natality by initiating something new in the world that has never before been seen and that could never have been predicted. Through speech, we enact our plurality by distinguishing ourselves among others, announcing who we are, what we have done, and what we intend to do. Speech and action thus enable human beings to appear to one another not as interchangeable entities governed by the necessary life processes, but as radically unique and capable of acting against "the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability" (178).

Arendt, like Guenther, thus conceives of political action as a transformative, world changing activity that has the power to intervene in structures that might otherwise appear natural, inevitable, and necessary. Yet, by undertaking rigorous phenomenological inquiry into human action itself, Arendt goes a step further than Guenther, demonstrating that the very conditions that make possible transformative political action are also what render it vulnerable to fallibility, and misjudgment. This comes into view in Arendt's analysis of the unpredictability and irreversibility of human action.

Arendt maintains that because action is conditioned by natality, it is inherently boundless and unpredictable. No artificial boundary can contain it and no external metric can determine or predict its outcome. She says: "While the various limitations and boundaries we find in every body politic may offer some protection against the inherent boundlessness of action, they are altogether helpless to offset its . . . inherent unpredictability" (1998, 191). Furthermore, because action is conditioned by plurality, one never acts from a universal, disinterested perspective. Instead, the actor is always already immersed in a world that prefigures her perspective, limiting her ability to see clearly enough to guarantee that the consequences of her action will match her intentions. Not only this, but the actor is also surrounded by others who are equally unique and unpredictable. Hence, while she may have clarity about the aims of her action, the actor can never know for certain how others will interpret and respond to her initiatives. And yet, because action bears directly on the realm of human affairs, even its unintended consequences are irreversible. To act is to intervene directly in the world as we know it. Whether this proves beneficial or disastrous, the action itself can never be undone.

This inherent unpredictability and irreversibility thus gives rise to the ultimate predicament of human action. Arendt says:

> That deeds possess such an enormous capacity for endurance . . . could be a matter of pride if men were able to bear its burden, the burden of irreversibility and unpredictability . . . That this is impossible, men have always known. They have known that he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes "guilty" of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no matter how disastrous and unexpected the consequences of his deed he can never undo it. (1998, 233)

In light of this, it is not difficult to see why one might be inclined either to ignore this predicament upon pursuing emancipatory action or give up on action as capable of realizing just and emancipatory ends. As Arendt concedes: "All this is reason enough to turn away with despair from the realm of human affairs and to hold in contempt the human capacity for freedom" (233). Yet, Arendt does not yield to this temptation but instead makes a move that runs parallel to Heidegger's call to make phenomenology a hermeneutics of facticity. Rather than assuming that this predicament is vicious, treating it as something to be avoided, she suggests that it is necessary to think the possibilities for praxis from out of it. As Sophie Loidolt explains:

> Arendt thereby *pluralizes* and *politicizes* her phenomenologically acquired hermeneutics . . . Arendt's appeal to experience just as much as Heidegger's forbids a methodical apprehension from "outside" . . . and instead demands an elucidation from "inside" experience itself. (2018, 79; emphasis in original)

In this, Arendt offers what might be described as a praxis of facticity that is oriented not by an attempt to get out of this predicament but by an effort to take responsibility for it in the context of political life.

## IV. ARENDT'S PRAXIS OF FACTICITY

Though Arendt develops this insight in a number of registers, in the essay "Understanding and Politics" her analysis of what it means to understand and intervene in oppressive political structures like totalitarianism offers a particularly relevant example for critical phenomenology.[15] In this essay, Arendt (1994) argues that because totalitarianism exceeds traditional metrics and categories of explanation, we cannot fight it by beginning from the assumption that we already know what it is. Instead, this fight depends on coupling action with what she calls "understanding." Understanding, Arendt explains, is distinct from scientific knowledge or correct information because it does not yield unequivocal results or clear paths to action. Rather, she says, it is "an unending activity by which in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world" (308).

The need for understanding arises from the conditions that comprise human existence. What she calls natality and plurality in *The Human Condition* she characterizes here in terms of being born strangers. As Arendt explains: "Every single person needs to be reconciled to a world into which he is born a stranger and in which, to the extent of his distinct uniqueness, he always remains a stranger" (1994, 308). For Arendt, this "bearing with strangers" is not a contingent feature of human existence or something from which we can choose to abstain. Rather, as Phillip Hansen says, "[i]t is an essential element of our existence as plural beings—a refusal to bear with strangers is a refusal of plurality" (2004, 10). Insofar as we are unable to abstain from this factical situation, understanding is essential, "[making] it bearable for us to live with other people, strangers forever, in the same world, and [making] it possible for them to bear with us" (Arendt 1994, 322).

In view of this, Arendt argues that understanding is not opposed to human action but indispensable for it. This, she thinks, is because understanding is the only form of cognition that can bear the burden of action's unpredictability and irreversibility, a burden which itself is born of the very conditions that make human action possible—namely, natality and plurality (322). That is, she says: "If the essence of all, and in particular of political, action is to make a new beginning, then understanding becomes the other side of action" (321). Insofar as political atrocities like totalitarianism are themselves products of the unpredictability of human action, they tend to exceed traditional metrics and categories of explanation. Understanding does not explain this away, but instead remains open to the factical limits of our knowledge, creating a space to think anew about what has

[15] Whereas Arendt turns to promising and forgiveness to address the unpredictability and irreversibility of action in *The Human Condition*, it is noteworthy that she finds neither useful for understanding and resisting totalitarianism in "Understanding and Politics."

happened and what to do. Understanding can also bear the burden of the irreversibility of human action because it is not the same as forgiveness. Whereas forgiveness attempts the impossible—namely, to undo what has been done—understanding confronts head on "what irrevocably happened" and what "unavoidably exists" (322). Hence, she says, "To understand totalitarianism is not to condone anything, but to reconcile ourselves to a world in which such things are possible at all" (Arendt 1994, 308).

To be sure, Arendt, like Guenther, recognizes the urgency of action in the face of structural oppression. Yet, by taking seriously the factical turn in phenomenology in order to clarify the conditions under which transformative praxis becomes possible, Arendt's approach to action remains grounded in the idea that no action—regardless of how just, emancipatory, or well-intentioned—is immune to reinforcing these structures. This, however, does not forestall action. Rather, through her account of understanding, Arendt offers a mechanism for remaining open to this fact while allowing it to inform praxis itself. She explains:

> Understanding, while it cannot be expected to provide results which are specifically helpful or inspiring in the fight against totalitarianism, must accompany this first if it is to be more than a mere fight for survival. Insofar as totalitarian movements have sprung up in the non-totalitarian world (*crystallizing elements found in that world, since totalitarian governments have not been imported from the moon*), the process of understanding is clearly, and perhaps primarily, also a process of self-understanding. For although we merely know, but do not yet understand, what we are fighting against, we know and understand even less what we are fighting for. (310; emphasis added)

For Arendt, the task of understanding does not end once we have identified oppressive structures and issued calls to dismantle them. Rather, because human action is always unpredictable and irreversible, the task of understanding remains unending.

Arendt, like Heidegger, admits that this creates something of a circle. While action may seek emancipatory and transformative ends, these ends can never be guaranteed, and, regardless of the outcomes, its effects can never be reversed. Yet, she suggests that it would be a mistake to interpret this circle as vicious and develop approaches to action that try to escape it. Such gestures, she thinks, are not only futile but also risk reducing political phenomena in ways that artificially limit the possibilities for emancipatory praxis in the face of political atrocity. For this reason, she says: "The activity of understanding is necessary; while it can never directly inspire the fight . . . it alone can make it meaningful and prepare a new resourcefulness of the human mind and heart" (1994, 310).

Arendt explains that when action remains tethered to understanding, it "will not shy away from the circle but, on the contrary, will be aware that any other results would be so far removed from action, of which understanding is only the other side, that they could not possibly be true; nor will the process itself avoid the circle the logicians call 'vicious'" (322). This, she argues, is crucial for a praxis that takes seriously the situatedness of one's calls to action, while also engaging in the unending critical criticality that this situatedness requires.

Arendt therefore provides a basis for a method of praxis that does not attempt to escape this situation, but that instead remains keyed to a concern for envisioning possibilities for action, activism, and emancipatory praxis from out of it.

## V. CRITICAL CRITICALITY AND UNDERSTANDING

It would be a mistake to suggest that Arendt's praxis of facticity offers the final word on how critical phenomenology should approach its calls to dismantle oppressive, quasi-transcendental structures. Afterall, as Andrew Schaap (2021) has noted, Arendt places strict and potentially problematic limitations on the political sphere, and Kathryn Sophia Belle (2014) has famously highlighted the ways in which this can exclude from the political forms of resistance that oppose oppressive structures like anti-Black racism. Yet, as problematic as these limitations may be, Arendt's political appropriation of the factical turn in phenomenology nevertheless remains useful for considering how critical phenomenologists might make explicit in the context of action the implications of their own insights into the situated and intersubjective constitution of experience. A praxis of facticity demands inquiry into the ways in which even the most well-intentioned calls to action remain beholden to their own factical limits, limits which themselves implicate us in the very structures that transformative political action seeks to abolish. This is necessary because it is not as if white supremacy, capitalism, heteropatriarchy, the genocide of indigenous people, climate catastrophe, or the rise of far-right populism have been imported from the moon. Rather, as Arendt suggests, they are crystalized elements found in our world, which means that the process of understanding is also, and perhaps even primarily, a process of self-understanding. Here, self-understanding does not mean turning inward to focus on oneself. Instead, it is akin to what Ortega means when she insists on asking the question of the who: who can undertake a reduction of colonial structures and who should undertake an abolitionist praxis in the face of this? A praxis of facticity proceeds from these questions rather than abstracting from them. By coupling action with understanding, a praxis of facticity not only provides a methodological basis to consider how distinct but interrelated factical situations may yield distinct but interrelated possibilities for praxis. It also challenges the assumption that we already have the correct categories and metrics for interpreting quasi-transcendental structures like white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, settler colonialism, and capitalism. By working against the temptation to reduce the situation, no less than the people in it, a praxis of facticity thus provides a basis to open new possibilities for emancipatory praxis and coalition that more reductive approaches foreclose. In so doing, it offers a way to integrate into a method of praxis the critical criticality that Ortega recommends, conceiving of action not as an afterthought but as a responsibility.

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# HORIZONS OF CRITIQUE: FROM TRANSCENDENTAL TO CRITICAL AND POLITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

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Our political present is characterized by the rise of right-wing populism. Whether in North or South America, Europe or Asia, right-wing populist parties are on the rise everywhere, and with them, nationalism, racism, and sexism. This trend has not only led to a repoliticization of society, but also of academic philosophy. Phenomenology as a discipline has not remained unaffected by this repoliticization. In the U.S., a strong movement has emerged under the label of critical phenomenology paralleled by the recent rise of political phenomenology in Europe. Critical and political phenomenology share the aim of positioning phenomenology as a critical project able to question social relations of domination and power. As such, they relate to Husserl's transcendental phenomenology in different ways. In the following paper, I want to uncover this relation by fleshing out the varieties of critique that come with transcendental, critical and political phenomenology. My main aim thereby is to show the conceptual and methodological differences between these approaches as well as their intrinsic connections. Therefore, I will not so much focus on the concrete analysis of phenomena of domination and power, but rather on the following question: from which standpoint can these phenomena be criticized?

As a guideline, I will use the concept of horizon, which plays an essential role in phenomenology, to describe the process of sensemaking. Husserl defines "horizon" as the supporting background from which individual perceptual phenomena can emerge in order to show themselves *as* something. In this context, Husserl distinguishes different kinds of horizons, but ultimately, he argues that the world itself is the "universal horizon" (1970, 144). In Husserl, the term is mainly used in a purely analytical manner and has no further political implications. However, its critical potential can be unfolded by showing that social relations of power figure as horizons and thus subtly structure the field of the visible. In this sense, Linda Martín Alcoff states: "The concept of horizon helps to capture the background, framing assumptions we bring with us to perception and understanding, the congealed experiences that become premises by which we strive to make sense of the world" (2006, 95). I will take up this idea in the following and show how the concept of

horizon in transcendental, critical, and political phenomenology can become a means of critique to question scientific, social, and political phenomena. In particular I will show how the phenomenological method of demonstration can become a means of political critique under conditions of conflicting horizons.

## I. TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGY AS CRITIQUE

Let me approach the critical claim of transcendental phenomenology by turning to its founding father, Edmund Husserl. Among Husserl's most groundbreaking doctrines is the intentionality of consciousness. Consciousness, according to Husserl, is always "consciousness of something" (1960, 41). Husserl thereby is not so much interested in specific experiences of particular things, but in the structures of consciousness underlying particular sorts of experiences. The object of transcendental analysis therefore is *consciousness in general*. In the following, I would like to point out the critical implications of this analysis on the basis of Husserl's investigation of the horizon intentionality of perceptual consciousness. Of course, this brings only a fraction of Husserl's rich analytical and methodological reflections into view. However, the focus on the transcendental analysis of horizon intentionality will allow us to draw a line of connection to critical and political phenomenology and to discover similarities and differences.

First, if we first turn to the act of perception, one of the central lessons of Husserl's phenomenology is that objects of consciousness are never given to us completely in our view, but always only in "adumbrations" (*Abschattungen*) (1983, 9). Consider the perception of a house; we never see the whole house from all sides, but always only the sides facing us. Nevertheless, according to Husserl, we envision the whole house in the act of perception. This is due to what Husserl calls the "internal horizon" of consciousness (1970, 162). With this concept Husserl designates a structure of anticipation which points us to the other sides of the perceived object. Part of the perception of the house, for instance, is that it has a backside and that while we are looking at the frontside, we keep this invisible backside present. Husserl calls this capacity "appresentation" (1960, 109). The actual object of consciousness—"the house"—then is only given to us by the fact that presentation and appresentation constantly complement each other.

Second, the internal horizon must be distinguished from the "external horizon" (1970, 162). With it, Husserl points out that in every perception we not only keep present what our perception is currently directed at, but also that which is in its environment—for example, the garage standing next to the house and the car in front of it. What is decisive here is that the things in the outer horizon are in a referential context. With the middle-class house belongs the garage, and in the garage belongs a car. This indicates that the objects of consciousness never appear isolated as individual things, but within contexts of significance. The organizing center of such a context of significance will be, in most cases, human engagement in the world. For instance, let us imagine that a sudden thundershower forces me to seek shelter. In this scenario, the house, the garage, and the car now would

show themselves in terms of how well they fulfill this shelter function. The outer horizon of perception thus demonstrates that something always shows itself *as* something in the world to consciousness. By means of this *as*-structure, the object of perception is always already situationally embedded.

Third, the fact that we see objects as houses, garages, and cars, and that we have knowledge of which of these best protects us from a thunderstorm, points us to the idea that the inner and outer horizons are not always simply given, but often must be learned. Although significance must be learned individually, this learning itself draws on an epistemic horizon that Husserl calls the "life-horizon" or just the "world-horizon" (1970, 144, 138). Uncovering this horizon in its genesis is the task Husserl increasingly takes up in his genetic phenomenology, especially in the 1920s and 1930s (Bernet, Kern, Marbach 1993, 195). The focus here is on how both explicit knowledge of the world (*knowing-that*) and implicit knowledge of orientation (*knowing-how)* are sedimented in the horizon of the lifeworld and are passed on from generation to generation by means of cultural and social institutions. By tracing the genesis further and further, one sooner or later must encounter what Husserl calls "primal institution" (*Urstiftung*) (1960, 80). What is meant by this is the collective event in which an epistemic concept first becomes socially established. Husserl himself makes this clear with the example of a pair of scissors, whose "final sense" must be learned to see the scissors "as scissors" (1960, 111). This final sense is embedded in a collective, social, and technical history of this tool and its modes of use. The same is true for the example of the house. Its meaning is also embedded in a social and technical history of dwelling that can be uncovered at different levels.[1] Such institutional events are not a one-time act; rather, it is indispensable that primal institutions are renewed again and again by "re-institutions" or are even transformed by "new-institutions" as Husserl argues.[2]

The three moments of horizon intentionality presented here do not come into play one after another, but rather are at work simultaneously; internal, external and world-horizon are always already there at the same time. In their totality they constitute the intentionality of consciousness. Husserl's transcendental analysis thereby shows that the internal horizon is responsible for the fact that we see "something" (*etwas*); the external horizon leads to the fact, that we see this something "as something" (*als etwas*); and the world-horizon provides us with an epistemic field of intelligibility of what can be seen as something in what contexts of reference. This preliminary analysis of the intentionality of consciousness as "consciousness of something" brings us to the question of what critical impulses can be gained from transcendental phenomenology.

Let us now turn to the question what horizon intentionality has to do with critique. To do this, we must first take a step back. The point of engagement of Husserl's reflections is, as is well known, his concern with the "general positing" (*Generalthesis*) of the natural attitude. It consists in the fact that the world "as factually existent actuality"—or the "something as something-structure" as we can say now—is simply there (1970, 57). For Husserl, this attitude must be made transparent in its origin. Phenomenology therefore uses the method

[1] See Martin Heidegger (1993).

[2] See Thomas Bedorf (2020).

of *epoché*, i.e., the bracketing of all prejudices and self-evident facts which guide our natural beliefs (Husserl 1970, 60). As a result of the *epoché*, we arrive at a phenomenological attitude which is characterized by the fact that in it we assume the position of a "*disinterested onlooker*" (1960, 35; emphasis in original). In this position, there is ultimately nothing to be done but to watch mundane consciousness at work and describe its mode of operation systematically. This is of course no easy task, and it raises important methodological and analytical questions regarding how to conduct what Husserl calls reduction and eidetic variation.[3]

Phenomenology acquires a critical character in Husserl wherever it can enlighten mundane consciousness about itself. Since Husserl's project of formulating a transcendental phenomenology is directed at consciousness in general, it unfolds its critical potential primarily where the mundane conception is guided by an obscured conception of our mind. An example of this is the so-called "computer model of the mind," which assumes that our brain resembles a supercomputer that is fed with sensory data, which it then processes according to certain rules.[4] This notion, mediated by our natural attitude, has for a long time been influential for the scientific worldview, especially in artificial intelligence research. The inadequacy of this model was pointed out early on by Hubert Dreyfus on the basis of the so-called "frame problem" (2014, 250). Simply put, the problem lies in the fact that artificial intelligences have great difficulties in specifying what information in their environment is relevant for their respective task. In other words, artificial intelligence systems are ill-equipped to identify in which horizon a phenomenon must be taken up. The critique can be extended into practice and gain more political weight in the process. Think of predictive policing for example where the racist effects of algorithmic AI have often been pointed out.[5] These effects do not simply result from the fact that AI has been fed false data, but rather from the fact that AI is not able to understand the horizon of its data. For example, if the AI is more likely to send police to disadvantaged neighborhoods, that is because the data it uses reflects ongoing policing priorities that target predominantly such neighborhoods, and this horizon is not reflected by the AI. The matter becomes even more problematic when one pictures how a "horizonless" AI can prefigure human horizons. For example, the software "PredPol"—used by the Los Angeles Police Department, among others, works by giving officers maps of their jurisdictions with little red boxes indexing where crime is expected to occur during the day. Jackie Wang (2018), in her work *Carceral Capitalism*, critically questions the effect of this practice. She asks: "what is the attitude or mentality of the officers who are patrolling one of the boxes? How might the expectation of finding crime influence what the officers actually find?" (241). Wang here indicates that the AI can prefigure the intentionality of police officers by creating expectations that frame people and situations in a way that can escalate otherwise unnoticed irregularities into crimes. The example thereby makes clear how the transcendental analysis of consciousness can become a means of critique. It shows that an inadequate understanding of the horizon

[3] See Maren Wehrle (2022) and Jaakko Belt (2022).

[4] See Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi (2012, 5).

[5] See Ruha Benjamin (2019).

intentionality of consciousness in AI-modelling can lead to dysfunctional and discriminatory practices.

## II. CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY AS CRITIQUE

A prominent criticism that has been repeatedly levelled at Husserl is that his transcendental phenomenology focuses entirely on transcendental subjectivity and thus loses sight of the issue of intersubjectivity. Dan Zahavi (1997) pointed out that this criticism is not justified, insofar as transcendental subjectivity always already includes transcendental intersubjectivity. This is made clear in the case of horizon intentionality. Objects refer, with their averted profiles, referential contexts, and with their epistemic foundations, already to other subjects who co-constitute them. Therefore, "intersubjectivity," Zahavi argues, "must belong *a priori* to the structure of constituting subjectivity" (306). The crucial problem of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is therefore not, in my view, the reduction to transcendental subjectivity, but rather the methodological restrictions that come along with it. As mentioned in the previous section, the transcendental analysis is only interested in consciousness *in general*, but not in *concrete* consciousness. As a result of this, it is in danger of losing sight of the conditions of its own philosophizing.

Sara Ahmed (2006) makes clear why this is problematic in her study *Queer Phenomenology*. She here asks, what makes Husserl's phenomenological attitude possible in the first place? What are the conditions that allow Husserl to think about the horizon structure of the perception in his study room? According to Ahmed, there is first the fact that he has a study in which he can turn to philosophical reflection free from distractions (31). Furthermore, the fact that his desk is ready and clear for writing depends on the fact that others kept this desk clear. What makes him independent from the burdens of reproductive labor is the gendered division of labor in his time (30). Accordingly, for Ahmed, in the background of Husserl's phenomenological setting lies the bourgeois home with its gender arrangement. His situation thus differs significantly from that of female thinkers. Regarding this, Ahmed refers to the biographical descriptions of Adrienne Rich, who explains how her children tend to pull her away from her desk and keep her from concentrating on her work (2006, 32). One might want to object that the historical structures of the gender division of labor have nothing to do with transcendental subjectivity, since the general structure of horizon intentionality in Husserl's consciousness is no different from that of his wife Malvine or Adrienne Rich. And this is true. But the suspicion goes in another direction; because Husserl does not recognize that the adoption of the phenomenological attitude is made possible by his situatedness as a bourgeois male, he is not motivated to consider consciousness as situated consciousness rather than consciousness in general. Ahmed thus points to the situatedness of the consciousness that asks transcendental questions. Therefore, her critique does not refer to a deterministic correlation but to a social relation between the situatedness of subjects, in this case Husserl, and the kind of philosophical questions they ask.

What at first glance may only appear as an empirical critique, at second glance points to a systematic problem of the phenomenological method. To make this clear, let us turn once again to the *epoché*. We had seen above that to engage in phenomenological attitude for Husserl is to make oneself a "*disinterested onlooker*" of one's own consciousness (1960, 35; emphasis in original). What Husserl overlooks here is the fact that the spectator is not looking from nowhere, but from a particular place. This, however, creates a problem: the spectator is never able to fully survey consciousness since the place from which he looks cannot itself come into view in the process. The blind spot that comes along with the adoption of the phenomenological attitude is what we can call the "horizon of givenness." It represents the background of all that the phenomenologist takes for granted in adopting his specific attitude. With regard to the difficulty of getting this background into view, already Merleau-Ponty already speaks of the "impossibility of a complete reduction" (2002, xv).

The crucial point of critical phenomenology seems to me that it tries to uncover the horizon of givenness. A point of departure for this endeavor is the phenomenon of double consciousness. William Du Bois (2007) used this term to draw attention to the specific experiences of Black people in a racist, white majority society in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. He describes it as follows: "it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (8). With double-consciousness, Du Bois addresses the phenomenon that oppressed social groups tend to observe themselves simultaneously from their own perspective as well as from the perspective of others. They see themselves from two perspectives at the same time. This double observer position comes with unease since it leads to a troubled and split consciousness that is hyperaware of itself. Nevertheless, precisely because of its splitting it holds the potential that the respective hidden horizons of givenness mutually illuminate each other. DuBois' concept of double-consciousness has subsequently been taken up by engaged theorists such as Frantz Fanon (1967), Jean-Paul Sartre (1976), Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Lewis Gordon (2000), and Marianna Ortega (2016). Even though the concept is employed by the respective authors in quite different ways, I think that two more general consequences can be derived from it.

First, if the nature of double consciousness comes along with a double observer position, then it holds the potential that these two positions mutually illuminate their respective background. Second, the notion of a disinterested spectator must be questioned and complicated. The position designated by Husserl must be understood as stemming from a particular interest, namely the interest in the universal which makes his object consciousness in general. Critical phenomenology, by contrast, is not interested in consciousness in general, but in situated consciousness. Accordingly, it is not the transcendental structure of consciousness that becomes the object here, but rather the social structures that situate consciousness. Central to the work of critical phenomenology therefore is the examination

of power-structures such as white supremacy,[6] heteropatriarchy,[7] or compulsory able-bodiedness,[8] which constitute an unquestioned horizon of givenness for mundane consciousness.

Let us turn to the example of white supremacy to make this clearer. When Ahmed notes that "whiteness in only invisible for those who inhabit it" (2007, 157), she stresses that for white people their whiteness is a horizon of givenness which normally does not come into view, because it is the place from which they see the world. In a similar vein, Alcoff stresses that racism often tends to be immune for critical review, since it prefigures what can come into view: "if race is a structure of contemporary perception, then it […] makes up a part of what appears to me as the natural setting of all my thoughts. It is the field, rather than that which stands out" (Alcoff 2006, 188). One effect of this is that whiteness and racism are often grasped as phenomena that only concern others. White people, George Yancy (2014) argues, often think that they are not racist, when they explicitly condone racism or do not use the N-word. Yancy calls such strategies "white talk" (46). They serve to separate "white racists" who believe in white supremacy from "'good whites'" (45) who are concerned about racial equality. Even if such an anti-racist position surely is better than blatant racism, it fails to bring into view the complexities of racism. Moreover, it tends to prevent white people from thinking about how racism functions as a subtle system of oppression. Following this line of thought in Ahmed, Alcoff, and Yancy we can say that white supremacy for a white situated consciousness acts as a horizon of givenness.

If white supremacy functions as an inaccessible horizon of reality for white subjects, this relationship of domination usually resists self-reflection. Its uncovering therefore requires confrontation with other perspectives that allow this horizon to come into view. For Alcoff, this means that white people also need to achieve a double consciousness that allows them to dissociate them from their horizon of givenness (2014, 272). While marginalized subjects often already bring such a consciousness with them due to their situatedness, white people have to cultivate such a consciousness. This requires "fearless listening" to marginalized subjects; in other words, it demands that white people take marginalized experiences seriously, and that they become willing to question their certainties (Yancy 2014, 46). Focusing on the racialized experiences of marginalized subjects thus shows that white supremacy does not only function on the level of conscious prejudice, but already on the level of perception and bodily orientation.[9] White supremacy is constituted by a field of visibility in which Black people come into view for the white gaze only as "problematic people" from whom danger and violence emanate (Gordon 2000, 69). Yancy tries to make clear how such a perception is already inscribed in the body schema of whites by way of the so called "elevator scenario" (2014, 54). Here, Yancy describes the experiences of a Black man who enters an elevator in which there is already a white woman who—barely noticeably—reacts to his appearance by gripping her handbag slightly tighter. In this micro-

[6] See George Yancy (2016) and Helen Ngo (2017).

[7] See Gayle Salamon (2010) and Johanna Oksala (2016).

[8] See Robert McRuer (2006) and Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (2011).

[9] See Ngo (2017).

gesture, which needs not even to occur to the woman herself as a racializing gesture, one can see how racism and prejudice are deeply inscribed in the body schema of white people. To bring such deeply embedded forms of racist comportment into view, white people need to engage with the experiences of racialized people. When such an engagement of experience succeeds, a white double consciousness can emerge that brings its own horizon of givenness into view. Gail Weiss captures the critical effect of such awareness in the following words: "By rendering the horizon visible . . . one also transforms the horizon itself, making it the critical figure rather than the uncritical ground of one's discourse" (2008, 107). For Weiss, critical phenomenology ultimately amounts to a "politics of the horizon" (112). Its task is to bring into view unquestioned horizons of givenness through the intersubjective widening of horizons so that individuals can enter into a critical relationship to their own situatedness, especially where it is interwoven with social relations of domination and power. This closely echoes Lisa Guenther's recent account of the senses of critique implied in critical phenomenology. For Guenther, phenomenological critique first and foremost deals with the exposure of "quasi-transcendental structures" in order to bring power structures to light (2021, 10, 13). By making them visible, these structures no longer have the character of unquestionable givens and can become the object of critical political action.

## III. POLITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY AS CRITIQUE

If critical phenomenology can be understood to stand for a shift from consciousness in general to situated consciousness, then one might suppose that political phenomenology comes along with a turn to political consciousness. But what could that mean? Transcendental as well as critical phenomenology, as I have argued, are already political in the sense that their insights can challenge distorted scientific world views (such as in the case of AI) as well as social structures of domination (such as in the case of white supremacy). Accordingly, politicizing phenomenology seems to be merely a question of a critical application of phenomenological concepts. Even if this is partly true, however, it is not the whole story. The genuine object of political phenomenology, I want to argue here, is irreconcilable conflict. This brings into view the fact that we are not only situated subjects, but that we can relate to our own situatedness by taking a political stance; and furthermore, that taking such a stance often demands we pick a side in insurmountable political confrontations.

To better understand this, we can turn to Hannah Arendt's political phenomenology. Arendt starts out her analysis with what she calls the experience of the "human condition of plurality" (1998, 7). Plurality here means not only that we as human beings are all unique and therefore different, but also that we have diverging political opinions about how the world we share should be arranged. Liberals, republicans, socialists, or feminists cling on to what Ludwig Wittgenstein would have called different "forms of life", which means that they have different background assumptions about matters such as the nation state, cross-

border migration, the nuclear family, or the protection of the climate and nature (1958, 8). If we grasp such background assumptions as horizons of perception and understanding by which we make sense of the world, the experience of political plurality comes along with the experience of conflicting horizons. The reasons for such conflicts are manifold and rooted in the fact that there are no ultimate answers to political questions regarding the just, the good, and the pragmatic, but always only a number of possible options between which we have to choose. The very essence of the political therefore is characterized by the fact that a decision must be made under conditions of conflicting horizons. To clarify what this means, let me present three irresolvable forms of democratic conflict.

(1) *The conflict over the people*: Since ancient times the democratic community is based on the claim of the equality of its citizens. The question of who counts as a citizen, as Arendt points out, has always been contested (1998, 199). As is well known, in the Greek *polis*, slaves and women were not counted as full citizens; or differently, in the period of the Enlightenment, Black people and women did not share the same rights as upper class white men. Teleological approaches now understand such kinds of exclusions as historically conditioned deficits that can be overcome as the democratic claim to equality continues to unfold. According to such a view, the history of democracy amounts to an advancing inclusion where formerly excluded individuals are bestowed a civic status. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the success of the Civil Rights Movement seem to support such a claim, initially. Against such a view however, radical democratic thinkers such as Claude Lefort (1988) and Jacques Rancière (1999) point out that the dispute over equality is irresolvable and cannot be put to rest. Even if we imagine a fully emancipated society, exclusions will persist because the question of who should be authorized to participate in the decision-making democratic community can only be answered by drawing contingent internal and external boundaries. We can see what this means in concrete terms by looking at the right to vote; internal boundaries, for example, must draw distinctions based on the age and maturity levels at which individuals are considered capable of participating in elections. Further, one must decide whether or not such rights can be withdrawn.[10] The same holds true for external boundaries: under ideal conditions, all those individuals who are affected by a political decision would have to be included in the democratic decision-making process. However, since the effects of political decisions often reach far beyond local and national communities, this principle is not feasible for collective self-determination (Benhabib 2004, 2). In effect, boundaries that differentiate who belongs to a political community and who does not must be drawn. In either case, no matter what position we take, the constitution of the political community comes along with an exclusion. This does not mean, however, that such exclusions should simply be accepted, but rather that the question of who belongs to the people and how democratic equality should be fashioned necessarily remains a controversial question.

(2) *The conflict over the constitution*: A second irreconcilable democratic conflict concerns the question of how the democratic community should be constituted. The main task of any constitution, Arendt argues in *On Revolution*, is to found a "political space" in which

[10] In the case of mental illness for example. See Arash Abizadeh (2012).

"public freedom" can unfold (1990, 126). Here we enter the field of classical political constitutionalism. In it, liberalism, deliberativism, and republicanism present us with quite different conceptions of how political participation and political power can be distributed. The ongoing virulence of such questions can be seen in two lively debates that took place in recent decades. First, the debate on empowered participatory governance in which the legitimacy and efficacy of current representative democracy is questioned in favor of democratic experiments that emphasize the potential of modes of direct local participation[11]; second, the debate over judicial review, which centers on the question of the division of political power between the legislative and the judicial branch. While critics of judicial review argue that constitutional courts come with a limitation and distortion of popular sovereignty, proponents argue that it gives political minorities the opportunity to politically contest majority decisions in which they have not been sufficiently taken into account.[12] Regardless of which side one takes in these disputes (Arendt certainly supports direct participation and judicial review), what is crucial here is that constitutional issues are not settled once and for all with the founding of democratic communities but continually persist, since there are various legitimate ways in which political freedom can be institutionalized. Political freedom, like political equality, is therefore necessarily a contested concept.

(3) *The conflict over public affairs*: The democratic community is further characterized by the existence of deep disagreements. In his seminal article, Richard Fogelin (1985) describes deep disagreements of opinion as conflicts resulting from different interpretations and considerations of democratic norms. For him, exemplary cases of this include the disputes over pregnancy termination and affirmative action measures. What characterizes these conflicts is that they are not irrational, but rational in the sense that both sides can claim fundamental rights to formulate their position. Deep disagreements stem from the fact that these rights can clash, necessitating a careful weighing and balancing of them. The result of this process is closely linked to the interpretation of democratic norms. This can be clearly seen in the call for "freedom." The agreement over the democratic value of freedom in practice does not mean that there is agreement on political issues. Representatives of libertarianism, liberalism, communitarianism, or socialism will interpret this value quite differently—Isaiah Berlin (1969) as negative, Philip Pettit (2012) as non-dominating, Arendt (1990) as positive, or Axel Honneth (2014) as social freedom—and consequently represent divergent ideas of what it means to realize freedom. Deep disagreements of opinion make it clear that behind the seemingly universal validity of democratic norms there are always processes of interpretation and evaluation, the results of which depend on what idea of a good life political groups cherish. Consequently, such conflicts cannot be resolved once and for all in a democratic community, but they can only ever be dealt with in the course of ongoing conflicts.

In our political present, the three areas of democratic conflict presented here are increasingly at risk of being neglected in the course of what Jacques Rancière has called

[11] See Archon Fung and Eric O. Wright (2003).

[12] See Richard Bellamy (2007) on the one hand, and Cristine Lafont (2020) on the other.

post-democracy (Rancière 1999, 95). What is meant by this is that in the present day there has been an erosion of citizens' opportunities for democratic participation and action, even though central institutions of parliamentary democracy are formally intact. One of the reasons for this erosion is the increasing influence of so-called non-majoritarian institutions. They ensure that political decisions are increasingly being outsourced by political parties to expert committees, constitutional courts, or central banks. This has the advantage of being able to surround their respective policies with the aura of science (in the form of expert committees), justice (in the form of constitutional courts) or necessity (in the form of central banks). Politicians, based on this, can then present their decisions as inevitable, necessary solutions. As a result, that which makes politics political, namely the conflict about how we want to live together, has increasingly disappeared from the democratic public. Against such approaches, post-foundationalist positions such as political phenomenology attempt to make clear that the democratic community does not rest on ultimate reasons, but on political decisions that we make in the course of conflicts about the people, the constitution, and public affairs.[13] Accordingly, the critical thrust of political phenomenology is to keep the field of democratic conflict open and to shield it from closure.

It may seem now that critical and political phenomenology pursue the same goal. Both are concerned with the multiplicity and openness of horizons. While critical phenomenology tries to counter the solipsism of white supremacy by bringing marginalized perspectives to the fore, for example, political phenomenology is concerned with pointing out the multiplicity of possible political projects in the face of political foundationalism. Both approaches thus seem to be concerned with a broadening of our horizons. A decisive difference, however, lies in the task assigned to this broadening. While critical phenomenology serves to produce "genuinely shared horizons," as Weiss puts it, the ultimate goal of political phenomenology in contrast is to uncover conflicting horizons (2008, 112). It rests on the insight that not all horizons of different life forms can be reconciled with each other in what Hans Georg Gadamer would have termed a "fusion of horizons" (2004, 305). Many horizons are bound to specific positionings and are therefore mutually exclusive. While the broadening thus serves in one case to expand our sense of the world by integrating other perspectives, in the other case, it serves to expose counter-perspectives and thus to prepare a field for political choices. Of course, the two projects need not necessarily contradict each other. Often, broadening our social horizon to include new horizons is a condition for perceiving lines of conflict in the first place. Nevertheless, the goal of political phenomenology is not to generate shared horizons, but rather to contrast conflicting political horizons.

## IV. PHENOMENOLOGICAL DEMONSTRATION AS A POLITICAL STYLE OF CRITIQUE

If at the core of the human condition of plurality there is the experience of irresolvable conflict, the question arises as to how we can deal with such conflicts. In this section, I want to argue that phenomenology offers a genuine political style of critique for this. To

[13] See Matthias Flatscher (forthcoming).

make this clear, let's first look at two classic ways of dealing with conflict as they can be found in political liberalism and in political populism. Political liberalism seeks to resolve political conflicts by means of compromise. Richard Bellamy distinguishes three strategies in this regard. In negotiation, the parties can try to move toward each other by means of mutual concessions, they can try to retreat to a lowest common denominator by means of compensation, or they can make possible the simultaneous implementation of competing claims by means of division (1999, ch. 4). Each of these three strategies is based on the combination of a bundle of political regulatory matters in a manner that results in an outcome acceptable to both parties, although this would not apply to the regulation of the respective individual matters. Political populism, on the other hand, no longer seeks to balance political conflicts, but to intensify them antagonistically until a decision can be reached in favor of one of the disputants. In order to bring about such a decision, Chantal Mouffe believes that politics must be conducted in the mode of a "war of position" (2015, 114). Following Antonio Gramsci, this refers, in contrast to a "war of movement," to a form of struggle that does not focus on one decisive battle, but on a multitude of scattered local confrontations through which cultural hegemony is to be achieved. Whereas political liberalism resorts to compromise, to make political cooperation across divides possible, political populism tries to escalate conflicts to ultimately overpower its political opponent. An alternative political style that aims neither at compromise nor hegemony, I want to argue, can be found if we turn to phenomenology.

Husserl distinguishes the phenomenological method from competing approaches such as Immanuel Kant's transcendental philosophy, among others, by the nature of its argumentation. For Husserl, phenomenology does not proceed by means of "deduction" but by means of "demonstration" (*Aufweisung*) (2019, 203 [own translation]).[144] In this sense, Husserl in *Ideas I* repeatedly writes of having proceeded in his analysis by "direct demonstration" or by "intuitive demonstrations" (Husserl 1983, 64, 202). I understand Husserl's claim to be that phenomenology presents its findings in the course of reduction not in the mode of proof (*Beweis*), but in the mode of demonstration (*Aufweis*). This is also indicated by Heidegger who characterizes the phenomenological method in *Being and Time* as bringing to light that which "indicates" itself through the phenomena by means of "pointing out" (1996, 26, 154). Similarly to Husserl, Heidegger describes phenomenology not as a method based on syllogistics; rather, it aims to put a phenomenon in the right light thereby "letting something be seen" (29). Accordingly, the aim of phenomenological argumentation is not so much understanding (*Verstehen*) but moreover insight (*Einsehen*). In a similar vein, Jean-Luc Marion in *Being Given* starts out to describe the phenomenological method by pointing out that it is not "a question of proving", but "a question of showing" (2002, 7). In contrast to metaphysics, where proving means to trace something back to its origin, phenomenology is a "counter-method" that seeks to let "appearances appear in such a way that they accomplish their own apparition" (7). Like Husserl and Heidegger, Marion contrasts phenomenology to metaphysics by way of the argumentation that it

[14] Fred Kersten (Husserl 1983) translates the German "Aufweisen" as "demonstrably showing" whereas Sebastian Luft and Thane Naberhaus (Husserl 2019) translate it as "authentication." I follow Kersten here since his translation better captures the expressive moment.

brings into play. I cannot follow the implications of this demonstrative method in Husserl, Heidegger, and Marion here in detail, but I would like to suggest that what they all share is the reference to an *aesthetic* rationality that can be distinguished from that of an *analytical* rationality.

Aesthetic rationality can be distinguished from analytical rationality in at least three respects. Firstly, in terms of the logic of articulation in which they address social problems. Whereas the former resorts to the means of argumentative proof, the latter proceeds with the means of figurative demonstration. Secondly, both differ with regard to the mode of cognition. Intellectual comprehension operates linearly; arguments and conclusions form a chain of reasoning. Aesthetic dramatization, on the other hand, operates figuratively. Its element is the surface; insights are achieved through compositional arrangements of individual elements into a whole. Finally, the mode of action can be distinguished. While analytical reconstruction yields to insights which lead us to think differently about political issues, aesthetic displaying leads to a "distribution of the sensible" as Rancière calls it (2010, 36). The result is that we *see* things differently. Its effects are thus not mental, but perceptual. In sum, analytical and aesthetic rationality differ in terms of their modes of articulation, cognition, and effect.

If we understand phenomenological demonstration in terms of aesthetic rationality, it can itself be understood as a specific mode of critique. Where phenomena can be seen against the background of diverging horizons, phenomenological critique can try to make these horizons accessible to others, thereby provoking what Wittgenstein called a "change of aspect" in perception (1958, 196). What is meant by this is illustrated by the famous image of the duck-rabbit. Depending on one's perspective, the picture appears either as a duck or as a rabbit (194). In order to bring those who see only the duck to see the rabbit, or the other way around, one will have to demonstrate to them how to look at the figure. According to Wittgenstein, we use expressions for this like: "Look like this, these are the ears!" or "Look, this is the beak!" This shows that phenomenological demonstration does not use first and foremost good reasons, but hints, comparisons, associations, questions. To take another example from Linda Zerilli: if we praise a painting for, say, the luxurious quality of its colors, the gracefulness of the figures depicted, or its overall composition, then none of these reasons can compel others to find the painting in question beautiful as well (2016, 78). Nevertheless, in the best case, our descriptions can open up a new, unexpected perspective for the other and thereby cause a change of aspect in her perception.

Phenomenological demonstration for Wittgenstein is not limited to the narrow field of art; rather, it stands for an alternative mode of argumentation we can also find in courts, for example. My contention is that phenomenological demonstration is also key for the political understood as a field of conflict.[15] An example for this might be the conflicting pandemic politics where we had two parties. The first one advanced strict public measures (obligations to wear masks, restrictions of public movement and gathering), the second one defended looser measures. What is important is that both parties could refer to the fundamental values of the constitution. This is because the constitution guarantees both

[15] See Steffen Herrmann (2020).

the protection of health as well as the freedom of the person. Any form of pandemic politics must therefore weigh up these two fundamental rights and take a position on the question to what extent the restriction of one fundamental right can be justified at the expense of the other. It seems crucial to me that the question of how far the protection of life and health should extend largely depends on the horizon against which political freedom is understood. Two horizons of freedom here are commonly opposed to each other: the liberal concept of freedom which understands freedom as negative freedom and therefore considers all forms of external restriction as threats to freedom, and the socialist concept of freedom, which understands freedom as social freedom that can be realized only in acting together. The constraint of freedom of assembly or freedom of movement in course of pandemic politics appears differently against both horizons. While in the first case it appears as a violation of negative freedom and thus as a restriction, in the second case, it appears as a collective social effort and thus as an expression of social freedom. In other words, pandemic politics, depending on which concept of freedom is taken as its horizon can be understood either as a restriction or as a realization of freedom. To the extent that both conceptions of freedom can be justified, we are dealing here with a genuine political conflict. The conflict over the appropriate politics must therefore be understood as a conflict in which the respective parties try to present their policies against the background of a specific horizon of freedom and, in the process, demonstrate to their political opponents that this is the appropriate horizon within which we should politically judge and act.

## V. KEEPING CONFLICTS ALIVE

Transcendental, critical, and political phenomenology certainly encompass more facets than I have been able to present here. The main focus of this paper was to distinguish different modes of critique that come with different conceptions of horizon intentionality in different varieties of phenomenology. As we have seen, three modes of critique can be distinguished. (1) The task of transcendental phenomenology is to uncover the basic structures of consciousness. One of these basic structures is horizon intentionality. Subsequently, transcendental phenomenology develops its critical potential wherever naïve presumptions about what kind of living beings we are are at play. (2) Critical phenomenology, as we have seen, is no longer interested in consciousness in general, but rather in situated consciousness. Its critical task is to uncover the situatedness of consciousness and to make its unquestioned horizon of givenness transparent in order to expose structures of social domination as they can be found in experiences of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy or compulsory able-bodiedness. (3) Political phenomenology is interested in what can be called political consciousness. The critical task of political phenomenology is to uncover and keep open irreconcilable political conflicts between mutually exclusive horizons, and to show how political action is possible under conditions of political plurality. The phenomenological method of demonstration thereby proved to be a guide for a new style of political critique, insofar as it no longer draws an analytical, but on aesthetic rationality.

What this analysis makes clear is that all three forms of phenomenological critique can lead to a politicization, and that to this extent political phenomenology could also be used as an overarching term for the political use of phenomenological concepts. Nevertheless, even in this case, it may be worthwhile to distinguish between a broad and a narrow concept of political phenomenology. A broad concept of political phenomenology would then stand for the politicization of social phenomena via phenomenological critique, while a narrow concept would be reserved for those disputes over irresolvable disagreements about the people, the constitution, and the public affairs that together constitute the democratic field. The question of a phenomenological political style seems to be independent from such questions of adequate framing, insofar as the practices of demonstration can be useful not only in genuinely political conflicts, but also wherever social power relations or scientific assumptions are to be criticized.

The classification presented here is heuristic in nature and should not blind us to the fact that there is overlap between the three phenomenological approaches. First, this is the case with respect to the relation between transcendental and critical phenomenology. Recently, disputes have arisen over the question whether Husserl is to be classified as a classical or a critical phenomenologist. While most of the contributions in the volume *50 Concept for a Critical Phenomenology*[16] read Husserl exclusively as a transcendental and therefore classical phenomenologist, the contributions in the volume *Phenomenology as Critique*[17] point out that we can also find in Husserl a lot of methodological instruments for a critical phenomenology. To this debate I only want to add that Husserl's work of course not only comprises the transcendental account presented here, but also other types of investigations which address situated consciousness (e.g., his analysis on home- and alien-world, on intersubjectivity or on birth and death). The dispute over how to classify Husserl's thought seems to me closely related to the question on which of these analyses one draws. In a recent study Neal DeRoo (2022) has argued that both modes of analysis are internally linked, and that transcendental phenomenology necessarily leads to what I have here called so far critical phenomenology. I agree with this analysis but would still add that this does not make Husserl a critical phenomenologist in a narrow sense. This is not so much due to the fact that his analyses do not have enough means for the analysis of situated subjectivity, but because Husserl was not interested in questions of power.

Secondly, there is also overlap between critical and political phenomenology at least in two ways. On the one hand, relations of social domination often must themselves be understood as the effect of political choices. Social and economic regulatory policies undoubtedly help white supremacy and heteropatriarchy thrive. Social domination thus always proves to be embedded in structures and institutions that are created and maintained by political means. Conversely, social relations of domination usually also extend into political conflicts. This is the case when a political group tries to win over a conflict with the help of social stigmatization. For example, conservatives often understand queer activists' claims and demands not as part of a political project that is in political

[16] See Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon (2020).

[17] See Andreea Smaranda Aldea, David Carr, and Sara Heinämaa (2022).

competition with their own idea of heterosexuality; rather, the protagonists who raise such a demand are branded as a public danger whose “perversions” and “abnormalities” threaten to disintegrate society. Stigmatization here serves as a means to depoliticize political conflicts by making it seem like there is not a real political choice at play. The main task for political phenomenology here is to preserve the genuinely political character of such conflicts by exposing them as conflicts between diverging forms of life. Once the ground for democratic conflict has been prepared in such a way, the method of phenomenological demonstration—as I hope to have shown—offers a promising political means of convincing others of one’s own way of life.

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# FROM DESCRIPTION TO TRANSFORMATION: A DECONSTRUCTIVIST INVESTIGATION OF A PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD

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## I. DESCRIPTION AND TRANSFORMATION

In the foreword of his *Phenomenology of Perception,* first published in 1945, Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that the question of what phenomenology *is* can only be answered by looking at what phenomenology *does*. Phenomenology is about "describing, and not explaining or analyzing," he states (2012, xxxi). Now, decades later, a new movement in phenomenology redefines what phenomenology does—or rather what it is *supposed* to do. In their introduction to *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, with the decisive title "Transformative Descriptions," Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon state that critical phenomenology is "an ameliorative phenomenology that seeks not only to describe but also to repair the world" (2019, xiv). Following this definition of critical phenomenology's task, one may thus ask: is describing simply not enough to deal with a world that needs, as quoted above, "repairing"? Or, alternatively, might there be ways of transforming the method of description itself, in order to make it a useful tool apt at fostering critical alterations?

In order to answer these salient questions, I will in this paper take Merleau-Ponty's claim about phenomenology being concerned with "describing" as a starting point to address some key points of the phenomenological method of description. Instead of arguing either in favor of or against phenomenology, I am interested in approaching both the potentials and the limits of this methodological tool within a social and political context. More precisely, I will investigate whether phenomenological descriptions can help in *transforming* a situation or experience that needs social and political change. In other words, if we can agree that describing is necessary to define what is going wrong, the task

that remains is to investigate whether and how describing must already be conceived as transformative of the situation to be described.

With this in mind, I will argue that description can serve critical changes, under the condition that the transformative power of language is taken into account. Following deconstructivist approaches,[1] I will argue that by describing our embodied experiences, we also transform them. This is because of how language itself is structured. Instead of understanding language as a pure tool of description, we should consider the social structures inherent to it, assuming that doing this opens a way to a situation that is *otherwise*. Such an understanding of language counters concepts of articulated language as self-transparent acts of expression of a given content. To this extent, again following deconstructivist approaches, I will stress language's profoundly social character. Building on the work of Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida, I will flesh out the complex structure of language as a multiple configuration of address. Thus, I will suggest that description can itself be a transformative tool—under the condition that we consider the social linguistic conditions that necessarily transform the experience to be described. In order to do justice to the social character of language, I will argue, first, that descriptions should include reflections on who they are addressed to and who they risk excluding. Second, I will claim that descriptions should aim at transparency with regards to how others already shape them. Finally, I will point to the political implications of such an understanding of the relationship between language and description, suggesting that focusing on the social structure of language from a critical perspective demands work on the conditions of address.

## II. DESCRIPTION AND THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL TRADITION

In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty identifies an already present ambiguity in the phenomenological project. Building on the work of Edmund Husserl, Merleau-Ponty states that phenomenology should "provide a direct description of our experience such as it is, and without any consideration of its psychological genesis or of the causal explanations that the scientist, historian, or sociologist might offer of that experience" (2012, ixx). However, one may ask what a "direct description of an experience as it is" would look like. Assuming that describing without transforming the experience described is possible, would this be something we ought to strive for?

In a short text ambitiously titled "Maurice Merleau-Ponty," Claude Lefort (2012) replies to the philosopher's demand for "direct description." He outlines some preliminary hints regarding where the phenomenological problem of description might lie. He writes:

> Merleau-Ponty never questions the phenomenologist's position; he works out his position only to establish more securely his right to meet up with

[1] My use of the term deconstruction is not limited to Jacques Derrida's philosophy. Rather, "deconstruction" is used to refer to philosophical approaches on language which I investigate in relation to the complex structure of address.

> the things themselves such as they are given to our experience; he does not wonder how it is that their access is governed by language, or how our installation within language conditions the movements of the description. (Lefort 2012, xxvi)

Lefort's initial problematization of the phenomenological method makes it clear that the status of description in phenomenology has always been a contested one. In particular, it implies a key question regarding the relationship between experience and language. Can transformation take place through description?

Merleau-Ponty's claim that there is an immediate givenness of the world within the perceptual experience of the subject results in notable methodological difficulties. For an experience to be describable as such, it must be accessible in some sense. However, one must ask *to whom* a specific set of experiences is accessible. Is the phenomenologist capable of describing the world through everyone else's eyes? Who can we speak for through our descriptions? Given that our experiences are both diverse and singular, should we not assume that everyone else's experience is impossible to access in an immediate way? Vice versa, which problems and potentials emerge from strictly reducing articulation to one's own experiences or that of one's own social group?[2] Are there empirical conditions, which can lead us to convictions that should not be bracketed within the process of description, but which represent the very basis on which descriptions become necessary in the first place? Further, if we assume that descriptions can be transformative, what potential might they have to foster social and political change? And finally, what kind of conception of language is needed in order to account for its socially transformative effects?

## III. DESCRIPTION IN CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

Critical phenomenologists give answers to the above-mentioned questions. Authors such as Sara Ahmed (2006), Alia Al-Saji (2017, 2021), Lisa Guenther (2019, 2021), Johanna Oksala (2016, 2023), Mariana Ortega (2016), and Gayle Salamon (2018a, 2018b) all expand as well as renew the phenomenological method by carving out its potential for fine-grained social critique. They do so by acknowledging socially constituted differences within embodied and perceptual experiences, not least with regard to salient social categories such as race, gender, and class. Hence, they do not, for instance, only speak of the body as such, but question *which* body is at stake in a specific context. Critical phenomenology therefore offers descriptions of experiences of marginalized groups, assuming that these are insightful for a society as such to foster an understanding of the mechanisms of oppression, but also for rendering audible the ways in which the social situatedness of the describing subject fundamentally influences—if not determines—the description they will give.

[2] See Linda Martín Alcoff (1991) and Johanna Oksala (2023).

However, there has to be more to critical phenomenology than broadening the scope of experiences to be described. Like traditional phenomenologists, critical phenomenologists, too, must aim at clarifying their methodological stance, not least with regard to phenomenology's transcendental heritage. As Johanna Oksala explains, *critical* phenomenology needs to develop its own "distinct method" which should be distinguishable from classical phenomenological approaches, and it must clarify how the classical method can be "appropriated for the task of contemporary social critique" (2023, 138). However, this appropriation should not represent a simple extension of the themes covered. If critical phenomenology were to be defined only by the material it analyzes, it could not count as a branch of philosophy in its own right, but it would amount to "a non-philosophical application of phenomenology" (138). Accordingly, for this critical project to succeed, one must strive for more than, in Alia Al-Saji's (2017) words, "a shift in what is being described." Rather, critical phenomenology is about finding the courage for "creative reconfigurations of phenomenology" (146). Therefore, there must be a shift in *how* we describe—and how we define the task of description altogether. In short, in order to do justice to critical phenomenology, that is, making use of description in a way that is apt for critique, one must aim at *transforming* the phenomenological method itself.

In "What's Critical about Critical Phenomenology?," Gayle Salamon (2018b) investigates how the gesture of description must be adapted for social critique. She writes: "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). Hence, if the task of critical phenomenology is to describe while, at the same time, paying careful attention to the power structures behind what we gather is true, phenomenological description can never take place *ex nihilo*. On the contrary, it must not only be formulated from a specific stance within a specific historical and social setting, but it must also operate on the basis of assumptions that emerge from the social situation at stake. For instance, in the case of someone giving a description of a lived experience of racist violence, the person who would receive it as such a description has to have an understanding of what racism is and, to some extent, acknowledge that it exists on a structural level. In other words, critical phenomenological description is performed on the grounds of key critical assumptions such as the belief in the existence of fundamental inequality in the distribution of privilege or lack thereof; that is, unequal conditions with regard to the scope of experiences persons can have.

Accordingly, as Oksala makes clear, the phenomenological reduction as a method of detaching oneself from one's presuppositions should—at least within a critical context—not be confused with presupposed neutrality in an ethical or political sense (2023, 145). Instead of merely accepting, as a given, that experiences take place within a profoundly racist and sexist society, we should, she states, reflect on "how we have come to experience and understand the world around us as gendered and racialized, and how race and gender could be experienced otherwise" (142).

Viewed in such a way, critical phenomenology's self-ascribed project cannot be satisfied by providing an accurate articulation of a status quo but aims at opening up a future in which the occurrence of sexist and racist violence could become less pervasive altogether.

The historically, socially, and politically justified "presupposition" that the world we live in is constituted in a racist and sexist way is, then, not what needs to be bracketed away within the act of description, but what makes fine-grained description necessary in the first place. In short, in order for description to be a critical methodological tool, it must serve the cause of transformation, the latter implying changes of material conditions within a specific political and historical context. Lisa Guenther provides a cogent summary of this point:

> As a transformative political practice, critical phenomenology must go beyond a description of oppression, developing concrete strategies for dismantling oppressive structures and creating or amplifying different, less oppressive, and more liberatory ways of Being-in-the-world. In other words, the ultimate goal of critical phenomenology is not just to interpret the world, but also to change it. (2019, 16)

Going back to Merleau-Ponty's definition of the phenomenological task as describing rather than interpreting, Guenther's methodological approach goes beyond the scope of classical phenomenological methods (as described by Merleau-Ponty in the foreword to the *Phenomenology of Perception*), in a two-fold way: first, by referring to interpretation as one aspect of what is required within phenomenology and, second, by stressing the necessity of going even further than interpreting the world—by changing it.

In the above-mentioned quote, Guenther delivers an account of description that strives to be both interpretative and transformative. Thus, she opens a way to conceive of description as something else than a direct linguistic expression of a given experience. Critical description, in Guenther's understanding, both precedes and follows an interpretation of concrete "oppressive structures" (2019, 16). However, when she states that the critical phenomenological task goes beyond description based on interpretation, as it involves changing the world, she establishes a difference between interpretative description and political transformation. At the same time, as a critical phenomenologist, Guenther's main tools to participate in changing the world remain practices of description. So might the method of description, after all, have transformative-political potential in itself? To approach this question, I would now like to propose putting phenomenology in dialogue with another philosophical field, namely deconstruction. In what follows, I will explore the encounter between phenomenology and deconstruction guided by the question of whether, and under what conditions, the method of description can become an ally of social transformation. An investigation of deconstructivist approaches on language and phenomenological description shall prove helpful.

## IV. DECONSTRUCTION OR BEING (UN)DONE BY LANGUAGE

For now, debates on fruitful encounters between critical phenomenology and deconstruction remain limited.[3] This may come as a surprise, as there are many theoretical overlaps. In terms of its overall methodological premises, deconstruction resembles critical phenomenology in that it is attentive to both the potentials and limits of traditional Western philosophies which remain hidden to the eyes of their authors. Just like critical phenomenology, deconstructive work requires a careful and detailed reading of philosophical traditions and concepts by the person engaging with texts. Further, deconstruction, too, is not about negating the content or method of the text to be deconstructed but about taking it so seriously that a *surplus* of sense offers itself, an excess of meanings which unfolds regardless of the author's intentions in writing the original text. In other words, deconstruction pays attention to the complex logics undermining the explicit, intended logics of texts. As such, it seeks to uncover new and unforeseeable material for thought. However, critical phenomenology and deconstruction differ fundamentally in the way they accomplish the rediscovery of classical (phenomenological) works.[4] For Derrida, at the very heart of the transcendental phenomenological description of the lived body is inscribed an uncontrollable alterity.[5] In *The Voice and the Phenomenon,* Derrida writes: "phenomenology appears to us to be tormented, if not contested, from the inside, by means of its own descriptions" (2011, 6).

Derrida remains suspicious of classical phenomenology's self-definition as a philosophical method. On many occasions, he insists that deconstruction should not be understood as a method at all (1999, 284). As he has it, deconstruction cannot consist of set of strict guidelines to be applied. It cannot simply be implemented by an autonomous writing subject in control of language; such a view of deconstruction would merely reduce it to an application of the subject's will. Hence, deconstruction "cannot be applied, after the fact and from the outside, as a technical instrument of modernity. Texts deconstruct *themselves* by themselves" (1989, 123; emphasis in original). In short, Derrida gestures towards the power of language, which destabilizes the power of the writing subject.

Following Derrida, there is an irreducible and structural withdrawal at stake, which takes place at the very core of the phenomenological description and is due to language itself. Although Derrida does not give us a tangible method at hand, he offers clues as to how he wants his philosophical project to be understood:[6] "If I had to risk a single definition of deconstruction . . . I would say simply and without overstatement: *plus d'une langue*—both more than a language and no more of *a* language" (1989, 15; emphasis in original). "More than a language" signifies something other than "more than one experimental

[3] See Stella Gaon (2021) and Perry Zurn (2019).

[4] Altogether, Derrida does not perceive deconstructivist work as a type of critique. Rather, in his view, the term critique, in its philosophical connotation, must itself be deconstructed (1999, 284).

[5] Without being able to delve into details here, it should be mentioned that, for Derrida, this alterity lies in the temporal and intersubjective character of experiences.

[6] Derrida has, in fact, given several definitions of deconstruction—all of them of paradoxical in character (Lawlor 2014).

world" to describe; it does not refer only to the diversity of perceptual experiences which are available for description. What Derrida suggests, rather, is that language itself precedes the speaking, writing, and describing subject. If there is always more to language, then there is always more to the world than the language I speak, and, accordingly, there is always more to the language I speak than what I can comprehend and access.

The French word *plus,* signifying both "more" and "no more," also stresses the subject's potentially unbearable lack of control over language. The formulation points to a specific historical situatedness of the writing subject or group of subjects. Importantly, Derrida's reflection on the multiple dimensions of language is anchored in his own relationship to the French language, that is, the language of the colonizer in his birthplace, Algeria. In fact, his tentative definition of deconstruction should also be conceived of as a reply to colonial power(s) and as a rebuttal of colonizers's attempts to neutralize existing pluralities of language on colonized territory and stabilize their hegemony. More generally, I suggest that deconstructivist conceptions of language should be approached in such a twofold way: both as a way to thematize the structural alterity and uncontrollability of language, and as a groundwork to discuss the relation between contingent power structures, oppression, and language. For instance, Derrida's famous statement, "I only have one language; it is not mine," points both to the context of colonialism in which he was brought up, and to the structural withdrawal and lack of control that the subject faces through their fundamental intertwinement with language (1998, 1).[7] The world we are born into is always already linguistic, and language is shaped by social and historical dynamics and power structures. Hence, as individuals, we cannot master language in isolation from others.

In sum, Derridean thought focuses on how language both *does* and *undoes* the subject. Following deconstructivist approaches, we are incessantly subjected to language. Our being as such is inseparable from our linguistic being. However, we never get to fully *make* language our own. Accordingly, language does not belong to one subject that could make use of it, be it within the act of describing or to express or represent a given sense or experience. Language occurs and materializes between multiple subjects within specific historical settings. Language indissolubly links us to others as beings that are socially constituted. And further, language operates within mechanisms of oppression and violence that shape the specific historical context it occurs in. In short, language is structured socially and historically.

## V. LANGUAGE AS ADDRESS

To accurately characterize the deconstructivist understanding of language, I suggest it is imperative to turn to a concept largely ignored in phenomenological debates until now: the idea of language as address. By pointing to the structure of language as always

[7] This implies that all tentatives to reduce deconstruction to *either* a political, e.g., anti-colonial, *or* an abstract-structural project are dismissive of deconstruction's complex multiple logics as well as its self-understanding (Syrotinski 2007).

already addressed, Derrida (1979) makes it clear that solipsistically formulated description can only ever be phantasmagorical.[8] When we speak, write, or describe, we already address ourselves to others. If one can speak of a "primary function"[9] of language in a deconstructivist sense, then it might be that of a call, a movement towards the other in and through language a movement which is structured as an address.[10]

An understanding of language as a structure of address has various political implications, some of which remain overlooked by Derrida. Butler's reflections on the role of address in shaping subjectivity particularly highlight one such political consequence of viewing speech as address. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler (2005) takes up the question of how to conceive of a subject differently than as a solipsistic, reflexive entity. They do so by analyzing the ethical conditions of self-narration: "giving an account of oneself." This notion suggests that the linguistic structure of speaking for ourselves, speaking as an "I," is intertwined with the question of taking responsibility (for the self-narration at stake). They then go on to explain that "I"—in the linguistic as well as in the existential and social sense of the term—cannot *be* if no conditions of address are given. If I am always already interwoven with other subjects—subjects I need to address myself to, and to whom I respond when they address themselves to me—then my existence is not conceivable without the very possibility of interdependent acts of addressing. Through their reading of Adriana Cavarero's *Relating Narratives*, they claim that an "I" who is not in relation to a "you" would lose its very meaning—linguistically as well as socially. As Butler explains:

> For Cavarero, the "I" encounters not only this or that attribute of the other, but the fact of this other as fundamentally exposed, visible, seen, existing in a bodily way and of necessity in a domain of appearance. *This* exposure that I am constitutes, as it were, my singularity. I cannot will it away, for it is a feature of my very corporeality and, in this sense, of my life. (2005, 33; emphasis in original)

In this sense, address is nothing less than a condition for survival,[11] which is why Butler writes: "the scene of address can and should provide a sustaining condition for ethical deliberation, judgment, and conduct" (49). In other words, one must reflect under which conditions, both intersubjective and institutional, *address* takes place or should take place. Thus, what Butler names a "scene" of address offers a possibility to reflect on the place and

[8] For the implications of this, see Derrida's reading of Husserlian phenomenology in *The Voice and the Phenomenon* (2011).

[9] The word "function" risks suggesting that language can be operationalized according to an autonomous will.

[10] Hence, I do not claim that this is the only or the most important function of language as such. It is sufficient for me to point out one aspect that is particularly relevant in the context outlined here.

[11] Linking together Lisa Guenther's (2013) work on solitary confinement to the notion of address as a question of survival could offer a useful starting point to combine deconstructivist approaches to language with a critical phenomenological methodology. The claim that the situation of prisoners in solitary confinement must be understood as a kind of death could then be translated into the strict necessity of a possibility to address oneself to others.

time in which addressing occurs. Scenes of address are embodied and situated. Address is fostered under certain material conditions and rendered difficult under others.

Accordingly, it follows that comprehending address merely as an intersubjective and/or ethically motivated interaction between at least two individual subjects would be insufficient. Butler has pointed out on many occasions that modes of address can include scenes of violent institutional interpellation exemplified, for instance, in the paradigmatic illustration of a police officer hailing an individual on the street (1997, 106–31). Indeed, as Butler underlines in an interview given to *The New York Times* on the vital necessity of the Black Lives Matter protests, there are various *modes* of address, some of which have larger political relevance than others.

> Sometimes a mode of address is quite simply a way of speaking to or about someone. But a mode of address may also describe a general way of approaching another such that one presumes who the other is, even the meaning and value of their existence . . . We make such assumptions all the time about who that other is when we hail someone on the street (or we do not hail them). That is someone I greet; the other is someone I avoid. That other may well be someone whose very existence makes me cross to the other side of the road.

In the context of anti-black racism, "presuming who the other is" and addressing them as such, implies:

> [figuring] black people through a certain lens and filter, one that can quite easily construe a black person, or another racial minority, who is walking toward us as someone who is potentially, or actually, threatening, or is considered, in his very being, a threat. (Butler and Yancy 2015)

Therefore, rather than hastily jumping to the conclusion that address is always already ethical, Butler invites us to reflect on the various existing *modes* of address and on the material, historical, and social situations in which these addresses occur.

In "Violence, Nonviolence," Butler (2015b) questions the mode of address adopted by Jean-Paul Sartre in his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. Butler asks, notably: "To whom is this preface written?" (171). They soon offer their own answer by showing how Sartre's words are directed at "white brethren" only (172). Sartre invites white readers to listen to something that has in fact not been addressed to them. By doing so, Butler states, Sartre is establishing a way of "acting upon that reader, positioning him outside the circle and establishing that peripheral status as an epistemological requirement for understanding the condition of colonization" (174). Sartre seems to claim that his white fellows have been excluded from the scene of address. He attempts, thus, to reclaim that same space. Butler writes:

> When Sartre effectively says "'You' are not the intended reader of this text," he constitutes the group who ought to undergo the deconstitution

> of their privilege; in addressing them, however, he does not deconstitute them, but rather constitutes them anew. (2015b, 176)

By striving to broaden the scope of Fanon's scene of address, Sartre not only appears to identify his peer group with the colonized that is usually erased from this very scene, he also reinstalls the power of his very group by returning to them the privilege of the "always already addressed." Even if a further deconstruction of this Butlerian analysis is beyond the scope of this paper,[12] it should now be clear that the mode of address inscribed into articulated language always echoes and is inscribed in various, complex power structures.

## VI. TRANSFORMING DESCRIPTION, DESCRIBING TRANSFORMATION

I would now like to return to the central methodological focus of this paper: the contention that taking seriously the structure of language as address demands a fundamental reconceptualization of the phenomenological method of description. Admittedly, this constitutes a tall order. And if it can, under what specific conditions does the theoretical reconfiguration of phenomenological description become possible? As should have become clear, such a questioning is more than an abstract philosophical problem. It directly relates to critical inquiries on the discursive as well as material exclusionary effects of specific descriptions.

However, as mentioned earlier, an investigation of the transformative potential of descriptions informed by deconstruction must be attentive to both political and structural aspects of language. Language always happens with a structural lack of control. Thus, the goal of reconceptualizing phenomenology's method of description in light of deconstructivist insights cannot only consider what description should and can do. It also requires that we take into consideration what description does and *un*does—specifically, we need to recognize that whoever describes can never fully regulate or master language. The question remains, however, how such a conception of language can inform the method of critical phenomenological description? And conversely, how can such a renewed critical descriptive phenomenological project help to carve out new nuances in deconstruction?

Attentive phenomenological readers might think of the influence of Emmanuel Levinas's (1979) philosophy and, in particular, of his notion of the *face* that calls for a response. In fact, within the framework of Levinasian thought, the face can be understood as a gesture of address that falls together with an ethical imperative for responsivity.[13]

[12] Such a detailed reading of this text would require further investigation into Butler's (2015b) own reading of Fanon, especially with regards to what they conceptualize as Fanon's self-address. See also Eyo Ewara's (2020) problematization of this notion in Butler's text.

[13] I hereby do not refer to Levinas as a phenomenologist but as a philosopher who has extensively engaged with phenomenology. I would justify this distinction as a gesture of taking Levinas's own suspicion with regard to quick usages of the term "phenomenon" seriously. In his understanding, the face, that is, the

Derrida expressed skepticism towards some of Levinas's reflections in *Totality and Infinity*, as he judged the ethical notion of the face to be pre-linguistic (1978, 92).[14] Nonetheless, I would argue that linking Levinasian ethics to deconstructivist conceptions of language as address opens up new and interesting theoretical possibilities. While Levinas does not explicitly thematize the salient political and social implications of the notion of address, his thought still holds promising insights for the project of establishing a dialogue between (critical) phenomenology and deconstruction. Both movements, for instance, connect in their foundational aim of uncovering the hidden meanings and potential in classical authors's works.[15] But how can such a dialogue be achieved? The question of if and how the descriptive method can include deconstructivist conceptions of address remains.

My suggestion here is that if language is confronting us with the limits of what we can actively and consciously do with it, then completely reducing it to a methodological tool of expression must remain impossible. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Butler (1988) refers directly to the theme of an expression of a given content in phenomenology. Interestingly, they connect this topic back to the question of gender: "There is, in my view, nothing about femaleness that is waiting to be expressed; there is, on the other hand, a good deal about the diverse experiences of women that is being expressed and still needs to be expressed" (530–31). At first glance, this statement seems to suggest the necessity of broadening the scope of experiences to be described in critical phenomenology. However, Butler also adds: "caution is needed with respect to that theoretical language, for it does not simply report a pre-linguistic experience, but constructs that experience as well as the limits of its analysis" (531).[16]

If language "constructs" experience, then linguistic articulation cannot be reduced to a tool of expression of a given state or situation. In fact, if we can agree with the Butlerian claim that experience itself is formed through language, then we might have to admit that

Other, cannot be reduced to a phenomenon. See, for instance, the following passage, which explicitly refers to the phenomenological method of description:

> I do not know if one can speak of a "phenomenology" of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears . . . I think rather that access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! (Levinas 1985, 85)

[14] On this point, see Carla Schriever (2018, 71–72).

[15] Take, again, Lisa Guenther's (2013) work on solitary confinement, in which Levinas's work serves as its constitutive grounds.

[16] Note that by referring to the constructive character of language, Butler does not imply that nothing exists outside of language. Rather, they indicate that we do not have an access to the world, which would not be mediated through language. See Butler's reflection on the relationship between body, language and description (2015b, 20–22).

taking descriptive articulations to be expressions able to simply capture an already-set reality is theoretically insufficient. By extension, it follows that we may at times even lack the words to provide a complete account of the very analysis we undertake. At the same time, however, characterizing the position of the describing subject as one of "insufficiency" undervalues both the depth of Butler's account of language as well as the importance of descriptive work. For Butler, the point is not that language is insufficient, nor that our grasp of it is lacking; rather, their contention is that language can be conceived of as *transformative*. It "constructs" experience and shapes the world we live in.

If this is the case, then we can finally assume that there are ways in which descriptions, as acts of linguistic articulation, are in themselves transformative and even creative. However, this transformation would be the effect of an encounter. Transformative descriptions would need to be understood as a collective act, as a multiple structure of address belonging to more than one (if they belong to someone at all). As Butler writes, "categories and descriptions" are a part of the world we live in "before we start to sort them critically and endeavor to change or make them on our own" (2016, 24). In other words, our descriptions are embedded in multiple descriptions that have preceded us, only some of which have been directly addressed to us.

By making explicit that, for example, the body one describes is not a given entity with contingent experiences that allow for direct linguistic transposition, but that in its complexity it always already refers to a historicity and to power structures that transcend our own subjectivities, Butler displaces and decentralizes the subject. They radically rethink the subject in its constitution through concrete power relations. In the last few years, furthermore, Butler (2015a, 2022) has increasingly highlighted this embodied dimension of experience, thereby, again, explicitly referring to phenomenological authors and scholarship. These recent layers of their work amount to highly relevant starting points for a dialogue with critical phenomenology and should be included in future discussions of Butler's readings of phenomenology as well as its limits.[17]

Critical phenomenologists, too, have been attentive to the concrete conditions of access to phenomenological descriptions. Take, for instance, Sara Ahmed's article, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," in which she analyzes Husserl's situatedness as a philosopher starting with the physical position from which he performed most of his phenomenological work: the calm, sheltered setting of the philosopher's desk. Husserl's "familiar world begins with the writing table, which is in 'the room'. . . . *It is from here that the world unfolds*" (2007, 151; emphasis in original). Ahmed then opposes the starting point of Husserl's descriptions to that of Fanon.

Following Fanon, Ahmed thematizes how racialization modifies the ways subjects perceive, are perceived, and describe these experiences of both self and outside perception. In Fanon's descriptions, the habitual world is full of risks of oppressive, discriminatory, and violent encounters. Being racialized fundamentally influences, if not determines,

[17] These discussions are often centered around the relationship between phenomenological concepts of embodiment and performativity. On expressivity, see Sylvia Stoller (2010); on habit formation, see Maren Wehrle (2021).

the relationship to the world: habitual movements, gestures, "the being-at-ease" or lack thereof, to take up a term by Mariana Ortega (2016), with which a space is inhabited—such conditions of experience depend on the histories inscribed onto bodies. As Ahmed makes clear, "bodies are shaped by histories of colonialism, which makes the world 'white,' a world that is inherited, or which is already given before the point of an individual's arrival" (Ahmed 2007, 153). This is why "race then does become a social as well as a bodily given, or what we *receive* from others as an inheritance of this history" (154; emphasis in original). Race, as a both socially and bodily given, fundamentally changes the ways in which bodies orient in space: "*we inherit the reachability of some objects*, those that are 'given' to us, or at least made available to us, within the 'what' that is around" (154; emphasis in original). In other words, the surrounding that both frames and constitutes the experiences to be phenomenologically described, is inseparable from the (racial) situatedness of the describing subject. As Ahmed argues, when Husserl faced persecution as a Jewish-born person during the national-socialist regime,

> he literally lost his chair: he temporarily lost the public recognition of his place as a philosopher. It is no accident that such recognition is symbolically given through an item of furniture: to take up space is to be given an object, which allows the body to be occupied in a certain way. (160)

It is in this sensitivity to the tangible and embodied articulations of power or lack of power that the force of critical phenomenological descriptions lies. After all, Ahmed's own attentive work towards uncovering the underlying conditions of Husserl's phenomenological descriptions takes place *through* critical phenomenological descriptions.[18] With this in mind, I would now like to return to my leading question: *can we achieve political and social transformation through description?*

As should now be clear, I propose taking the complex functioning of language as address seriously, against the reduction of language to a tool of representation or expression of already given experiences. Understood in such a way, description as a mode of addressing oneself to others then becomes a way of inscribing oneself into the world, of leaving a trace in it, albeit one which may initially appear blurry, nearly invisible. Searching for the transformative potential of description thus can open up new perspectives on what a distinctly *critical* phenomenological practice might look like. In this vein, Guenther has hinted at the profound modification the critical phenomenological task entails by referring to Audre Lorde's intersectional feminist poetry. "For Lorde, poetry is both a descriptive practice of illuminating and articulating one's experience and also a transformative practice of changing the conditions under which one's experience unfolds" (Guenther 2019, 14). This quotation is significant for several reasons. Guenther's claim that practices, which are *both* descriptive and transformative can help change the very *conditions* of the experiences to be

[18] In fact, Ahmed herself even refers to a scene of interpellation, which she identifies in Althusser's work (2007, 157–58). It is the same scene that Butler offers an in-depth analysis of in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997, 106–31).

described and transformed. Guenther's statement helpfully draws out the methodological shifts implied in our endeavor. Following her reasoning, I suggest that we must aim at opening up a space for such descriptive and transformative practices to come forth—not only for ourselves, but also for others we are irreducibly linked to. Understood in this way, a methodological rearticulation of phenomenological description not only implies reflecting on the conditions under which our experiences and our phenomenological descriptions of them take place; it also demands that we reflect on the ways in which the descriptions of those experiences can render other descriptions possible, or risk to foreclose them. As I have shown, philosophical work on conditions of address requires a careful exposition of the power relations structuring these modes of address.

Again, taking critical phenomenology together with what I have called deconstructivist approaches to language can prove helpful here. The following questions should, further, provide some initial hints as to how reflecting on the mode of address in one's descriptions can critically inform the phenomenological method. Such questions that critical phenomenologists could ask include: How am I to describe in order to give space to other descriptions? What mode of address do I employ within my descriptions? Does my description foster other descriptions to come forth? If so, by whom? What language risks excluding specific groups from responding to my description, by adding descriptions of their own experiences? What are the limits of what I can describe? And finally, who are my descriptions addressed to?

Hence, taking the power of a socially structured language into account demands that we strive for an inclusion of others within this transformational linguistic process. Such an approach goes beyond a sheer broadening of the scope of experiences to be described. Rather, it is to be conceived of as a transformation of the method itself, which entails a transformation of the social effects investigated by phenomenological descriptions. In addition, critical phenomenological reflection on the method of description should include a conceptualization of how each linguistic act is shaped by a social linguistic environment. For instance, how can I give space to the encounters with others that rendered my descriptions possible in the first place? Hence, for one's own descriptions, describing in a critical way might require *describing the process of description itself*—including others we have learned from and the limits one sees oneself confronted with during that process. Such an additional methodological step is needed to prevent the critical phenomenological descriptive method from reflecting only the experience of the isolated philosopher at his writing table, as Sara Ahmed would have it. Rather, our descriptions should aim at showing how every reflection is based on our fundamental intertwinement with others.[19]

I argue that approaching the method of description through the methodological insights developed in this paper can help us see how description must not function as a mere summary of a problematic status quo but, rather, that it carries in it the opportunity to transform the situations described by phenomenologists from a critical perspective in

[19] I thank Alia Al-Saji for her response to my question as to whom our phenomenological descriptions are addressed. By addressing her descriptions "to other racialized folks," she showed a way that critical phenomenological description can offer tools to oppose academic philosophical practices of exclusion and white privilege.

socially and politically desirable ways. In other words, critical phenomenology needs, as Alia Al-Saji has put it, "description—which listens, checks, and questions"; description "so attentive that it can become transformative" (2017, 152).

## VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

My aim in this paper has been to examine whether the phenomenological method of description can be understood as transformative on a social and political level, and thus, able to go beyond the careful observation and diagnosis of the ways in which society needs to be changed. I have drawn on critical phenomenological approaches, which propose to use the phenomenological method of description for the goal of social transformation. Following contemporary debates in critical phenomenology, I have argued that phenomenology must not only broaden the scope of experiences to be described, including experiences of sexist and racist discrimination, but it must strive to transform its own method to become apt at serving critical causes. For such a methodological shift to take place, I have stressed the theoretical advantages of turning to deconstruction and to its specific conception of language as socially constituted and transformative. The concept of language as a structure of address seems particularly suited to support critical attempts aiming at the modification of the method of description. Following both Derrida and Butler, I discussed language not as an expressive tool used to translate given experience, but rather, as something which shapes the experiences described. I have argued that the transformative potential of language is due to its inherently social character, in the way that articulated language is always already addressed to others that shape the experience at stake. However, it should be clear from my argument that such multiple structures of address are neither exclusively nor primarily set on an intersubjective level; they should be understood to reflect concrete material power structures. Hence, I have argued that in order to foster change that is desirable from a critical perspective, one needs to work on the conditions of address. Such a deconstructivist approach sheds new light on the method of description and is thus apt at informing and broadening critical phenomenological approaches. Description can function as a collective tool of critical social transformation if it includes a reflection on the mode of address it employs, as well as on the methodological ways to attest to how others have participated in the description one has delivered. Hence, description, as linguistic articulation, can not only prove transformative but, if embedded in an attentive consideration of its own social character, appropriate for fostering critique. In consequence, I argue that linking critical phenomenology to deconstruction opens up new theoretical avenues for such practices of transformative description.

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