PUNCTA
Journal of Critical Phenomenology

BOOK REVIEW

50 CONCEPTS FOR A CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

EDITED BY GAIL WEISS, ANN V. MURPHY, AND GAYLE SALAMON (2020)

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When the history of critical phenomenology in the early twenty-first century comes to be written, it will be the story of a thought whose time had come. Certain books and articles will feature in the timeline and certain thinkers' names will be prominent on the lists. Indeed, the possibility of a Newton-Leibniz style debate over who started it all cannot be ruled out. But it seems clear already that critical phenomenology did not have a single point of origin at all, and will turn out to have emerged in several places at once as thinkers of the new century took up and took on the tradition of phenomenology that had ripened in the old. Many will have had the experience of thinking up the term, or finding it showing up surreptitiously in their writing and teaching, or having it trip off the tongue as they described what they were working on, only to then start finding it everywhere. At a conference in 2017, I was discussing it with a handful of colleagues when a new person joined the conversation, interjecting: "Critical phenomenology? Is that a thing?" Without hesitation and in unison we replied: "Yes, it's a thing."

One great advantage of this work, *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, is that it quickly corrects the hopes of anyone who would come in search of a definition; we will not be told by any of the 52 contributors and editors exactly what sort of *thing* critical phenomenology is. The title alone gives it away. If critical phenomenology has become a thing, it declares, it's because a lot of people have started doing a lot of different sorts of work, along the way producing tools for an approach to the world that will be critically phenomenological, and phenomenologically critical. The first line of the editors' introduction presents Maurice Merleau-Ponty's question: "What is phenomenology?" The second notes that it is a question that remains unanswered. The third sets aside the project of answering it and instead commits the volume to the work of honoring the generative principle contained in that question. In this sense, critical phenomenology is nothing new, and it might be argued that phenomenology has been critical all along. After all, rejecting the natural attitude is the first move of any phenomenological investigation, and that means encountering the world otherwise, undermining all at once the processes of naturalization that work to enforce

the conviction that how things are is the only way they *can* be and/or the way they *ought to* be. Suspending the natural attitude is the first step toward imagining the world otherwise, which is also the first step toward revolution.[1]

Learning the history of phenomenology in the late twentieth century, one could have been forgiven for missing that. All of the following facilitated an understanding of phenomenology as methodical, transcendental, serious, scientific, beautiful, even therapeutic, but not political: studying consciousness, intentionality, and cognition; navigating examples of lecterns, tables, and hands touching hands; knowing of the famous and infamous political engagements of the practitioners of phenomenology but being encouraged to think that they happened elsewhere, off-stage, in other texts; accepting the received wisdom that engaged political thinking could only happen within the apparently unsurpassable horizon of Marxism; ceding the field of revolutionary thought to critical theorists who oriented themselves to this horizon, and, in the process, losing access to the political use of the word *critique* itself; seeing thinkers whose work was both phenomenological and critical energetically reject being described as phenomenologists (as Michel Foucault did) or indeed as philosophers (as Hannah Arendt did). The sort of objects regarded as suitable for phenomenological investigation appeared not to include power, sovereignty, political institutions, or the *res publica*. The phenomenological method, with its transcendental aims, was assumed to work independently of the differential positions of the worldly, flesh-and-blood phenomenologists doing the work. Now, with so much compelling work under way and the right conceptual tools laid in front of us, we have no excuse for not recognizing the imbrication of phenomenology and the political, which is to say for not acknowledging the *critical* dimension of phenomenology.

An exhaustive review of this volume would be hard to make comprehensible, so I hope the reader will bear with me as I try to capture how the volume has pushed my thinking, knowing that I will fall short in the process. The chapters are bracingly short—2,500 words—and several treat classical phenomenological issues such as method, immanence and transcendence, time and temporality, the ontological difference, and the natural attitude. Many deal with the body—intercorporeality, the habit body, confiscated bodies, the racial epidermal schema, the normate—while many more deal with recognizably political themes—decoloniality, model minorities, borderlands, collective temporalities, and trans phenomena. Yet these sub-divisions are hardly helpful, since, for example, the chapter on epistemological ignorance is about knowledge and also racism; the one on ontological expansiveness makes us think about ontology but also privilege; and both "Queer Orientations" and "*Sens*/Sense" make us think about directedness, queerness, and meaning. Themes resonate from chapter to chapter throughout the book in surprising and generative ways. For this reason, the editors were wise to avoid corralling the contributions

[1] Revolutions may be a matter of politics or science, but the word may also be used more broadly to describe the shift that happens as a new generation takes on the work of inheriting the world. See Hannah Arendt (1968).

under sub-headings. Instead, the chapters, listed alphabetically by title, are allowed to stand on their own terms, which is to say, free to take a place in the context a reader builds for them on any given occasion. So, while a reader might sometimes approach it as an anthology and sometimes as a handbook, it is above all a book of provocations. As Arendt might put it, the thinking encountered here will have the effect of keeping thought in motion.

This is my justification for a review that traces the path of this particular reader's thinking. As I open the volume now, I have in mind a particular question about critical phenomenology, springing from a colleague's comment about the transcendental move in phenomenological research. "Does there have to be a transcendental element?" someone asked. "Of course," my colleague replied. "Without that you're just doing autobiography." I am puzzling over what's at stake in that *just*. What is it about the difference between phenomenology and autobiography that makes possible—even requires—the demotion of *mere* autobiography? What is the difference between what becomes of my lived experience when it is the beginning of a phenomenological investigation, and what becomes of it when it is part of the writing of a life?

At the same time, more specifically, I am asking how what's in front of me addresses the project I happen to be working on right now, the thing that preoccupies me. In this case, I'm thinking about democracy as a break with the rule of *genos*—family, clan, tribe—and the time of *demos* as a rupture with the time of *genos*. In Athens, access to rule was allocated on the basis of birth and inheritance until Cleisthenes's reform of 508 B.C.E. He designated districts or *demes* so that one now participated in political life as the member of a *deme*, not a family. That is to say, he created a distinctively democratic space that lacked its own version of the temporal ordering principle that is central to *genos*-life, and created the problem of democratic time. Can there be a distinctively democratic temporality? Can some of these 50 concepts help?

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"The Phenomenological Method" is the place to start, and Duane H. Davis's initial move is an excellent opener, in all senses. He writes: "[Edmund] Husserl . . . invokes a transcendental turn that is grounded in the reflective power of the transcendental ego, but surely all of this matters to us only if it pertains to matters-at-hand" (3). The transcendental element is always a turn, a move, a reaching towards and, if it has been understood as reaching towards a transcendental universality, we should not forget that it is also a matter of reaching from here. The eidetic reduction aims at providing access to invariant essential structures, but it happens at the same time as the phenomenological reduction, which aims to give free access to real experience of the phenomena (5). Together they reach not for *the* transcendental subject, but for a field of transcendental subjectivity. We can think of many sorts of first person narrative that fall short of that ambition—chit-chat, telling anecdotes, or giving descriptions of one's meals on Facebook and Instagram—but the form of autobiography, the writing of one's life, involves reaching for a plane on which

my experience opens access to something general, whether experience of growth, love, pain or loss, or the very experience of the arc of an existence.

At this point, Dorothea Olkowski's "Time/Temporality" offers an array of phenomenological approaches to time from Husserl to Simone de Beauvoir and Alia Al-Saji, and a study of autobiographical time might find a place here in Olkowski's piece. Linda Martín Alcoff's "Public Self/Lived Subjectivity" describes the disjuncture often felt by persons of color and others between their public selves and their lived selves, provoking questions about what the *auto* in *autobiography* might mean. And peppered through several chapters are references to Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), with its mining of autobiographical elements in Husserl's phenomenology and phenomenological reflections on the specifics of her own experience. "Just autobiography" might be a reference to bad autobiography that never manages to reach beyond narcissistic musings, in which case phenomenologists do right to establish their distance from it. It may express a lack of understanding of the thought and craft required to write one's life and of the forms of truth that emerge in autobiographical writing. In this case, distinguishing phenomenology from autobiography is warranted, but the dismissal of mere autobiography as though it fell short of phenomenology is not. Yet "just autobiography" may also be evidence of a commitment to the value of phenomenology as a method of purification and a desire to preserve that quest for purity. This last is where Davis's article comes to bear most pointedly. The pursuit of a reliable mechanism for the purification of knowledge was a constant in Husserl's thinking, since it is the only thing that would win out against the limitations, biases, errors, and vicissitudes of everyday experience and theoretical presuppositions (5). The result is not thin or merely formal, and the natural attitude remains available even as it overlaps with other attitudes—the biological attitude, the geographic attitude or—why not?—the autobiographical attitude. At the same time, existential phenomenology allows that our identities are intersectional identities where differences overlap. Subjectivity is intersubjective; our relations with others are co-transcendental; the transcendental ground is not holy ground, as Davis so aptly puts it. Subjectivity is always subject to structures it cares about and describes critically (8).

Which structures we care about, and which we decide we need to describe critically, is not a phenomenological matter, but phenomenology does have something to say about *how* we come to care. We generally approach the world in the natural attitude, taking it for granted and experiencing it as no more than what *is*, but in the chapter on the natural attitude, Lanei M. Rodemeyer points out that, for Husserl, the natural attitude is "neither just a self-evident fact nor a mere starting point but rather an approach that garners its own phenomenological insights, [which] contemporary and critical approaches in philosophy today are able to employ in a variety of effective ways—as can be seen in this volume" (240). In terms of my present project, I know that certain pre-phenomenological experiences of the world led me to attend to the phenomenon of *genos*, among the many that contributed in ways I will never know: the universal experience of being a child of somebody; the experience of family and extended family; the autobiographical particularity of growing up in the cultural and political context of nationalist Ireland; the experience of emigration,

first to England and then to the United States; a philosophical curiosity about the experience of belonging to a generational group, which grew as I became teacher and a parent, and as the older generation began to pass away; and a curiosity about how political institutions attend to the crimes of their past, which led to the study of patterns of Holocaust commemoration and an interest in the political phenomenon of genocide. The compulsion to attend to this, here, now arises in the midst of a life, and the method we choose for responding to it might be a matter of placing experience in the narrative arc of a biography, working to make good on the implicit promise of biographical writing that the part will make sense in the whole of a life, and that this sense can be shared. Or we may respond by undertaking phenomenological analysis, which uncovers sense in the shared structures of experience. What this volume demonstrates is that the phenomenological method entails a way of reflecting on the questions and questioner, on intersubjectivity, and on the transcendental, co-transcendental, and quasi-transcendental that makes sure that we never take the sharing of sense for granted.

Phenomenology requires an experience to get to work on, and the crucial one here is that of belonging to a generational group, the sort of group I gather under the name *genos.* In the natural attitude, we can pass over experiences of *genos* as just what it is to be a daughter, a descendant, an Irishwoman; we belong to a family, a group of relatives, a nation. Suspending the natural attitude and setting the experience of generational belonging between brackets means becoming attentive to a set of relationships with those who came before us as well as those who come—or *may* come—after, and attending to the temporality that characterizes our overlapping with those who are older and younger in a shared world. Mark Ralkowski's "Being-toward-Death" encourages us to think, after Heidegger, of anxiety in the face of death as a way "to make our lives our own" (43). From the point of view of generations, this suggests that my life *becomes* my own as I receive it from those who gave it in bringing me into the world. We are for others before we are for ourselves, and by the time we come to think of ourselves as beings in a world, we have already been here for some time. This is the syncopated temporality of natal existence. Likewise, we receive the world from those who went before and we bequeath it to those who come after according to the overlapping temporality of generational existence. Kyle Whyte's "Collective Continuance" extends this thought of relation, and at the same time shows the contingency of Heidegger's decision to start with the experience of death as one's ownmost possibility. While Heidegger described our temporality as futural, Anishinaabe thinkers instead begin from a set of relationships experienced according to a spiral temporality, and describe them in a language that has just one word for both *descendant* and *ancestor* (54).

We are the sort of beings that exist in relation, but the relations we first emerge into do not always form a context for belonging. Fit cannot be taken for granted, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's thought of misfitting asks us to rethink the experience of non-belonging as itself politically powerful (225-30). Misfitting is offered here as a way of experiencing disability, but is also a universalizable "contingent and fundamental fact of human embodiment" (229). Language of generational continuity and the natural cycles of birth and death encourage us to think of our arrival as a matter of coming into a world that

has a place prepared for us, but the arrival of a misfit forces us to think again. What norms shaped the expectations of the ones who anticipated us? Who did they think we would be? Perhaps the place I came into was a nurturing and protected place, but it could have simultaneously been a constricting and oppressive place. Garland-Thomson's attention to marginalized experience shows the contingency of belonging both as a universal experience and as the starting point for a phenomenological project. "Misfitting" makes me confront the thought that coming to be in relation is a matter of both arriving into a place made for us and making a place for ourselves, reshaping the world in the process.

These relations are embodied relations (see Scott Marratto's "Intercorporeality," 197-202) and they happen in the geographical places we inhabit or travel through (see Natalie Cisneros's "Borderlands and Border Crossing," 47-52). Yet the body is never a mere body or a merely natural body (see Jenny Slatman's "The *Körper/Leib* Distinction," 203-10) and the very experience of border crossing and being crossed by borders shapes other ways of belonging, other ways of understanding and being a *genos*, and other sorts of embodied, mixed consciousness (see Elena Ruíz's "Mestiza Consciousness," 217-23). Belonging will have to be approached as a matter of givenness and as an activity charged with political potential for those who, perforce or by choice or, like Arendt's conscious pariah, perforce *and* by choice, move between places. Andrea J. Pitts calls it willful world-traveling ("World-Traveling," 343-50, following María Lugones). Mariana Ortega describes her response in "Hometactics": "We engage in practices that allow us to feel comfortable and to get a sense of belonging in various spaces, including ones that are not welcoming or that highlight membership in communities with whom we don't share identity markers" (169).

If *genos* is a matter of embodied, generational identity, then *demos* responds to that way of being. In sixth century B.C.E. Athens, it was a way to disrupt the power of the city's quarreling aristocratic families, and to put an end to the fanatical study of parentage that was being used as a way of excising all but true-born Athenians from the citizenship rolls. Families were not abolished but set aside. Since the *demos* is not given, and everyone had to choose his *deme*. *Demos*, then, is the community that has no identity markers other than its own; one belongs as a demesman, without adjuncts or hyphenations.

Yet do citizens of real existing democracies experience their citizenship like this now? Despite decades of philosophical deconstruction and theoretical critique of nationhood and statehood, we continue to organize ourselves into nation states; when it comes to political belonging, national identity and state administration are what give it its shape and character. That is to say, turning our phenomenological attention to the experience of belonging to a *demos* will have the advantage of setting these aside, recognizing them as social imaginaries generated by and around us (see Moira Gatens's "Imaginaries," 181-87), often taking the form of controlling images that both offer and deny us possible ways of being, or offer possibilities for some and constraints for others (see Patricia Hill Collins's "Controlling Images," 77-82). The critical response to oppressive imaginaries is counterimaginaries, creative appropriations of a disputed past that open new paths to a projected future (185), but it is not yet clear that the *demos* can be imagined in these

ways. The *demos* is a thought without a figure, an aspiration that constantly sloughs off its descriptors as overdeterminations; it is the citizenry, being and acting now, and we belong to the *demos* by virtue of our being and acting together.

Part of the problem is this "now." *Genos* constitutes a pattern of inheritance that marks continuity in generational change; for Cleisthenes, *demos* was the interruption of that *genos* temporality. The Beauvoirian perspective on time Olkowski describes may help here: "We come into the world that is already there and that contains meanings sedimented through other lives so as to give us a sense of the world as real. This world is thus intersubjective but also open to the creation of new possibilities" (325). *Demos* time will have to be thought in tandem with *genos* time, as the time of interruption and openness in the face of continuity. This is also the time of revolution, and the thought of an irruptive community without identity will always be a powerful critical tool. But *demos* time is not just about miraculous or messianic intervention. The interruption itself is an opening to the expression of other temporalities: election cycles, sessions of legislatures, rituals of leadership, festivals of citizenship, the sovereign temporality of war, the seasons of migration, the routines of policing and the time done in prison, to be sure, but also the temporalities of work, home, sickness, social care, and social reproduction. More than an imagined phenomenon, *demos* is the scene of imagining and counterimagining. Far removed from the glory of a revolutionary interruption, but also removed from the identity-generating structures of the *genos*, there is the mundane temporality of maintenance, what psychologist Lisa Baraitser calls the time of the "on-go." It is the time of "the disavowed durational activities behind every person, situation or phenomenon, behind every institution, and art object, and behind the maintenance of everyday life" (Baraitser, 2015, 27, 21). Perry Zurn's "Social Death" (309-14) picks up the thought of social death initiated by Orlando Patterson and developed by Claudia Card in a way that is provocative here; his re-reading suggests that failures on the level of the "on-go" produce an insidious, slow violence that spreads suffering while remaining all but invisible because those who suffer are marginalized people, already pushed toward oblivion such as young people caught up in the school-to-prison pipeline in the U.S., rural communities sickened by toxic drift, or island people losing their land to rising seas. He quotes Lauren Berlant: "Slow death prospers . . . in temporal environments whose qualities and whose contours in time and space are often identified with the present-ness of ordinariness itself, that domain of living on, in which everyday activity; memory, needs, and desires; diverse temporalities and horizons of the taken-for-granted are brought into proximity" (Berlant 2007, 759-60, cited by Zurn on 312). The democratic interruption means turning to what is not given and what may not be taken for granted. It also means that, after the interruption of *genos* time, temporality is an unsettled question for the ensuing democratic forms of life. This would seem to set democracies up for a habit of examination not seen in other political forms; if democracy is the scene for the expression of many temporalities, it will matter *which* temporalities are given expression. That is to say, democracies are subject to calls to responsibility for preserving the ability of citizens to be and act together, and constitute a *demos*, in ways that may not be wholly prescribed, and that will not always be punctual. They are also subject to demands for justifications in the case of specific exclusions, as in the exclusion of immigrants as late-comers. Why then do

real existing democracies appear unwilling or unable to see the violence that traps people in a school-to-prison pipeline and legislates poverty? Why is it still the case that, as Zurn puts it, violence leaks across taxonomic boundaries and borderlands? Why are the borders and seas that separate the democracies of the North from the Global South the scene of growing violence and mounting death? Why is this understood as "the immigrant problem" rather than an effect of the perennial contingency of democratic boundaries?

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I moved through the chapters of this volume as if I were choosing my own adventure in a Netflix episode. But the point of the Netflix trick is to give viewers a sense of agency by allowing them to follow different routes to one of a few possible endings, whereas I have reached no end: neither the end of the book nor an end of thinking about my current question, nor the end of my questions about critical phenomenology. The volume has resources I have not touched upon and the question of my *demos/genos* project has been complicated by what I have read. Meanwhile, my questions about critical phenomenology have multiplied. Lewis R. Gordon argues for the compatibility of transcendental phenomenology, Marxism, and existential thought (20); could that be the beginning of an account of how phenomenology and critical theory diverged historically, and the ways in which they may converge now? Foucault surfaces in several chapters, but in the introduction to *The Order of Things* (1994) he can't find enough bad things to say about phenomenology. What currents of philosophical and political thinking intersected in that historical moment to make that rejection essential? Meanwhile, Arendt liked to state publicly that she did not consider herself a philosopher, but her training was in phenomenology and her writings in political theory enact her version of the method *as critique*. What forces made the disavowal of philosophy necessary while the tacit avowal of phenomenology remained possible? Heidegger's philosophical might and political shame will be part of the story in both cases, though only part. It is worth noting that, though virtually all the contributors to this volume are philosophers, phenomenology escaped the bounds of the discipline a long time ago; critical phenomenological work has been going on among sociologists, anthropologists, feminist theorists in various fields, and others for a long time, and is increasingly theorized as such (see Desjarlais and Throop 2011, Ram and Houston 2015). In those disciplines, scholar practitioners think a lot about the relation between theory and practice, their commitments constantly challenged by deep experience in the field. Workers in those fields will certainly find this volume useful, though they may also wonder what took philosophy so long. I hope they will bear with us. Marx and Engels told us long ago that philosophers interpreted the world when it was also necessary to change it. Lisa Guenther ends her "Critical Phenomenology" chapter with a reference to that thesis: "The ultimate goal of critical phenomenology is not just to interpret the world, but also to change it" (16). Change requires interpretation, which requires attentive experience, which at its best broadens and deepens our sense of the world.

I recently heard a young scholar describe plans for her doctoral thesis, a sophisticated politically-oriented work of phenomenology. Summing up the project she said, simply: "I'm trying to make sense of my own experience." In writing this review I have had her and a new generation of phenomenologists in mind, thinking to empower them further in the work of inheriting a tradition and renewing it by putting it to work in the examination of their complex, intersectional, twenty-first century lives. But I think they already feel empowered. Scholars training in phenomenology now have easy access to the language and techniques of critique, thanks to the work of these editors and contributors, among others. Rather than feeling compelled to shed their overlapping identities as a condition for thinking, they understand the power of thinking in and through those identities and speaking from a distinctive place in the world.

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