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CRISIS, ALTERITY, AND TRADITION: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION TO CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

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Delores' five grandchildren, ranging in age from five to thirteen, are piled on her bed, a favorite cozy spot for family gatherings. Delores lives in a modest house in a predominantly Black neighborhood on the eastern outskirts of Los Angeles. She is the matriarch of her household, which is comprised of these grandchildren and two of her adult daughters, the children's mothers. The children are facing Delores' television. Delores sits to one side, outside the main scene of action where the children lean against one another, affectionate, teasing. They have gathered to watch a recording we (on the research team) have made of a local parade where three of them have performed as members of the Pasadena Rodeogirls Drill Team and one of them is in the accompanying, all male, Drum Squad. The parade features a performance competition among local Los Angeles area drill teams. These are judged informally by spectators lining the Pasadena streets and formally by a panel of judges who award prizes.

Delores' grandchildren watch the video footage intently, gauging the quality of the performance of rival teams. They joke as they comment and point out people they recognize. This includes their mother Marcy who stands on the sidelines of the passing parade. She has her back to the camera but at some point she turns and sees that the camera is aimed toward her. She waves with a grin. The children on the bed laugh at this. As their team comes into view, the children's attention stills. One of the girls (Latoya) exclaims, face lighting up "Oh there we go!" She points to the corner of the screen where she and two of her sisters can be seen executing their elaborate stepping routine. The other children lean in, following her gaze. With surprised awe she exclaims, "We look tight! We are SO tight!" And they are. Their performance is expertly choreographed, steps perfectly synced as they prance along the street in front of the judges. The bedroom is momentarily silent as the children stare at the television, mesmerized. Two of the girls on the bed sway along with the dance rhythms of the performers (which include themselves) without seeming to notice they are doing so, their moving arms a perfect muted mimicry of the movements displayed on the television screen.

Once their team has passed out of view and the drum squad follows, teasing resumes. One of the girls jokes with her brother Leroy, who is in the drum squad and not known for his physical prowess, "What is Leroy *doing*?" She laughs. "What are you *doing* Leroy?" she repeats, laughing harder. (Leroy ignores her jibes.) The children are disappointed we have neglected to record the performance of their well-known competitors from South Central Los Angeles, the Compton Sounders. Jeanine, the videographer, tells them that their team, the Rodeogirls, have some routines similar to the Sounders. They are affronted by this comparison. "We don't like them," Latoya pronounces, annoyed. "They think they're gangbangers." Leroy nods. "Sometimes we get into it with them," he adds. "We battle against 'em." He recounts, with gleeful disapproval, an incident in which the Sounders did not act with appropriate decorum. "One time we were battling against them and they got in our faces." (Battles are informal drill team competitions than the parade they are watching. They take place in neighborhood streets when two or more teams "face off" in semi-improvised team exhibitions where no official judges are present but crowd applause determines winners.) Leroy is interrupted as others offer evaluations of passing teams, noting costumes as well, an important ingredient of the performance. The "Blacks and Blues" meets with special approval because their outfits are cleverly kitted out in varying shades of blue and "They have the hats and everything," Teisha explains enviously.

PART ONE: CRISIS AND RESPONSE

The theme of this special issue is crisis, precipitated by a pandemic. How is this small moment, children watching a video of their performance in a local parade, of any relevance? What can we learn about crisis by considering it carefully, by paying close attention? What context is required to recognize this *as* a particular, a part of larger social and historical scenes while *also* attending to its singularity? How might we follow the children's surprise and wonder in that one interruptive moment to perceive an alterity, an unruly "out of orderness"—to paraphrase Bernhard Waldenfels (2011)—that accompanies their engagement in a traditional cultural practice? Finally, how might a certain mode of critical attention to such a moment allow us to rethink our ready generalizations about crisis? The project of this article is to address these questions.

The presence of a pandemic, the crisis it has posed, leads Judith Butler (2022) to ask in their lead article (this issue): What is it to have a world? Butler suggests "that something about the pandemic makes us reconsider the world as our object of scrutiny, register the world as a cause for alarm, mark the fact that this present version of the world was not anticipated, and register the world as bearing a new kind of opacity rather suddenly and as imposing a new set of limits" (13). This alarming world, rendered suddenly opaque, also provokes Butler to ask: What *is* a livable life? "To make a demand for a livable life," they further state, "is to demand that a life has the power to live. If we ask the question, what makes a life livable, we do so precisely because we know that under some conditions it surely is not, that there are unlivable conditions of poverty, incarceration, or destitution or social and sexual violence" (18).

One does not just live in a crisis: a crisis calls for action. Etymologically, from the Greek krisis, it is a turning point or a moment of decision. It not only alters perception; it alters the demands for living. It stands out from the everyday. If we follow Gail Weiss (2008), we could say that a crisis is a moment when the ground called "ordinary life" is interrupted in such a way that it no longer functions as an out-of-awareness backdrop but itself becomes the visible figure. But what happens when the ground is already permeated by crises, large and small? How should we think about crisis when we cannot call upon a simple binary—times of crisis and somehow livable normal times? How to think, conceptually, about those communities who live with what is variously termed "slow death" (Berlant 2011), "slow violence" (Nixon 2011), or "chronic crisis" (Vigh 2008) that make the everyday a source of such continual threat that crisis and non-crisis shade into one another? I ask these questions in the context of my twenty-year history of research in African American communities in which families are caring for children with disabilities and chronic illnesses. The queries I have added to Butler's arise in light of this extended research in the greater Los Angeles area.

I call upon this research, as well as upon the phenomenological concepts of alterity and tradition (as horizon) to deepen what we can learn about crisis. Theoretically, this article primarily confines itself to scholarship in philosophical and anthropological critical phenomenology. Though I cannot pursue it here, the Black radical tradition has much to say about the issues I will raise. They have considered life after, and during, crisis, examining fugitive forms of creativity, experiment, flourishing, that have grown up under historically oppressive conditions, including slavery. Within this scholarly tradition, it has been important to not only expose centuries of horror but also to document practices and traditions of creative response, even what one might call a "fugitive alterity," that have remained largely hidden from view of dominant white society (hooks 1990; Glissant 1997; Moten 2003; Hartman 2019; Spillers 2003; Sharpe 2016).

Social media and news accounts are documenting how the COVID-19 pandemic is currently unfolding within the African American community. These accounts provide a starting place but they can only take us so far in unraveling crisis as a concept and a form of experience that is locally lived.

"WE WERE ALREADY IN A CRISIS": COVID-19 IN THE AFICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY: 2020 – 2021

It was apparent by spring 2020 how much harder the African American community was being hit by the pandemic as compared to the non-Black population. Several surveys conducted by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) documented the raw statistics. A June 2020 survey showed one-third of hospitalized COVID-19 patients were non-Hispanic Black people, though that group represented only eighteen percent of residents in the surveyed communities. Another CDC study, published April 29, 2020, found that Black people made up eighty-three percent of COVID-19 hospitalizations in Georgia, a disproportionate level compared with overall hospitalizations (Gold et al. 2020). Death

rates are higher for Black COVID-19 patients in large urban areas such as New York, Milwaukee, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and New Orleans. One in ten Americans are Black, but Black people account for one in four of COVID-19 deaths (Collier 2020).

Disparities have been documented in other ways. Several polls done in June 2020, for example, found that eleven percent of African Americans said they were close with someone who has died from COVID-19, compared with five percent of Americans overall and four percent of white Americans (Stafford and Fingerhut 2020). In February 2021, in an opinion piece for *The Guardian*, Gilbert et al. continued to note the disparities of illness and death for Black Americans, citing the latest statistics that "show a persistent racial disparity in Covid-19 cases and deaths." They particularly examined one key factor playing a role in these disparities—lack of access to proper care (Gilbert et al 2021).

These grim statistics are supplemented with chilling personal anecdotes of denial of care. On December 4, 2020, Susan Moore, a Black physician who subsequently died of COVID-19, made a video of her treatment at the hands of white physicians that was widely circulated. *The Washington Post* reports:

> Struggling to breathe and pausing between sentences, Susan Moore mustered enough energy to record herself from her hospital bed, where she was being treated for covid-19, the illness caused by the coronavirus. The message she shared: Not even her status as a doctor shielded her from the inferior medical care long endured by other African Americans. Her White doctor didn't believe she was short of breath, she said—even though he knew he was treating a fellow licensed physician. Staff at the hospital near Indianapolis attempted to discharge her early, Moore said. And her pleas for medication to quiet pain in her neck was met with sneers, she said. "I was crushed. He made me feel like a drug addict. And he knew I was a physician. I don't take narcotics … I put forward and I maintain if I was White, I wouldn't have to go through that. (Nirappil 2020)

Bleak headlines summarize data from polls, newspaper article reports and preliminary research studies. They underscore the intensity of the situation for the Black community, the pernicious intersections of impoverished living conditions, lack of access, stigmatization, and a history of mistrust of the health care system rooted in hundreds of years of mistreatment. All these factors contribute to making African Americans the most adversely affected population in the United States in terms of deaths, anxiety levels, and burdens of care (Snowden and Snowden 2021).

In one sense, it is accurate to say that the Black community faces a distinctive health crisis with the unleashing of a new virus into the world's human population. For African Americans, it has engendered a situation in which denial of care for this specific disease is bound up with a history of institutionalized violence toward Black communities. The rise of COVID-19 has intersected with other lethal threats that have become widely publicized during this same historical moment, most notably the police murder of George Floyd. But another feature of this pandemic is equally chilling: it is all too familiar. It is both a unique crisis and a continuation. Here is how Dr. Uché Blackstock, a Black physician, former

associate at the NYU School of Medicine and founder of Advancing Health Equity, put it in an interview:

> So our healthcare system is founded on racism, and our communities have been essentially made sick by racism. We carry the highest disease burden in almost every parameter. We were already in a *crisis.* (Stafford and Fingerhut 2020, italics in original).

This disturbingly familiar tale is not complete by itself, however. Headlines also hint at a story that does not focus solely on health devastation. Here is one: *"Why Is COVID-19 Killing So Many Black Americans? The answer, according to researchers, is racism. But the Black community is fighting back*" (Collier 2020). Subtitles like this one register something else, a qualifying "but." They underscore the importance of recognizing that the Black community is not only the victim of racism but also a community that mobilizes to respond to crisis. How can we deepen our understanding of what is suggested by this modest qualifier? How can we allow it to gain conceptual purchase and disturb "common sense"?

RESPONDING: MAKING A WAY OUT OF NO WAY

While it has been logistically impossible to conduct in-depth ethnographic research on family life in the midst of COVID-19—at least in the usual way—much can be gained by looking historically to other health epidemics that were also bound up with an array of socioeconomic and structural features marking an enduring, systemic racism. In this article, I consider what I have learned from families about the stakes of life when it is lived in an enduring perilousness that is periodically punctuated or intensified in particular historical moments. In my research, another historical moment has figured in a world shaping manner. In the 1980s, the ordinary dangers of being Black and poor were intensified by the introduction of crack cocaine into Black neighborhoods and the accompanying, infamous "war on drugs" that entailed punitive policing and mass incarcerations.

The epidemic of crack cocaine addiction and the current COVID-19 pandemic are both syndemics for many Black communities. A syndemic, a concept developed in critical medical anthropology and public health, "reconfigures conventional historical understanding of diseases as distinct entities in nature, separate from other diseases and independent of the social contexts in which they are found" (Singer et al. 2017, 941). The notion of syndemics takes social contexts into consideration, highlighting the role of political economy and structural violence in shaping the rise and spread of specific diseases or pernicious health conditions (Farmer 2009; Nguyen and Peschard 2003; Seeberg and Meinert 2015; Meinert and Seeberg, 2022). Syndemics may arise in highly visible ways (like the COVID-19 pandemic) but because they are entangled with systemic conditions, they may also persist, mutating into other pernicious configurations. They are likely to have long histories. The events of the 1980s have had lasting consequences for many of the families I have followed, as they have in Delores' family. Families grapple with questions

such as: What can I/we do under such conditions? What is ethically demanded and what is even possible? Or, to borrow an iconic African American expression, these families are in effect asking: How does one make a way out of no way?

As explained in a major exhibit at the national African American museum in Washington D.C., this expression invokes a core theme in African American history:

> Taking its inspiration from a popular African American expression, *Making a Way Out of No Way* explores themes of agency, creativity, and resilience through personal stories of African Americans who challenged racial oppression and discrimination and created *ways out* of "*no way*." (reference? Italics in orginal?)

A similar narrative is provided by Henry Lewis Gates (2020) as he tells the story of the Jim Crow era. *Making a Way Out of No Way* is the title of an episode that recounts the period. Gates' narration explains the brutal nature of Jim Crow laws but also emphasizes some of the creative practices that arose within the Black community even under these conditions, including the birth of the Harlem Renaissance. According to Gates, the ascendance of Black arts and culture during this historical moment is both an act of resistance, a way of "fighting back," and an expression of creativity and experiment that enriched the world through new forms of aesthetic expression. Creativity and resistance are intertwined in an "errant poetics" (Glissant 1997).[1]

MAKING A WAY OUT OF NO WAY IN ONE FAMILY

With all this in mind, I return, once again, to the opening vignette. When I first met them in 1997, Delores' multi-generational family was still deeply affected by the aftermath of the 1980s syndemic of rising addiction, loss of jobs in the Black community, brutal policing and mass incarceration. These events had torn through the family. Children and grandchildren were in prison. Close relatives had been murdered. Delores, who held her fragile family together, quit her job to raise her grandchildren during the period when her daughter, Marcy, struggling with her own addiction to crack cocaine, could not. For them, the crisis had no end in sight. It not only threatened the life and health of family members, it also attacked their very sense of identity, their dignity and sense of life possibility. It was shame inducing.

Delores was well aware of this. She met this moment in many ways, but one of them was by leaning upon a traditional art form that was popular in her neighborhood. She was insistent that her grandchildren participate in the local drill team. She used her authority as the household's matriarch to make this happen and she faithfully drove her grandchildren

[1] See also Moten 2003 for an elaboration of this line of thinking.

to practice several times a week, though it took considerable effort and planning to do so while also caring for the younger grandchildren.

THE CALL OF TRADITION[2]

Drill teams are a valorized cultural practice steeped in the history of the African American experience. "Drilling" has been associated with public dance and performance since the days of slavery. A drill team is an orchestrated dance group where performers march in unison, like in military drills, but with movements infused with hip-hop, jazz, African dance and other types of choreography. Both drilling and its close corollary "stepping" gained popularity with the formation of Black fraternities and sororities in the 1920s and 1930s. In the post-World War II era, these became influenced by African American veterans who infused African American dance with military style movements.

Contemporary drilling, as a style of dance, exhibits cultural features well known within African American history, combining synchronized movement with rhythm and chanting. Today, drill teams are primarily comprised of young girls from seven or eight through high school. They are generally accompanied by drum squads primarily made up of boys. These are public and community-based art forms. Over the past several decades, they have been especially significant in poor and working class African American communities where they have been promoted as outreach programs designed engage youth after school and offer an alternative to gang life. Drill teams also explicitly commemorate Black culture and history. The most important competitions are in February, Black History Month. The highlight of drill team performances is often a local community's Black History Parade.

On the one hand, their collective family participation in a drill team enacts tradition in the usual sense of handing down a cultural art form to the next generation. Marcy, herself, had performed in this very same drill team when she was a young girl. Along these lines, one could simply interpret the children's behavior watching the video as cultural reproduction. Their activities reflect dominant, deeply held moral norms. They are being socialized into values that are ethnically marked instantiations of American ideals. There is, for example, the cultivation of self-discipline demanded by a performance that can win prizes (as the Pasadena Rodeogirls do): the tightly choreographed teamwork, the physical prowess, the aesthetic sensibility, the creative virtuosity required to master the rules of the game. Performative mastery also trains the moral self in such ideals as: learning to excel, cultivating collective as well as individual pride, loyalty to one's teammates (which includes the enthusiastic denouncement of rivals), the ability to withstand scrutiny and critique by one's peers and superiors, the willingness to be a follower and, for some, a leader.

[2] An earlier version of this case has been published elsewhere but from a considerably different theoretical perspective, as part of a special issue on a New Humanism from a phenomenological point of view (Mattingly 2018).

But in the larger historical context of an epidemic of addiction and mass incarceration, something else becomes visible. This moment, and all that brought it into being, can also be seen as a response to a historical crisis. During the period of family life when this video was made (2001), the children's mother Marcy was still in the early stages of recovery. Her oldest son and her sister (who lived in the same household) were serving time for drug trafficking. There had been a police raid in the house some months earlier which had resulted in their incarceration. Neighbors warned us to avoid the family. "That's a drug house," they told us. In the face of this, Delores responds—she fights back. She tries to provide her grandchildren and her daughter another version of life, another possible future. She does not pontificate. This was not her style. Instead, she directs an embodied realization of an alternative possibility.

THE PLAY OF ALTERITY AND TRADITION

The phenomenological concept of alterity as articulated in critical phenomenology—I rely especially upon Waldenfels (2011) here—speaks to the potentiality for otherwise worlds, to dimensions of experience that have an unruly "out of order" place in normative social life that have been explored in both philosophy and anthropology (Dyring 2018; Dyring and Gron 2021; Gron 2017; Mattingly 2018, 2019; Zigon 2018, 2019). Lisa Guenther (2011), thinking with Emmanuel Levinas, gives us a way to think about alterity in ethical terms that contrasts it with social positionality. It speaks to a singular "otherness" that is a "source of ethical command" and that can be differentiated from the otherness of political exclusion. While the latter "refers to the multiplicity of relational, historically specific modes of differentiation," difference as social positionality, otherness as *singularity* or *alterity* directs us to a contrasting phenomenon: "a singular . . . otherness of one who remains irreducible to anything or anyone else" (196).

In this piece, Guenther emphasizes the way that social identity can function as a marginalizing form of othering. This marginalizing is clearly in evidence when Delores' household is identified by the neighbors as a "drug house." But when Delores taps into their social identity as participants in a proud Black tradition, we see another side to what social identity can offer—its creative potential. This is something Linda Alcoff (2006) has explored, calling upon Gadamer's concept of horizon. She frames social identity as a

> substantive perspectival location from which the interpreter looks out at the world, a perspective that is always present but that is open and dynamic, with a temporal as well as physical dimension, moving into the future and into new spaces as the subject moves. (95)

By adopting Gadamer's concept of horizon to think about social identity, Alcoff (2006) is able link experience to identity while avoiding an all determining position. Identity works to shape what and how we perceive, making us aware of the "*mediated* nature of

experience" (my italics). "Social location is . . . itself indexed to a particular (rather than universal) ethical engagement" she goes on to remark (96).

Tradition offers a horizon that prefigures what we encounter, Gadamer announces. Furthermore, he goes on to claim, this kind of pre-understanding is necessary to knowing anything at all.[3] In Gadamer's (2003) language, we necessarily pre-judge, and this prejudice is what we inevitably bring to any situation. For him, "[t]he recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust" (272). In prejudging, we judge what *will* happen, we anticipate. We approach each present moment with a history we embody, and this means that we pre-understand any present moment. But this also means that we are prepared to *misunderstand*, that is, to not recognize or attend to features of a situation that mismatch the (historically informed and tacit) expectations we bring to it.

We could say, following Gadamer, that when the children respond with such surprise, it is because they encounter themselves in a mirror that disrupts their own preunderstanding of themselves, a preunderstanding in which they are children of drug addicts and dealers, the subject of neighborhood gossip. If tradition is a "perspectival horizon" that offers a "preunderstanding" of what one encounters, it is also, for this very reason, poised to generate moments of alterity. It is precisely the children's mastery of tradition, their extensive prior knowledge of what they are seeing—their background "preunderstanding"—that triggers their surprise. Latoya's cry signals an attentional moment in which she and the other silenced children are struck with stunned recognition that is also misrecognition. The shock in her voice suggests that her directive (her pointing finger, her imperative tone) is also a question. "Can this be us?" she seems to ask. "Can this beauty, this grace, belong to us?" The unanticipated appearance of this "tightness" calls her to an alien beauty in herself and those closest to her. The call is excessive in the sense that it seems to surpass the many normative rules and goals that guide the ready opinions the children have been noisily offering up as they assess the strengths and weaknesses of various performers. They are, for the first time, silent.[4] Things are not as they seem, from the perspective of the state, dominant white society, the neighbors, even perhaps the children themselves.

Gadamer's articulation of tradition as a horizon of significance, in conjunction with the Gadamer-inflected work of Alcoff and Gail Weiss on social identity, prompts a phenomenological consideration of "making a way out of no way" as—in this ethnographic case, at least—the creative appropriation of tradition. Tradition as a vehicle for resistance and refusal (Moten 2003; Spillers 2003). When Delores calls upon it, she is also resisting the normative judgment of her neighbors. Her refusal involves more than saying no. It is also bound up with an insistence that more than *this* life, the one her neighbors so disapprove of, and that threatens her family, is possible. The children's ethical singularity

[3] See also Mattingly 2017.

[4] I have previously analyzed this moment more extensively with Waldenfels' concept of alterity, a term he especially uses to investigate a shadow order that lives beside all dominant social orders, poised to interrupt it (Mattingly 2018). As I return to this same scene with Gadamer in mind, I can better appreciate the role of tradition as a resource for an experience of alterity.

(in the Levinasian sense that Guenther registers in the earlier quote) also emerges. They are not, for this moment on the bed at least, reducible to members of stigmatized categories, tokens of a type. Is it possible that what makes ethical singularity visible here is precisely this play between an out-of-order alterity and a cultural tradition? Is the interplay between alterity and tradition an inextricable element in "fighting back" (as Delores does) when one is in a crisis that is chronic? Does it speak to what is at stake in that paradox: "making a way out of no way"? I leave these as questions, as unsettled perplexities.

PART TWO: THE ETHNOGRAPHIC GESTURE

Careful, close description is foundational to the phenomenological enterprise. Gayle Salamon (2018b) sees it as a key resource for theoretical and critical investigation. I quote her at some length because her articulation of phenomenology's descriptive commitment comes very close to an anthropological position:

> in viewing the world and describing it with all possible precision, we might see the world and all the objects and others within it open, and reveal themselves to be more varied and more mysterious than our imaginations could have conjured, or our schemas of knowledge contain. And we can reflexively consider our own philosophical legacies, including their omissions and their missteps, not to dismiss those older forms of thinking and ways of understanding but to constantly renew them and expand their capacities. (16)

This "promise of phenomenology" that Salamon (2018a) speaks of, and which she exhibits beautifully in her own closely observed study of the murder trial of a transgendered girl, is exactly where anthropology has something to offer. From an anthropological perspective, paying attention by describing something carefully and with precision is our stock in trade. And we are very aware that this is always a matter of interpreting interpretations. In my opening, I offered a description of an event that exhibits this in an obvious way. The children are not merely observing the scenes unfolding in the videotaped parade, they are actively interpreting them. In my description, I am not merely conveying "what happened" or "what was said" but also interpreting their interpretations. Accuracy is essential: I repeatedly watched the videotape to verify the veracity of words and actions. But interpretation enters at the most basic and unavoidable level. I have turned a visual recording into text, oral speech into written word. And I have necessarily been selective—I can't include everything. In my description and selection, I have relied on my extensive knowledge of this family. My task has been to include the kinds of descriptors and background material that can call attention to why this drill team performance mattered so much to the children, and to Delores and Marcy and, beyond that, to why you (the readers) should care about it.

To get at this, I do more than try for accuracy and clarity in my representation. I also offer an account poised for further interpretation in conversation with concepts. I am interested not only in the "facts" of what happened but the significance of those facts from this family's perspectives. And beyond that, to what we can learn in a more general, theoretical way about larger questions (like crisis and response) by paying such close attention to such small matters. My theoretical and the ethnographic avenues of investigation are utterly entangled, as is usual in anthropology. For most anthropologists, sustained, close to the ground ethnography is indispensable. While other approaches of inquiry (e.g., reflecting in the abstract, conducting textual analyses of the works of researchers, scholars, journalists and artists, or consulting one's personal life experience) may be important, they are not usually considered sufficient for formulating anthropological claims and making arguments. Instead, our primary route involves asking, and re-asking, questions as part of research investigations which we are actively involved in carrying out. This ethnographic commitment is not meant to dismiss other disciplinary approaches but merely to signal where anthropology is likely to best contribute to questions that are larger than any one discipline can hope to address sufficiently.

Anthropology belongs to what have sometimes been called the "historical sciences" in which description (of particulars), interpretation and theory development are closely intertwined. Precisely because of this intertwining, Gadamer (1976) considered the special affinities between the historical (or human) sciences and the project of hermeneutic phenomenology. As he put it:

> the true intention of historical knowledge is not to explain a concrete phenomenon as a particular case of a general rule … [but] to understand an historical phenomenon in its singularity, in its uniqueness. Historical consciousness is interested in knowing, not how men, people, or states develop *in general*, but, quite on the contrary, how *this* man, *this* people, or *this* state became what it is; how each of these *particulars* could come to pass and end up specifically *there*." (116, italics in original)

While the historical sciences might initially draw from established, generalizing claims and might make further general claims based on empirical investigations, Gadamer insisted that what was crucial to this historical approach was that it not only passed through concrete particulars to do so, but that these particulars were meant to be visible, to hold their own—as singularities—and not be subsumed as mere cases illustrating general "regularities" or causal probabilities.

A classic anthropological treatise on this subject is Clifford Geertz's 1973 essay "Thick Description" which has close affinity to Gadamer's position. Geertz connected ethnography's close to the ground descriptive approach to its generalizing claims. What do anthropologists do? he asked. They "inspect events," things that happen to people in particular times and places. The small-scale descriptions of discrete events that result from this inspection cannot simply be superseded through increasing levels of abstraction without losing their import. Even when one wants to talk in larger abstractions, like "meaning

systems" or "life worlds," these are not discoverable, do not even exist, as abstractions. They are real only as they emerge, are brought to life, through eventful particulars. Not surprisingly, the work of many phenomenologically minded anthropologists bears a close kinship to a contextualized *substantive* phenomenology that feminist phenomenologists have also advocated, one that resists abstract idealisms in favor of "sweaty concepts" (Alcoff 2006; Ahmed 2016, 12; Guenther 2013; Weiss 2008; Salamon 2018a and 2018b; Al-Saji 2010).

Paul Ricoeur has also considered the centrality of the particular as a feature of the historical (or human) sciences, their insistence on describing and understanding the particular in its singularity rather than merely subsuming it under general explanatory frameworks (e.g., rules, norms, causal laws). He, too, believed that this insistence on the particular qua particular brings the historical sciences into close proximity with hermeneutic phenomenology.[5] But Ricoeur adds something crucial—the *imaginative potentiality* that a descriptive enterprise can disclose. What are these particulars? They are certainly not reducible to information. While the sorts of empirical particulars that we might call "facts" are of concern to the anthropologist, it is not the facts in themselves that are the ultimate point of an investigation. What the anthropologist's facts uncover are the values and concerns of others, people living in different times or in different social locations. This orientation to people's concerns and commitments opens a space for imagining variations of our taken for granted reality. In speaking of the historian's facts (and the values these reveal), Ricoeur (1981) argues that history "explores the field of 'imaginative' variations which surround the present and the real that we take for granted in everyday life" (295).

But if particulars are so important to historical/social sciences like anthropology, and if these cannot be discerned from some neutral, Archimedean perspective, it is especially obvious that the social location of the observer cannot be divorced from what is observed and interpreted. Understanding always happens somewhere, concretely.[6] "There is no zero-point from which meaning is first encountered" (Risser 1997, 67). It emerges through a dialogical experience, an encounter. It *takes place*.[7] Recognizing this demands that we ask: where do these (ethnographic) particulars come from, these singular moments that are also always interpretations of interpretations? And how should they be evaluated for their authority and validity?

Sara Ahmed (2014, 2016) notes the importance of putting the "who" back into the politics of study. Ahmed reminds us repeatedly that when somebody is speaking, not everybody is speaking. Who is speaking? Identify yourself. This is a familiar issue for anthropology. Possibly it has been felt with particular acuteness in my discipline because of the kind of research we conduct. We build arguments on ethnographically-informed cases that have emerged from sustained fieldwork and include the "voices" of interlocutors which

[5] In fact, Ricoeur's (1981) essay, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action considered as a Text" heavily influenced Geertz's "Thick Description."

[6] See Palmer 2010, 122.

[7] Eventness has a spatial as well as a temporal character, Malpas notes (2010, 261).

are gleaned by witnessing social interactions, participation in informal conversations and formal interviewing. Fieldwork ordinarily takes at least a year to carry out, and frequently far longer. For many of us, fieldwork in the same community and with some of the same people continues over decades. Arguments and claims are created through an iterative process, a dialogue of sorts. This involves moving between rawer primary "data" (especially observations and interviews) which are of course already interpretations, more refined interpretative accounts fashioned with close attention to that primary material, and the gradual development of more general, thematic claims. Since there is no single position that can be attached to "the informant" or "the community," this iterative process means recognizing and grappling with the inevitability of multiple and sometimes contradictory perspectives in the community one is studying. There is no easy solution to this except an honest recognition of the partiality of any generalization.

The anthropologist's larger claims are also developed in conversation with theoretical positions and substantive published accounts (e.g., other ethnographies, histories, statistical data) of particular relevance. These, too, are fed into this iterative process in which the initial primary material is not left behind. For this reason, anthropologists tend to include lengthy excerpts from their observations or conversations with their informants in their publications. The whole research process, tacking back and forth among multiple levels of analysis, is exceedingly laborious and time intensive. Published texts emerging from a particular research study generally take at least an additional year to develop after initial immersion in "the field."

Anthropologists acknowledge their own positionality in every aspect of this process. When Geertz famously outlined anthropology's interpretive approach in the early 1970s, he underscored how thoroughly interpretation penetrated observation and interaction: it was interpretation all the way down. But he paid insufficient attention to the structures of power that suffused the postcolonial contexts in which most anthropologists carried out their research. Put more critically and problematically than he did, the anthropologist's positionality was bound up in systems of power and inequality. The discipline increasingly confronted its troublesome entanglement with structures of colonial oppression, its history of intentional or unintentional collaboration with projects of empire building, precipitated a full-blown crisis by the late 1980s and continues to this day, keeping the vexed question of positionality at the forefront of concern.

Nevertheless, anthropology's own reflexive examination has not resulted in a rejection of ethnographic fieldwork. Anthropologists continue to insist that fieldwork offers a powerful mode of research exactly because it challenges the researcher's a priori assumptions about the world. Fieldwork is a descriptive enterprise of a particular sort, one that (usually) takes place "elsewhere"—away from one's familiar surrounds. Anthropologists presume that it is necessary to defamiliarize ones' common-sense apprehension of reality in order to learn about the world. Sustained, systematic fieldwork introduces a reflexive element that prompts challenges to tacitly held assumptions. Discovering the contingent features of one's lifeworld, in other words, is made possible through exposure to life worlds that are not one's own. Carrying out fieldwork introduces an anthropological version of the "*epoché*,"

an "ethnographic *epoché*," as Jason Throop (2018) and others have articulated. Throop describes this as a variation of Edmund Husserl's *epoché*:

> In the spirit of Husserlian phenomenology, the *ethnographic epoché* is a special form of bracketing in which the "thesis of the natural attitude" . . . is suspended . . . Where the phenomenological epoché is an active and willed achievement, the ethnographic epoché is a passive and responsive one—one that arises from, and makes discernible, some of our most deeply sedimented and taken-for-granted assumptions, orientations, habits and dispositions. (204-05, italics in original)

Returning to Gadamer but this time with the anthropologist researcher in mind, prefiguring is an unavoidable feature of fieldwork and disorientation is a necessary part of coming to understand. However, as Gadamer makes clear, we are not destined to stand by these prefigured expectations. The historical givenness of life is not an *ending point* but serves as the *beginning* of understanding. Sometimes we become acutely aware of the misfit of our expectations to what arises. (Anthropological fieldwork encounters supply many such moments.) Disorientation is also something our interlocutors experience. Even the quotidian experiences of everyday life may offer situations where they are struck that their preunderstanding seems inadequate or misguided. They, too, run into interpretive trouble or perplexity and it is precisely this trouble that belongs to the act of understanding itself.

The scene on the bed I described serves as a small example. I had often heard from Delores about her grandchildren's participation in a local drill team and I vaguely remembered this video that we had taken of the children, but for many years I didn't think too much about it. I had published quite a lot about this family without taking it into account. I "pre-judged" this part of their lives as an interesting but unremarkable enactment of a popular cultural practice. It was only when I happened to return to that video some years later that I was struck by Latoya's surprise, by the arresting of the children's movements. Why did their very pleasure at their own "tightness" startle them so? What were they seeing that I had not? There was an alterity present, an "out of order" moment. But why was their tightness out of order for them? After all, they had practiced hard for many months. They came from a family replete with dancers and athletes. Why shouldn't their performance be skilled, beautiful? A perplexity emerged.

Hermeneutic phenomenologists like Gadamer and Ricoeur help to illuminate the stakes and promise of this kind of generative misunderstanding in which close attention and description yield perplexity rather than certainty. Gadamer's formulation reveals a critical dimension to the interpretive enterprise, our own historicity, the limits of an unavoidable positionality. But recognizing our social and historical situatedness does not merely alert us to the finitude of knowledge. It also speaks to one of the most important qualities of understanding: it is an experience that *confronts* us and, in so doing, may open up new worlds for us. To understand something, Ricoeur (1981) tells us, "is at the same time to light up our own situation . . . [the act of understanding] frees us from the visibility

and limitation of situations by opening up a world for us, that is, new dimensions of our being-in-the-world" (Ricoeur 1981, 202).

LOCATING AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PARTICULAR: THE BOUNDARY CROSSING PROJECT

The ethnographic study I call upon in this article is the most intense fieldwork I have ever carried out. For more than fifteen years (officially ending in 2011 but continuing unofficially to this day) a group of us conducted research among a cohort of fifty African American families. Most families chose to participate for more than a decade. Very few left the project once they joined it. We were a multi-racial, multi-ethnic research team (Euro-American, African-American and Asian-American) with backgrounds in anthropology, child psychology, linguistics, and occupational therapy. The three primary and senior investigators (Mary Lawlor, Lanita Jacobs and I) were very experienced ethnographers.

We initially recruited families in clinical sites in Southern California. Most families came from Los Angeles or its close neighboring towns. As the study progressed, some moved far from LA as part of Black outmigration. But many families continued to participate, sometimes driving two hours each way to take part in family meetings. Most participants were mothers and grandmothers. Although they varied socioeconomically between the "working poor" and the chronically unemployed, finances were a day-to-day challenge for everyone. None escaped the weight of serious financial worry. Most faced the threat posed by living in dangerous neighborhoods which were also "food deserts" and lacked safe outdoor spaces for children to play. All confronted the problem of sending their children to underfunded schools. Racial disparities factored largely into the intransigence of these issues, even for those with a bit more economic security. Race, in other words, played a significant role in constraining everyone, including those with more education and more financial resources.

While the study initially focused primarily upon health care encounters and often took place in clinical settings, our fieldwork expanded over the years at the invitation of family members. Many of the families asked us to come and videotape important home and community events in their lives, including baptisms, birthday parties, church services, athletic games, funerals and parades. Our ethnographic approach was familiar in some ways, a mode of extended, immersive participant observation that is easily recognizable in anthropology. As is also common practice, our key questions and lines of inquiry and analysis were informed and reshaped by what our interlocutors told us mattered most to them. However, something happens when one carries out research for such a long period of time among the same people: relationships changed. Lives changed in ways that we would never have been privy to if we had kept to the more traditional one or two year period of fieldwork characteristic of an anthropological study.

We audiotaped interviews, carried out observations that we recorded in fieldnotes, and videotaped hundreds of events. We transcribed almost all of this material (except some of the videotapes), storing everything electronically in secure files. The archive consists

of more than six-thousand pages of documents and hundreds of digital recordings. As is typical for anthropological studies, there is far more "data" than one will ever make direct use of. Although I have written two books and dozens of articles from this study, there are some families I knew well who I have still not written about. But this plethora of material is crucial to how the ethnographer comes to build confidence in a particular line of interpretation. It is not a matter of merely repeating what one's informant has said to you. Direct quotes are important but something more is required to get at the significance of words and actions. Coming to think through what is at stake demands more than literal transcribing. It also demands more than basing interpretations on a single or small number of interviews or events. For every event that I focus on and that finds its way into a published article or book, there is a whole background of material in the archive, and in body memory, that informs my interpretations.

It is not possible in this article to describe the many processes we used to test—and challenge—our interpretations as researchers, but it is worth mentioning the key role of the family advisory groups. At the start of the project, we instituted regular meetings for interested research participants. This became very popular. We met, in smaller groups, three or four times a year. While these groups were only a small part of the overall study, they figured importantly in many respects, shaping the project as a whole. They also provided what some of the families started to call, jokingly, "family reunions," where people had a chance to meet up periodically and talk to others whose children also had similar medical or educational issues. Through them, participants collectively exerted pressure on us, the research team. We had never intended to carry out a research project for so long but the level of commitment by family members encouraged us—pressed us— to look for more funding in order to keep going. During periods when we ran out of grant funding— which allowed us to buy lunches for families and pay transportation and childcare costs to cover meeting times—many parents asked if we could continue in some way. We began to have potlucks where those who could brought food. We sometimes met at the home of one of the researchers.

Group meetings became places where we could ask participants to comment on the themes we were identifying as important in what we were learning from them. We regularly asked them if there were matters we should be considering that we were neglecting or misunderstanding. Of course, participants did not speak as a unified voice—there were often disagreements and differences in perspective. But everyone was interested in what we were doing, with what we were learning. We shared published articles. Though they rarely commented on them, it mattered to many that their own challenges and hard-won knowledge should do some good elsewhere, might help someone else. They wanted to know that we were talking to other parents but they were especially keen that we were educating clinicians and students in training for clinical professions.

Families directed our attention in multiple ways. In the family groups, they led us in prayer on occasion, brought music they thought we should hear, food we should try, pictures their children had made, pamphlets from school graduations and funerals. They joked about our rules—"everyone gets a chance to speak, no judgment"—but many also seemed to appreciate our efforts to create a space for discussion. There was a great deal

of storytelling. We encouraged this through our style of open-ended interviews questions, avoiding overly directive, yes and no structured queries in favor of those that allowed the greatest latitude for respondents to shape the interview.

This open-endedness was also characteristic of the kind of research we conducted, in which we increasingly followed the lead of family members in what and how we observed and participated in their lives. The very existence of the videotape I draw from in this article is an example. Delores was eager to have us see what her grandchildren were doing in the drill team. She requested that someone from the project come to videotape them in one of their performances, which we did. She and the children then asked us to bring the videotape to their house so that they could see it. When we did (videotaping them as they watched) they were so enamored that they asked to see it multiple times. We left them a copy of the parade video, at the children's enthusiastic request. They were quite anxious to show it to the "Miss Hays," the revered woman who had been orchestrating and raising funding for drill teams in their local community for decades.

CONCLUSION

An exciting feature of a still emerging critical phenomenology is its interdisciplinary possibilities, including new avenues of rapprochement between philosophy and anthropology (Zigon and Throop 2021). In light of this interdisciplinarity, I organized this article into two parts. The first half directly concerns the theme of crisis. The second half functions as a kind of meta-commentary on my methods as an anthropological critical phenomenologist. It is intended to position me and to address the kinds of questions that, for example, Ahmed poses: Who is speaking? By what right?

My avenue for considering crisis has been through close consideration of an ethnographic particular. I have suggested that we can learn something about crisis—as a concept and a form of experience—by paying close attention to how a group of children respond to images of their performance in a drill team parade. Including what takes them—and subsequently me—by surprise. A perplexing particular can serve as a provocateur for concept building and destabilization (Mattingly 2019). Such a particular is less like a fact than an impetus for interrogation.

In this article, the particular is a single ethnographic moment, as variously illuminated through the notions of alterity, tradition as horizon, and that fleshier concept "making a way out of no way." I have argued that the binary of crisis and normalcy does not work for the families I have studied and for much of the African American community. Something like "chronic crisis" (Vigh 2008) is more apt. It is essential not to reduce African American history to a tale of victimhood. But it is equally important to avoid other reductionisms. Phenomenological concepts like alterity and horizon resist the reduction of a single heady moment of disorienting beauty and tightness into an episode of another misleading narrative: triumph over adversity. Instead, moments of alterity such as the one I've described live side by side with enduring family crises. Two years after this moment on the bed, Delores has

died from cancer. Marcy has assumed the role of matriarch, maintaining her sobriety as she takes the lead in holding her family together. Three months after Delores' death, Leroy (who figures in the video) has been shot and killed in front of his house as he angrily tries to protect his younger sister, Latoya, from some older boys in the neighborhood who want to take her for a ride. After Leroy's funeral, Marcy, in anguish, tells us that none of her children died when her mother was alive but she has already lost a son. "Making a way out of no way" is not a tale of triumph. It is a response to an enduring crisis, which must be met again and again.

In my argument, alterity and its interplay with tradition figure in two respects. Most obviously, the interplay speaks to the children's confrontation with an image of themselves. But it also speaks to my task, as ethnographer, in attending to those situations that strike me by surprise or perplexity, that I cannot readily fit into my own preconceived notions, my own horizons. Gadamer (2003) tells us that we must direct our gaze "on the things themselves" but of course he does not mean that we should or could come with no preconceptions, no foreknowledge (267). Rather, training one's gaze on "the things themselves" demands an openness that "is prepared for it [the other] to tell him something" (269, 271). It demands a sensitivity to alterity (269). One need not share the perspective of the other, Gadamer notes, but the only way to "break the spell of our own foremeanings" is to recognize that the perspective of this other is not mine and to be prepared to revise my foremeanings in light of what transpires in the experience of the encounter (270).

My engagement with African American families has prompted me to become attentive to the alterities that infuse their lives. Put another way, I am ethnographically attentive to a double alterity. Part of what it means to direct my gaze on the things themselves is to follow the gaze of my interlocutors. Where do they look? What do they pay attention to? What is the world of salient things for them? When are they surprised? When do they discover that they have misunderstood their own situations? (Using misunderstanding in the sense Gadamer intends, as an aspect of an anticipatory preunderstanding.) The ability to discover alterity in an everyday situation, as the children do, illuminates the "how" that is part of making a way out of no way.

My fieldwork and the concerns of my interlocutors *also* prompts creative appropriation of Gadamer's concepts. I have called upon him to contribute to a phenomenological inquiry of crisis and response in situations of "chronic crisis"—of sustained structural inequality and systemic racism. These are topics about which Gadamer (as far as I know) has nothing to say. Although I cannot take it up here, my appropriation also entails considering the limitations of his work (Mattingly 2022). This manner of taking up but also amending classic phenomenological concepts is a hallmark of critical phenomenology in both anthropology and feminist and antiracist philosophy.

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