

SIX SENSES OF CRITIQUE FOR CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

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There is a point where methods devour themselves. I would like to start there.
– Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

What is the meaning of critique for critical phenomenology? Building on Gayle Salamon's engagement with this question in the inaugural issue of *Puncta: A Journal for Critical Phenomenology* (2018), I will propose a six-fold account of critique as: 1) the art of asking questions, moved by crisis; 2) a transcendental inquiry into the conditions of possibility for meaningful experience; 3) a quasi-transcendental, historically-grounded study of particular lifeworlds; 4) a (situated and interested) analysis of power; 5) the problematization of basic concepts and methods; and 6) a praxis of freedom that seeks not only to interpret the meaning of lived experience, but also to change the conditions under which horizons of possibility for meaning, action, and relationship are wrongfully limited or foreclosed.¹ While the first two dimensions of critique are alive and well in classical phenomenology, the others help to articulate what is distinctive about critical phenomenology.²

¹ Thanks to Thomas Abrams and Team Phenomenology (a reading group based at UCLA and the University of Virginia) for conversations that helped me to formulate these six senses of critique. This paper is also inspired by conversations at the Collegium Phaenomenologicum on Critical Phenomenology organized by Anne O'Byrne in July 2019, and by discussions in my graduate seminars on Critical Phenomenology at Vanderbilt (2017) and Queen's (2019). In particular, I would like to thank M  r  dith Lafert  -Coutu, Adam Schipper, Shiloh Whitney, and Noah Moss Brender for their input and feedback. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers who raised many important issues and questions that I have barely touched upon here, but which I intend to take up in future writing.

² "Classical phenomenology" is an admittedly imperfect term. I don't think anyone would say of themselves, "I do classical phenomenology," nor would it be particularly helpful to draw up a list of classical and critical phenomenologists, as if these were two different schools of thought. And yet, I do think there is a significant difference between a practice of phenomenology that explicitly engages in social critique—let's call this critical phenomenology—and a practice of phenomenology that does not. I have opted to call the latter classical phenomenology, not to suggest that such an approach is uncritical—as I will argue, there are multiple senses of critique at work in both classical and critical phenomenology—but rather to reflect in an open-ended way on the senses of critique that I see operative both in the emerging sub-field of critical phenomenology and in work throughout the phenomenological tradition that engages in some form of social critique.

As an initial formulation, we could understand critical phenomenology as a practice of suspending hegemonic “common sense” accounts of reality in order to reflect on the conditions of lived experience and the lifeworld in which it unfolds. It then describes, interrogates, and ultimately transforms the contingent, historical, yet quasi-transcendental structures that shape the meaning and materiality of this experience. I will say more about quasi-transcendental structures below, but some examples include colonialism, anti-Black racism, and heteropatriarchy. These structures are contingent in the sense that they have emerged through historical struggles, the outcome of which could have been—and could still become—otherwise. But they function in a quasi-transcendental way insofar as they generate and consolidate meaning by normalizing some habits of perception, cognition, and comportment while pathologizing others. In other words, they are not just phenomena in the world, but also (inter)subjective ways of seeing, hearing, moving, relating, and sense-making.³

The main difference between classical and critical phenomenology turns on a methodological and ethical commitment to attend to the ways that power and history shape lived experience. As Salamon (2018) puts it, “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). The critical suspension of hegemonic norms is akin to the *epochē* in classical phenomenology, which brackets or suspends the natural attitude. But the challenge of bracketing quasi-transcendental assumptions like white supremacy or heteropatriarchy is different from the challenge of bracketing more abstract ontological and epistemic norms, such as the assumption that a perceptual object like a table exists apart from me, prior to the noetic acts that constitute its meaning. This difference is not just a matter of relative abstraction or concreteness; it has both methodological and substantive theoretical implications. First, it is by no means clear that we can simply “bracket” white supremacy or “put it out of play” in order to reflect on the way it shapes our lived experience and our lifeworld. As long as the historical, material, social world is structured by white supremacy, consciousness—including its perceptual practices, its ways of remembering and imagining, its encounters with alterity and feelings of empathy (or lack thereof), its kinaesthetic experiences, embodied habits, and ways of moving through the world—remains immersed in the very structures that one

³ A full account of the quasi-transcendental is beyond the scope of this paper, but my use of this term is closer to Sartre’s (2004) *practico-inert*—understood as a structure that is contingently established through praxis, but then comes to function as a generative matrix for further praxis—than it is to Derrida’s account of the quasi-transcendental as a condition of possibility that is, at the same time, a condition of impossibility. Sina Kramer (2014) defines Derrida’s quasi-transcendental as “the moment in which the entirety of the system falters, which is nevertheless necessary to its very operation” (522). This logic of “constitutive exclusion” is internal to the structures I have named as examples of the quasi-transcendental; for example, heteropatriarchy depends for its coherence on the constitutive exclusion of a queer/femme Other, who in turn haunts the system as a trace that can never be fully expunged. This is a helpful concept for critical phenomenology, but my own use of the term quasi-transcendental in this paper could be understood more simply as a condition for possibility that is contingently established—that could have been otherwise—but which comes to function *as if* it were necessary and inevitable. In this sense, it is very close to the concept of the historical *a priori* discussed below.

attempts to suspend, both to describe how they work and to interrogate them, ultimately intervening to transform or abolish oppressive structures.

Phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) raised the possibility that even the classical *epochē* and reduction was a process that could never be completed once and for all (xii-xvi). Yet, the stakes of bracketing the assumption that the world exists apart from consciousness (in classical phenomenology) and bracketing the complex matrix of assumptions built into white supremacy, including its intersections with colonialism, capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and ableism (in critical phenomenology), are different in scale and complexity. Whether they are different enough to warrant regarding critical phenomenology as post-phenomenological hinges on one's understanding of structures like white supremacy as quasi-transcendental, and therefore generative of meaning rather than simply phenomena in the world to be studied empirically. Furthermore, the challenge of bracketing white supremacy, even just methodologically in order to “think what we are doing” (Arendt 1958, 5), will be different depending on how one is situated in relation to this structure. A white person who benefits materially from white supremacy will have to undertake a different kind of work to describe, map, and critically interrogate it than a person of color whose life chances are systematically attacked or undermined by white supremacy. To put this in more explicitly phenomenological terms: the way into the *epochē* will be different depending on how one is situated in the lifeworld.

The second important methodological difference between classical and critical phenomenology concerns the relation between description, normativity, and action. In classical phenomenology, the point of the transcendental reduction is to discover and systematize *a priori* conditions for the possibility of a meaningful experience, such as the correlation between *noesis* and *noema*. The possibility of questioning the normative status of these correlations or intervening to change them does not arise because it simply does not make sense to change *a priori* structures. It would be as strange to question the ethical or political status of the Kantian categories; they are not right or wrong, they just are. But one cannot adequately describe and map the quasi-transcendental structure of white supremacy without engaging in a normative critique of its impact on the world, embodied consciousness, and Being-with Others or Being-for Others. And once one begins to interrogate the ethical and political dimensions of white supremacy, it is not enough merely to describe it and denounce it as harmful or unjust; critique calls for collective action to transform structures that normalize, naturalize, and support the possibilities of some subjects while pathologizing, marginalizing, and undermining the possibilities of others. While not every attempt at critical phenomenology will manage to intervene and transform the structures that it describes and interrogates, an ethical orientation towards practices of freedom is crucial to the method, and not simply added on later as an “application” of philosophical analysis to the “real” world.

Again, classical phenomenology would not think of intervening into the transcendental structures of consciousness or even the lifeworld, even when Husserl (1970) announces a crisis in the European sciences. The point is not to transform the structures of the lifeworld, but rather to make the empirical sciences more accountable to the lifeworld, and to guide them back to a transcendental foundation in phenomenology. Critical phenomenology has

different aspirations, and so it needs different methods. We must both rethink the purpose and practice of methods, such as the transcendental and eidetic reductions, and also engage with non-phenomenological critical methods to trace the contingent, historical emergence of structures like white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, to ask whether and how these structures could be otherwise, to experiment with different modes of transformative praxis to (re)open horizons of possibility, and to reclaim, create, and support more liberatory ways of being, relating, and sense-making.

It follows from these first two points that critical phenomenology is a hybrid method; it needs tools, concepts, and practices beyond classical phenomenology to engage with history and power in its specificity, whether these methods come from postcolonial theory, feminism, critical race theory, Marxism, the Frankfurt school, psychoanalysis, queer theory, Foucaultian genealogy, deconstruction, critical disability studies, or some other critical discourse. As such, critical phenomenology is not a science and does not aspire to become one; it is a pluralistic and open-ended practice, a way of thinking, doing, and paying attention that seeks to (re)open and support multiple horizons of possibility.

What, then, does critique mean for this hybrid critical practice of phenomenology? While the following list is not comprehensive, it covers a range of different meanings, some of which are shared by classical phenomenology, and some by other critical methodologies. The most important point running through this discussion is that critique is more than just an analytical method for pointing out what is wrong or problematic; it is also a creative, generative practice of experimenting with ways of addressing what is wrong without assuming that it can simply be made “right,” but still aspiring to make it less wrong, less harmful, less oppressive.

I. CRITIQUE AS THE ART OF QUESTIONING, MOVED BY CRISIS

At the heart of critique is a capacity and willingness to question what might otherwise seem unquestionable, whether because it appears true, necessary, and foundational, or because it seems too irrelevant, marginal, or inconsequential to warrant further inquiry. One might be moved to ask questions by idle curiosity, by a desire for systematic completeness, or by stubborn contrariness.⁴ But one might also be moved by a situation that demands one’s attention, whether because it disrupts one’s expectations or because the expectations that it normalizes are intolerable. Critical phenomenology is situational in this latter sense; it goes beyond the activity of questioning, doubting, or becoming skeptical about something for its own sake. It is not the devil’s advocate. Critical phenomenology has skin in the game, which is not to say that it only springs up in times of emergency, but rather that it is attuned to the relation between lived experience and the stuff of life: the materiality of the world from which we live, the relationships that support or undermine our flourishing, the

⁴ By “idle” curiosity, I mean curiosity as a form of voyeuristic entertainment, in contrast with the rich accounts of curiosity by Perry Zurn (2021) and others for whom curiosity is very close to the sense of critical attention that I articulate here.

infrastructure that distributes life chances equitably or inequitably.

In this sense, a critical practice of phenomenology remains rooted in the ancient Greek sense of *kritikē tekhnē* as the art of making distinctions to address a legal or political conflict, and also the medieval Latin sense of *crisis* as a medical situation calling for diagnosis and intervention. As Wendy Brown (2005) explains, *kritikē tekhnē* involved “recognizing an objective crisis and convening subjective critics who then passed a critical judgment and provided a formula for restorative action” (5). For the ancient Greeks, the art of critique was not only to clarify what is wrong in a situation, but also to undertake thought and action “to sort, sift, and set the times to rights” (6). In this sense, critique is not only a negative or analytical practice, it is also a (re)constructive intervention to “stave off catastrophe” and to find a path towards repair (7).

Two points are especially important here for my account of critical phenomenology: first, the situation of being *moved to think* by a concrete situation or problem—a “crisis,” both in the sense of a punctual, disruptive event and also in the sense of ongoing, structural forms of injustice or harm—and secondly, the orientation towards creative, reparative action, beyond the clarification and diagnosis of problems. This practice of situated, motivated, and creative questioning is more interested in responses and response-ability than in definitive answers or solutions. As such, its aim is not to put an issue to rest, but rather to (re)open horizons of indeterminacy, possibility, and becoming-otherwise. This includes rigorous forms of attention to joy and delight that immerse themselves in phenomena without needing to know whether or how this joy can be justified.

II. CRITIQUE AS TRANSCENDENTAL INQUIRY

At the heart of modern European philosophy, including classical phenomenology, is an understanding of critique as a systematic inquiry to clarify concepts and to establish the limits of these concepts and their application, in resistance to dogmatism. As Kant (2008) writes in the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

We deal with a concept dogmatically . . . if we consider it as contained under another concept of the object which constitutes a principle of reason and determine it in conformity with this. But we deal with it merely critically if we consider it only in reference to our cognitive faculties and consequently to the subjective conditions of thinking it, without undertaking to decide anything about its object. (243)

In this sense, critique involves a shift of attention from the object to the subject, and from the empirical to the transcendental; it is a form of transcendental inquiry that reflects on the (subjective) conditions for the possibility of a thought or perception.

The phenomenological method developed by Edmund Husserl and refined by many others including Eugen Fink, Edith Stein, Maurice Halbwachs, and Alfred Schutz, is critical in this sense. The natural attitude is a site of unquestioned, pre-reflective dogmatism that

must be bracketed through the *epochē* and led back to its transcendental conditions through a series of reductions to discover, clarify, and systematize the underlying structures of intentionality that make possible the meaningful appearance of a world to consciousness. As such, the phenomenological method cuts through the dogmatism of psychologism, positivism, and abstract rationalism, opening up a middle path that is both theoretically systematic and also grounded in lived experience. This understanding of critique is necessary but insufficient for critical phenomenology, as I hope will become clear in the sections that follow.

III. CRITIQUE AS THE HISTORICALLY-GROUNDED, QUASI-TRANSCENDENTAL STUDY OF PARTICULAR LIFEWORLDS

In addition to a transcendental inquiry into the conditions for the possibility of any world whatsoever, some phenomenologists have made historically-grounded inquiries into particular lifeworlds, as well as particular ways of being situated in these lifeworlds. In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl (1970) defines the lifeworld as the pre-given, pre-reflective context of everyday experience that grounds the meaning of basic concepts upon which empirical sciences rely, but which they cannot fully understand without the transcendental science of phenomenology (121-48). Husserl acknowledges the importance of history as “the vital movement of the coexistence and the interweaving of original formations and sedimentations of meaning,” and he argues that the conclusions of “factual history” remain naïve to the extent that they ignore “the general ground of meaning upon which all such conclusions rest” and “the immense structural a priori which is proper to it” (371). This acknowledgement of historicity opens the possibility of a phenomenological study of the *historical a priori* “which encompasses everything that exists as historical becoming and having-become or exists in its essential being as tradition and handing-down” (372). But the radical potential of this account is abruptly limited by Husserl’s commitment to a teleological view of history in which “all historical facticities, all historical surrounding worlds, peoples, times, civilizations” are ultimately whittled down to their essences in order to demonstrate, within the “*aeterna veritas*” of phenomenology as a transcendental science, that “the same reason... functions in every man, the animal rationale, no matter how primitive [*sic*] he is” (377-78).

A more promising approach to the historical *a priori* emerges in Michel Foucault’s account of the contingent historical structures that nevertheless operate as a “grid” of intelligibility, shaping the production and circulation of statements that function as a basis for truth claims. Foucault (1972) writes:

Juxtaposed, these two words [historical apriori] produce a rather startling effect; what I mean by the term is an *a priori* that is not a condition of validity for judgements, but a condition of reality for statements. It is not a question of rediscovering what might legitimize an assertion, but of freeing the conditions of emergence of statements, the law of their coexistence with others, the specific

form of their mode of being, the principles according to which they survive, become transformed, and disappear. (127)

James Dodd (2016) explains the relation, but also the difference, between the historical *a priori* in Husserl and Foucault in terms of the archive:

Foucault's notion of the archive can be thought of as marking that gap or break of separation that binds but at the same time holds us apart from the past, and in this sense its analysis shares something with what Husserl describes as the zigzag of historical reflection. But here it is the break and not the continuity with the past, the manner in which past discursive practices are no longer "our own" as opposed to inescapably ours, that is revealed as the space in which the archive appears. (34)

This difference between Husserlian and Foucaultian approaches to the historical *a priori* is decisive for critical phenomenology.⁵ While classical phenomenology may aspire to become a science of essences built on transcendental reflection and eidetic variation, critical phenomenology needs an archive. It is not just anyone's reflection on anything, it is *someone's* reflection on a particular situation that they did not create single-handedly, but in which they are implicated. Precisely because an historical situation is more complex than the first-person experience of any given consciousness, we need more than our own perspective to make sense of it. Critical phenomenology moves beyond the centrality of first-person experience in classical phenomenology, although it does not leave it behind; rather, it engages with third-person accounts and second-person encounters, both to broaden its understanding of the situation and to deepen its sense of the quasi-transcendental structures at work in its own first-person experience.

Individual introspection is not enough to pick out the quasi-transcendental historical structures that shape one's own lived experience. In addition to the transcendental reduction that begins with a reduction to ownness, critical phenomenology needs a method of what Sartre (2004) calls "regressive" analysis (39). This analysis may begin with first-person experience, but also takes its cue from an 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. In studying this archive, the critical phenomenologist is not just studying "the world" as opposed to their "own" experience;

⁵ Foucault's own relation to phenomenology is notoriously hostile. In claiming that critical phenomenology needs an archive, I do not mean to imply that Foucault himself was a secret phenomenologist, or even that he would approve of the connections I am making between critical phenomenology and Foucault's own methods of archeology, genealogy, and problematization. My claim is not that these methods are actually phenomenological, but that a critical practice of phenomenology needs to engage with critical methods beyond its own transcendental and eidetic methods. For a more detailed discussion of Foucault, phenomenology, and the historical *a priori*, see Koopman (2010, 2012) as well as the special issue of *Continental Philosophy Review* on the Historical *A Priori* in Husserl and Foucault, edited by Andreea Smaranda Aldea and Amy Allen (2016).

they are studying the world *in which* they exist as (historical) Being-in-the-world. In other words, they are studying the sedimented structures of a situation that they inhabit, but which they cannot access through personal memory or perception alone.

This is precisely the form of study that phenomenologists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Frantz Fanon, Sartre, and others undertake in their critical phenomenologies of patriarchy, racism, colonialism, and capitalism.⁶ What makes these inquiries quasi-transcendental rather than empirical—although there is also a great deal of empirical research in *The Second Sex* and other works—is the elaboration of the phenomenological method not only to bracket the natural attitude and uncover apodictic transcendental structures, but also to bracket specific aspects of the natural attitude—sexism, racism, colonialism, classism—to follow the traces of these contingent, historical structures in the world, in the habits of embodied consciousness, and in the many correlations between them.

Already, we should note a certain complication of some basic concepts of phenomenology, such as Husserl's repeated claim that the singular transcendental ego is prior to transcendental intersubjectivity, or his claim that consciousness constitutes the world without reciprocity. While a detailed discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of the current paper, I don't think we can get a critical phenomenology off the ground without affirming that transcendental subjectivity and intersubjectivity are equiprimordial, and that the world—not merely in the sense of a material universe, but also in the phenomenological sense of the broadest possible horizon for meaning—shapes the habits of embodied consciousness, even if the meaning of world *as such* is inconceivable without consciousness.

To elaborate this claim more concretely: a critical phenomenology of patriarchy is still a phenomenological inquiry, even though patriarchy itself is a contingent, historical phenomenon that manifests differently in different times and places, insofar as it attends both to patriarchal phenomena—i.e., to particular ways that patriarchy shows itself in the world, for example in institutions, laws, literary and philosophical works, etc.—and to patriarchal forms of consciousness, including patriarchal ways of perceiving, feeling, imagining, acting, moving, and relating to others. One could conduct an ethnographic or auto-ethnographic study of the subjective experience of patriarchy that does not rise to the level of critical phenomenology, even if it does follow a “phenomenological” research method of conducting interviews that ask participants to describe how they feel about x or how they experience x-y-z. What makes an inquiry *critical phenomenology* is, in my view, a quasi-transcendental analysis of how such experiences are possible, how such a (life)world is possible—not just “what is it like” but also how it got this way, and what would it take to transform the situation. Foucault (1988) makes a similar point in a late interview: “A critique

⁶ Martin Heidegger also attempted a disastrous, proto-fascist, and anti-Semitic critique of a particular lifeworld, which he interpreted as the decadence of European and American democracies. There is nothing in the first three senses of critique to resist the violent appropriation of intellectual traditions and philosophical methods to (re)inforce some forms of dogmatism in the name of defeating others. This is why we need a more robust sense of the normative orientation of critical phenomenology to distinguish between liberatory and oppressive practices. Such a critique begins—but does not end—with a close, careful inquiry into particular lifeworlds.

is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest” (154-55, cited in Zigon 2018, 159). Foucault’s genealogical method is one way of undertaking such a critique, which is distinct from phenomenology but not incompatible with it.⁷

In order to undertake an historically-grounded, quasi-transcendental critique of a particular lifeworld, one must grasp social structures like patriarchy or white supremacy as both *constituted* and *constitutive*: both constructed and upheld by particular relations of power, and also generative of thoughts, perceptions, and actions that tend to naturalize and normalize those power relations. When we practice phenomenology in this way, we are still attentive to the correlations between consciousness and world, but we do not restrict ourselves to universal, apodictic correlations. How, then, do we develop appropriate methods for this kind of work? For this, we must look beyond classical phenomenology without losing touch with it.

IV. CRITIQUE AS (SITUATED AND INTERESTED) ANALYSIS OF POWER

In addition to 1) the art of asking questions in response to a crisis, 2) a transcendental inquiry into *a priori* conditions of possibility, and 3) a quasi-transcendental study of the historical *a priori* that shapes particular lifeworlds, there are many schools of thought that practice critique as a study of social power. We could call these approaches *critical theory*, without prioritizing the Frankfurt School or any other approach that designates itself in this way. Critical theory identifies a form of injustice, oppression, domination, exploitation, or extraction, and breaks it down, analyzing how it works. This is not generally understood as a transcendental or even quasi-transcendental inquiry; more often than not, it takes the form of an historical materialist inquiry into the social and political conditions of injustice in specific situations.

Iris Marion Young (2010) defines critical theory as “a normative reflection that is historically and socially contextualized. . . . Normative reflection must begin from historically specific circumstances because there is nothing but what is, *the given, the situated interest in justice*, from which to start” (5, emphasis added). This account of critical theory resonates with the phenomenological commitment to beginning with the given, but it also contrasts sharply with Husserl’s insistence on the *disinterestedness* of the phenomenologist (for example, in Husserl 2010, 110, 174-5, 241). Husserl’s approach to phenomenology includes an arguably normative reflection on the value of freedom, but his understanding of freedom is negative and methodological; it entails freedom *from* the sort of interests that, in his view, would interfere with the methodological neutrality required for the project of constructing a universal science of essences. The emerging field of critical phenomenology

⁷ See Oksala (2016) for an example of scholarship that brings these methodologies together in productive ways.

does not share these universalist aspirations, nor the teleological view of history upon which they are founded. This does not mean that critical phenomenology is “biased,” or that it slips back into a dogmatic adherence to a specific set of assumptions or principles. Critical phenomenology is committed to a sense of freedom that is more substantive than methodological neutrality, but whose specific content or meaning remains open to indeterminate horizons of possibility.

To the extent that critique is situated or contextual, such that one is moved to think critically by a particular relation to the given and to a history in which one is implicated, critical phenomenology is a practice of *immanent critique*. There is no outside to capitalism, heteropatriarchy, or colonialism from which to critique these structures and forces from a distance; rather, we must diagnose, resist, and unbuild them from within. As Karl Marx writes, “critique must comprehend itself as a moment within the situation which it is seeking to supercede” (cited in Allen 2016, 43). The immanent character of critique calls for the kind of epistemic courage and humility that Amy Allen calls “openness to unlearning,” which is “properly understood not as a rejection of the reflexivity afforded to us by the epistemic and normative resources of modernity, but rather as a further elaboration of it” (31). This suggests that critique is not just a negative practice of pointing out what is oppressive or wrong, but also an openness to transformation, where action is understood not as a post-critical application of theory, but a further elaboration *of* critique.

One might well ask: what does phenomenology bring to critical theory that is not already alive and well in other critical methods? In other words, why practice critical *phenomenology* when one could undertake critical theory in many other ways without having to deal with the transcendental baggage of a tradition that has centred the first-person experience of a putatively unmarked, de-contextualized, and de-historicized “consciousness”? Wouldn’t it be more critical just to leave phenomenology behind?

While I appreciate these questions and affirm a multiplicity of different critical methodologies, I remain committed to critical phenomenology because it offers a rich and insightful method for paying rigorous attention to lived experience in relation to social structures and in the context of an archive, without reducing the alterity, singularity, and complex relationality of experience to these structures. Phenomenology’s affirmation of the inexhaustible horizons of meaning in any given experience holds open the possibility of unlearning and transforming sedimented habits of thought and being. It anchors this possibility in the horizon, not just as a methodological assumption but as a transcendental structure shaped in particular ways by quasi-transcendental relations of power. Building from this transcendental foundation, and (un)learning from other methodologies, critical phenomenology has grounds to claim that freedom is not just contingently preferable to oppression, it is an *a priori* good. But it also has the subtlety and complexity to explore the *meaning* of freedom in different contexts and situations.

For example, Beauvoir’s (1964) critical phenomenology of oppression shows that the meaning of freedom is not limited to rights or capacities but rather unfolds in relation to *time*, understood in terms of an indeterminate horizon of possibility, the relation to an open future (60-61). Freedom is both an existential structure for Beauvoir and also a concrete

site of political struggle. The existential concept of freedom helps to resist overly reductive accounts of oppression that would seem to foreclose any possibility of resistance, given the relentlessness of the structures and systems designed to curtail or destroy freedom. But the attention to particular situations where freedom and oppression are at stake, and where the antinomies of action make it difficult or impossible to know the right thing to do, keep this transcendental orientation towards freedom grounded in the complexity of situations where its specific meaning remains open to interpretation and experimentation.

Other path-breaking examples of critical phenomenology that engage in critique as a situated and interested analysis of power include Young's (1990) phenomenology of feminine embodiment, Lewis Gordon's (2006) critique of anti-Black racism as bad faith (1995), Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, and Salamon's (2010) phenomenology of trans embodiment.

V. CRITIQUE AS PROBLEMATIZATION

Problematization is the practice of articulating and questioning the assumptions that motivate one's "situated interest in justice." While this might not sound very different from the first sense of critique as questioning, it's important to distinguish between the art of asking questions and the practice of problematizing the very terms with which one formulates a question. Heidegger asked plenty of questions, but he did not problematize his situation as a German in a fascist, anti-Semitic, white supremacist state.

Problematization includes the critical disciplinary practice of re-thinking one's own key terms, for example by not taking for granted the meaning of race in critical race studies, or not assuming the meaning of disability in critical disability studies. Gayle Salamon (2018) writes that critical phenomenology:

reflects on the structural conditions of its own emergence, and in this it is following an imperative that is both critical in its reflexivity and phenomenological in its taking-up of the imperative to describe what it sees in order to see it anew. In this, what is critical about critical phenomenology turns out to have been there all along. (12)

Similarly, anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly (2019) distinguishes between critical phenomenology 1.0, which she defines as applied phenomenology or "approaches that bring together critical sociopolitical voices and scholarly traditions with phenomenological ones" (416), and critical phenomenology 2.0, which she understands as "a radical provocation to disquiet dominant sociopolitical concepts, including those we ourselves hold" (417).⁸ In

⁸ See also the work of anthropologist Robert Desjarlais (2005), for whom critical phenomenology "attends at once to the concerns and lifeworlds of [our ethnographic subjects] and to the interrelated social, discursive, and political forces that underpinned those concerns and lifeworlds" (369). For Desjarlais, critical phenomenology makes "a plea for experimentation and difference in future research into the subjective worlds of those suffering from distress" (370).

other words, critical phenomenology 2.0 problematizes its own basic concepts in a reflective (or maybe even hyper-reflective or meta-reflective) way, as a practice of phenomenology that unfolds not merely alongside but *through* ethnography.⁹

In his later work, Foucault (1994a) defines problematization as a practice that:

. . . develops the conditions in which possible responses can be given; it defines the elements that will constitute what the different solutions attempt to respond to. This development of a given into a question, this transformation of a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems to which the diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response, this is what constitutes the point of problematization and the specific work of thought. (118)

Erinn Gilson (2014) clarifies: “Our response, then, is not to the problem as a dilemma but to the conditions of its emergence, its problematic structure” (88). This point is key for any critical practice of phenomenology, and it helps to clarify what is at stake in a quasi-transcendental study of particular lifeworlds with a situated interest in power. For example, one could approach the problem of mass incarceration as a dilemma to be solved through sentencing reform, legislative change, or even by releasing people from prison and eventually closing down prisons. But these ways of “solving” the dilemma of mass incarceration would not, in themselves, address the conditions of the problem’s emergence, and they may actually exacerbate the problem by inscribing carceral logics more deeply, for example by expanding non-custodial forms of surveillance and disciplinary control. In order to problematize mass incarceration, one must not only grasp how it is “wrong” and try to make it “right,” one must trace the contingent, yet constitutive structures that normalize the conflation of accountability with punishment – and in order to do this, one must situate oneself in relation to networks of carceral power that promise security and prosperity to some, while exposing others to containment, control, and state violence.

In a sense, problematization is questioning 2.0; it has a reflexive structure that takes even its own most compelling responses as problems for further thought. As such, problematization opens endless horizons of possibility, not in a way that stalls or forecloses action but for the sake of resisting co-optation by hegemonic power. To continue the example of mass incarceration, problematization allows us to grasp prison abolition not as the finite project of shutting down correctional institutions, but rather as an open ethical horizon of possibility that seeks to dismantle the carceral, capitalist, colonial, patriarchal, white supremacist logics that form the prison state’s conditions of emergence. In the words of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2004), the point is “[n]ot so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons” (114).

⁹ Ultimately, the practice of problematization must also extend to critique itself. For an abolitionist problematization of critique, see Boggs et al (2019, 27-28).

Even though problematization is an open-ended process, it does not devolve into an endless reflection on the problem with solutions, which in turn become problems, and so on, and so on, ad infinitum. This is because problematization also does the creative or generative work of assembling a community of thought and action—an emergent “we”—to respond to problems without assuming that a definitive solution is possible. Foucault (1994a) argues that it is

necessary to make the future formation of a “we” possible by elaborating the question. Because it seems to me that the ‘we’ must not be previous to the question; it can only be the result—and the necessarily temporary result—of the question as it is posed in the new terms in which one formulates it . . . [This is a matter of] seeing if it were possible to establish a “we” on the basis of the work that had been done, a “we” that would also be likely to form a community of action. (114-15)

This invocation of a community of action brings us to the sixth and final sense of critique as a praxis of freedom.

VI. CRITIQUE AS A PRAXIS OF FREEDOM

This final sense of critique is also the most important for critical phenomenology. I understand praxis not only in a general sense as the embodied and/or collective practices through which one makes sense of the world, but also in a more specific sense rooted in community organizing as the relation between theory, action, and reflection that is explicitly oriented towards resistance, resurgence, emancipation, liberation, or some other way of trying to get (a little more) free.

In the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx (1975) defines praxis as *sinnlich-menschliche Tätigkeit* or “sensuous human activity,” which Frederic Jameson interprets as “a material, or materialist, action involving change” (Sartre 2004, xix). Sartre builds on this Marxist account in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, defining praxis as human activity that alters the material-historical context in which it unfolds by producing structures with enough stability to constitute a new sense of social and historical reality (53-64). Sartre calls this reality the *practico-inert*; it is the material-historical field out of which praxis arises and which it seeks to perpetuate and/or transform (67, 71-74). Each configuration of the practico-inert has its own sedimented objects, patterns and norms that limit and shape the possibilities for action without fully determining them (162-66). Part of the work of critique is to track the interplay of praxis and the practico-inert, identifying counter-finalities that constrain or block the horizon of possibility for further action (124, 183).

With this critical phenomenology of praxis, Sartre (2004) reminds us that *we make the road by walking*: “Through experimentation, as through any other form of activity, human action posits and imposes its own possibility” (19). While a Marxist critique begins with the means and modes of production and pursues the contradictions internal to this material-historical

context, Sartre's critical phenomenology "set[s] out from the immediate, that is to say from the individual fulfilling himself in his abstract praxis, so as to rediscover, through deeper and deeper conditionings . . . historical man" (52). In other words, critique unfolds as an investigation of the historical depth and texture and structure of my own experience, which becomes accessible to me through a *regressive* investigation of leading-back to the material conditions of this experience, but also (ultimately) also a *progressive* movement of cultivating new forms of praxis. For Sartre, praxis is not just the creation of a new and unanticipated future through a critical engagement with the past; it is also "a movement from the future (for example, the machine in working order) towards the past: repairing something means grasping its integrity both as a temporal abstract and as the future state which is to be reconstituted" (61). In this sense, critical praxis is not just an analytical process of pointing out, breaking down, and clarifying what is dogmatic, unjust, or problematic, but also a creative practice of (re)claiming, (re)building and experimenting with alternative ways of Being-in-the-world and Being-with others, supported by more life-giving frameworks for thought, action, and existence.

This creative or generative work of critique ranges from the relatively modest goal of cultivating "the art of not being governed quite so much," as Foucault (2001) defines critique in his later work (193), to a radical "restructuring of the world," as Fanon (1986) announces in *Black Skin, White Masks* (60). Restructuring the world is not a metaphor; it is a revolutionary practice with material conditions and effects. But revolutions don't happen unless people also come to perceive, remember, and imagine the world differently. In his essay, "This is the Voice of Algeria," Fanon (1965) shows how a sense of national consciousness emerged among people in remote villages who gathered around radios to listen through static and signal disruptions to Radio Free Algeria, collectively interpreting the meaning of broadcasts from the front and holding open the possibility of another world beyond colonial domination. This collective act of problematizing and interpreting colonial power "brings about essential mutations in the consciousness of the colonized, in the manner in which he perceives the colonizer, in his human status in the world" (53). But it also has material effects: "Listening in on the Revolution, the Algerian existed with it, *made it exist*" (93, emphasis added). In an extraordinary turn of phrase, Fanon calls this "a radical transformation of the *means of perception*, of the very world of perception" (96, emphasis added). Revolutionary praxis must not only seize control of the means of production, but also transform the means of perception that (re)produces meaning in and through materiality.

The desire to restructure the world might sound naïve or utopian if we limit our revolutionary imagination to a sudden, instantaneous change on a planetary scale. But if we understand the meaning of *world* phenomenologically, as an open-ended context for meaningful experience with nested levels of intimacy and strangeness that sometimes overlap and sometimes conflict or crash against each other, then we must admit that the structure of the world is quite open to change – sometimes frighteningly so. The collective practice of restructuring the world need not extend to a global scale in order to matter. It might turn on very basic questions like, "Can I live?" (Hartman 2019, 10). What would it take to get your knee off his throat? How can we help each other breathe?

As a generative context for meaning and for happening, world is both an epistemic and an ontological concept. It is not an entity or a collection of entities; it is also not a container for entities. Rather, world is a matrix of relations and a horizon of possibilities. In his critical hermeneutics of worldbuilding, Jarrett Zigon (2018) understands political action as a practice of “moving into the clearings—the sites of potentialities—that emerge in the interstices of [for example] the drug war situation. Once there, in the clearings, we can begin to experiment with new political-moral concepts that may hold up to the burden of a worldly political demand” (101). For Zigon, “[a] critical hermeneutics cannot simply tear down and destroy; it cannot simply unground. It must also create by disclosing the openings that are already there” (159). He calls this “a critical hermeneutics of what *can be* as a practice of the not-yet” (160) and “an ethics for becoming otherwise” (161). Like the open-ended processes of problematization, praxis is not necessarily—perhaps not ever—a matter of finding “solutions,” but rather of (re)opening, expanding, and amplifying horizons of possibility that might have otherwise seemed closed or nonexistent.

COMMON THREADS

At the heart of these different senses of critique is the (re)opening of a possibility for moving beyond the situation as it currently presents itself: a movement that is provoked by *crisis*, or by a situation that raises questions for thought and action.

The first three senses of critique—the art of asking questions, the transcendental inquiry into conditions of possibility for meaningful experience, and the quasi-transcendental study of historical conditions of experience—tend to be regressive in their analysis, insofar they seek to reconstruct the conditions and structures that have produced the current situation. The final three senses of critique—the analysis of power, problematization, and the praxis of freedom – are progressive or transformative insofar as they seek to intervene in the current situation, and not just understand how it came to be.¹⁰ The sixth sense of critique as praxis reminds us that it is not enough to be aware of oppression or to understand how it works, we must also figure out how to change it by (re)opening concrete possibilities for survival, escape, healing, and restructuring the world. In this sense, critique is a creative practice—which does not mean that it produces substantive principles that form the basis of a new dogmatism. The fifth sense of critique as problematization still applies here, but praxis urges us to move beyond the identification of problems, and even beyond the assembling of a critical sense of “we,” by actively experimenting with collective practices of freedom. If the fourth sense of critique as an analysis of injustice tells us about the conditions under which current world was built—namely, through slavery, colonialism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy—then the sixth sense of critique as praxis challenges us to study, reclaim, imagine, and (re)build alternative ways of being and becoming in relation.

¹⁰ This language of regressive and progressive analysis comes from Sartre’s (2004) *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

One might wonder if critical phenomenology still has need of transcendental critique if it is committed to an historically-grounded, situated analysis of particular lifeworlds with a normative orientation towards practices of freedom. I believe we do need a transcendental argument for the normative orientation towards freedom, even—or especially—if the *meaning* of freedom remains open and indeterminate. One might also wonder if critical theory has much need for phenomenology if so many of the methods that make phenomenology critical come from other intellectual and political traditions. For me, what phenomenology has to offer critical theory is a rigorous practice of *attention* to that which escapes coherent understanding or explanation: attention to alterity, singularity, and the irreducibility of lived lives to the patterns and structures that shape them and the context with which they grapple—even in the midst of this shaping and grappling.

What might a critical phenomenology of experience, improvisation, and experimentation become if we affirmed a methodological hybridity rather than policing the boundaries of what counts as phenomenology? I will leave the last word to Ocean Vuong (2017), who reworks a phenomenological account of attention, deepening its critical and ethical significance:

Simone Weil says, “Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.” That’s my mantra to myself: Pay attention to people, what they care about, their worlds, their words, their aesthetics, their life. I look at Simone Weil and say, “Why don’t we edit that?” What if we were so ambitious—to change the word “rarest” to “most common?” What would we then say? “Attention is the most common and purest form of generosity.” That’s what I’m working toward.

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