

WE FEEL GRATEFUL AND ALIVE TO BE DOING THIS WORK TOGETHER: PHENOMENOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON A 2020 SUMMER OF FEMINIST RESEARCH ACROSS DIFFERENCE

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[a]t some point. all the dead being here anyway and all of us here being obviously doomed, we let go of that particular game. and started breathing. and saw our hands.
—Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *M Archive: After the End of the World*

*Research: 1590s, from French *rechercher*, from Old French *rechercher* “seek out, search closely,” from *re-*, intensive prefix (see *re-*), + *cercher* “to seek for,” from Latin *circare* “go about, wander, traverse,” in Late Latin “to wander hither and thither,” from *circus* “circle” (see *circus*). Related: *Researched; researching.*
—Online Etymology Dictionary, “Research”*

We are three feminist phenomenologists who thought and wrote together through the global conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic and uprisings in response to the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, and other state killings of Black people, during the summer of 2020.

We are three feminist phenomenologists experimenting with the opportunities provided for critical phenomenological research during this moment, feeling and writing through what it yields.

We are three feminist phenomenologists exploring what it means to write phenomenology in multiple voices, interested in the possibilities of intersubjective phenomenologies that unfold as a process.

We are three feminist phenomenologists who are thinking about the future of “research” through the intersections of our ambiguous experiences during the political moment of the pandemic.

We are three feminist phenomenologists taking seriously the task of laboring across difference, by inquiring about how our individual situatedness might probe, inform, or bring to light one another’s situation.

Considering the multiple dynamics of oppression that were brought to the surface during the summer of 2020, we ask ourselves: how can we use feminist critical phenomenological research to heal, to resist oppression, and to fight white supremacy?

We offer this writing together as a demonstration of the possibilities afforded by critical feminist phenomenological research as it continues to develop and expand to include diverse lived experiences and practitioners.¹

ON THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR A CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF RESEARCH UNDER PANDEMIC CONDITIONS

In the June 22, 2020 issue of *The New Yorker Magazine*, historian Jelani Cobb reported on the multiple crises of the pandemic moment:

What is the product of a crisis multiplied by a crisis? The official mortality count of the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States swept toward a hundred thousand, while the economic toll had left forty million people out of work. It was difficult to countenance how so much misery could come about so quickly. But on Memorial Day we became video witnesses

¹ In “How is this Paper Philosophy?” Black feminist philosopher Kristie Dotson (2012a) illustrates the ways that the discipline of philosophy, from which phenomenology emerges, and its subsequent professionalization, through its disciplinary norms, have kept a range of diverse voices from engaging with the

to the horrific death of George Floyd, at the hands of the Minneapolis Police Department. By Friday [May 29], the looted shops, the charred buildings and cars, the smoldering Third Precinct—these were evidence of what the world looks like when a crisis is cubed. (Cobb 2020)

The three of us initially embarked on the task of researching together, but, as the summer began, found ourselves in a world drastically different from the one in which we had intended to do research; the compounding circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic and racial unrest resulting from police violence put into relief for us the concept of research itself. Because of this cubed crisis, the conditions under which we intended to conduct research were broken and provided the “crisis”: the moment which opens up the very possibility of phenomenology itself (Zaner 1970; Henry 2005; 2011). This break presents a prime opportunity to turn toward the phenomenological. Referencing the Heideggerian hammer, Sara Ahmed (2019) notes that: “when the hammer is working, it disappears from view. When something stops working or cannot be used, it intrudes into consciousness. We might call what cannot be used *broken*. A break can be how something is revealed” (21). In her lecture “Phenomenology of Social Distancing,” Havi Carel (2020) also takes up the idea of the Heideggerian hammer to contextualize the disorientation of being forced to distance from one another because of coronavirus restrictions. The broken hammer, as taken up by Carel and by Ahmed, illustrates that when things are broken, we come to understand their usual function through their dysfunction. Brokenness, then—precisely because it allows us to see normative function—also brings opportunity to see the flaws, or dysfunctions, in usual practices. The pandemic, for example, supposedly “revealed” such flaws in the structures and institutions of “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” such as the healthcare system and models of policing. Because the political and social structures we had taken for granted were in deep states of flux, the horizons of our world felt unstable. One such structure was the ability to think together in person and to travel to do research in traditional research repositories and environments. The dysfunction of our research methods during the summer revealed the norms (and the flaws) of a usual research project. Reflection on the ways in which traditional research did not happen this summer offers up a unique opportunity to understand research’s usual form. Disorientation caused by the pandemic also offers the opportunity to take on some of the challenges of critical phenomenology itself. As Duane H. Davis (2020) writes:

The phenomenological method is an attempt to offer prescriptive descriptions of the world in which we live. It involves the transformation of the way we understand our world such that we can be astonished before it—the attempt to see our world as if for the first time. (4)

tools of the discipline. In response to this, Dotson proposes that philosophy shift to a culture of praxis, where the efficacy of philosophical arguments are based in part on their usefulness to diverse practitioners in the field.

As a contemporary dimension of the phenomenological project, critical phenomenology invites us to take seriously the embeddedness of the phenomenological subject and the notion that *who* enters the phenomenological enterprise matters to the enterprise itself. When we consider the use of the method of phenomenology, we must ask ourselves why we do this re-casting and re-viewing of our experience and relationship to and with subjecthood. “Maybe methods are not simply tools,” Ahmed (2019) suggests, “or if they are tools, maybe they do different things depending on who uses them, with this *who* being understood as not simply an individual but someone shaped by many histories—intellectual, social, other” (17; italics in original). If methods are tools that change depending on who is using them, then we recognize that we come to phenomenology—our tool—through our own particularities and ambiguities.

In this work, we call attention to what has been previously termed “intersectional ambiguity” as a Black feminist critical phenomenological framework that guides the work and situates how we approach the multiplicities of our ambiguities (Mason 2018). We inherit the concept of ambiguity from the feminist existential phenomenologist Simone de Beauvoir (1991), who uses it to describe our ontological and situated orientations toward being: the ways in which we are both/and, as well as either/or. We also inherit from the decolonial feminist philosopher María Lugones² (2003), who uses the concept of ambiguity to extend the dynamism of the both/and, pointing us toward the

[a]mbiguous, neither this nor that, unrestrained by the logic of this and the logic of that, and thus . . . not mapped, traced already in movements, words, relations, structures, institutions; not rehearsed over and over into submission, containment, subordination, asceticism—creative, changing, defiant of norms meant to subdue it. (11)

Beauvoir and Lugones remind us that our ambiguities are felt and experienced both subjectively and intersubjectively. Theories that attend to the lived experiences of those whose particular ambiguities situate them adversely within matrices of power, including the framework of what might be widely understood as “intersectionality” offered by such Black feminist thinkers as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991), bell hooks (1987), and Patricia Hill Collins (1991); Collins and Bilge (2020), also guide this work. By melding these concepts to locate our intersectional ambiguities—those ambiguities that are each political subject’s intersecting orientations toward institutional structures of power and domination—each of us is empowered as (political) subjects to name our ambiguities.

² Lugones contrasts the logics of purity and curdling in her essay, “Purity, Impurity, and Separation,” suggesting that curdling resists the Western philosophical impulse toward either/or conceptual frameworks. For more on this concept, see Lugones 2003 and Bailey 2007.

QMM:

I am Qrescent Mali Mason, a 37-year-old bisexual Black feminist assistant philosophy professor at what is known as a “selective private liberal arts college.” I live in West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in the United States, and my people are from Montgomery, Alabama, and Montego Bay in Jamaica. I am a third-generation college graduate whose mother is also a professor. I was initially trained in philosophy at Spelman College (a private all Black, all women’s liberal arts college).

NC:

I am Noorie Chowdhury, a 22-year-old queer brown second-generation undergraduate student at a “selective private liberal arts college.” I grew up in Bombay, India, and study philosophy, politics, and economics. I was educated in an English-medium school, but also speak Hindi and Bangla at home, stemming from ethno-linguistic backgrounds I inherited from my parents. Although I come from an upper middle-class family in India, I am considered a low-income student on campus, where I spent the summer of 2020 unexpectedly.

SE:

I am Sofia Esner, a 20-year-old queer white Philosophy major at a “selective private liberal arts college.” Though I currently live in North Salem, New York, I grew up and spent the vast majority of my life in various parts of Brooklyn, New York. I attended a K-12 private school for the entirety of my pre-college education and, though in that space I was surrounded by those with greater wealth than me, I would be categorized as firmly middle class. I am ethnically half Ashkenazi Jewish but, as I am baptized Greek Orthodox, it is not a religious affiliation.

We offer these descriptions as a means through which to illustrate our diversity of lived experience and to emphasize the ways in which our positionalities situate us ambiguously within various axes of power. For example, while we all commonly identify as feminist phenomenologists, we are differentially located with regard to our age, race, nationality, ethnicity, class background, etc. These differential locations place us not only in differential relationships of privilege and power among the three of us, but also *within*

each of us, as we each navigate how our individual situations are comprised of the tensions among our lived experiences and situations of oppression and power. With respect to the theoretical importance of naming these intersectional ambiguities, and the dangers of not doing so, Lugones (2003) helpfully suggests: “When I do not see plurality stressed in the very structure of a theory, I know that I will have to do lots of acrobatics—like a contortionist or a tight-rope walker, to have this theory speak to me without allowing the theory to distort me in *in my complexity*” (74; italics in original). We recognize that our attempt to name these complexities will always already rupture our acknowledgement of the breadth of our complexities. But we attempt to name these nonetheless, as we understand the work of phenomenology to be that of moving not only beyond distortion (by theory), but towards difference, using the latter to enrich and mold existing theory.

We face the challenges of the multiple dimensions of our intersectional ambiguities through the process of writing and thinking together. These reflections, we hope, will open up further opportunities within critical phenomenology by demonstrating how it unfolds as a process. Davis (2020) suggests that when “personal identity is disclosed to be intersectional, we can come to disclose our sociopolitical identities as the difference of differences” (8). Critical phenomenology allows us to consider our intersecting differences because it attends to the power relations that infuse our situations and material capabilities. A critical phenomenology is one that “mobilizes phenomenological description in the service of a reflexive inquiry into how power relations structure experience as well as our ability to analyze that experience” (Weiss, Murphy, and Salamon 2020, xiv). As such, we name and center our particularities here for the sake of pointing toward those critical differences and in order to highlight the ways that power infuses our own relations toward and with one another. As Black feminist philosopher Audre Lorde (1984) cautions, “It is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation” (Lorde 1984, 1). We believe that by acknowledging our differences, we contribute to the work of examining such distortions.

In this way, a critical phenomenology leaves room for yet another use of phenomenological methodology—for healing and ameliorative ends, for future possibility-making, and thinking about ways of future being. We are encouraged by the claim that a critical phenomenology “is also an ameliorative phenomenology that seeks not only to describe but also to repair the world, encouraging generativity, respect and compassion for the diversity of our lived experiences.” And we tarry with the notion that, “[s]uch a project can never be an individual endeavor, moreover, but requires coalitional labor and solidarity across difference” (Weiss, Murphy, and Salamon 2020, xiv). Throughout the process of working and writing with one another, we have thought seriously about what it means to engage across our various areas of difference. Indeed, the conditions of the pandemic call us to such thought, as we look toward rebuilding a “post-pandemic world” and attempt to locate and articulate which chasms and areas of difference remain untold, unthought, and untested. An additional dynamic of Beauvoir’s concept of ambiguity guides us here—that of the inevitability of failure. Of this, Beauvoir (1991) writes that it is possible for us to desire the tension of ambiguity “even with the failure which it involves” (13). This “taking

up” of ambiguity, in both the Beauvoirian and Lugonesian sense, requires that “the failure is not surpassed, but assumed” (Beauvoir 1991, 13). And indeed, the assumption of this failure also carries political weight. Sonia Kruks (2012), writing of Beauvoir’s politics of ambiguity, also reminds us that a commitment to ambiguity requires that when we labor in solidarity, we do so with this assumption of failure. We recognize that the possibilities for the rebuilding of new worlds rest on such vulnerable labor. We make no claim to having achieved solidarity or having jumped over the many hurdles of coalitional politics. We only claim that our naming of our differences has allowed us to think about the disrupted practice of research in the summer of 2020 in ways we otherwise might not have.

This reinforces the importance of the intersubjective nature of our writing here. Following Lugones (2003), this work “takes up, from within, a feel for collectivity without presupposing its ways and constitution. It ‘takes up’ in the sense that it responds with an appetite for moving against entrapment, being cornered, trapped, reduced, conceptually, and sensually invaded” (ix). The interspersal of our three reflections here mimics the way the three of us had interconnected yet different experiences of research during the summer of 2020. Indeed, presenting our reflections in this form reveals the process of critical phenomenology embedded in the summer’s research.

In approaching the phenomenon of research, we take seriously the opportunities that critical phenomenology offers for a resistance to the notion of purification through singularity. Rather, following the guidance of a Black feminist ethics, we want to consider the “praxial promise of . . . instability and encroachment rather than regarding it as something to be overcome through a purification process. Most important, [we] recognize that encroachment and overlapping differences both among us all and as the intersectionality of differences *which we are*” (Davis 2020, 8; italics in original). We assert the ubiquity of ambiguity against the logic of purity and separation by presenting the following interspersed reflections in experimental form as an intersubjective critical phenomenology of embodied difference.

We have written this piece for this journal with intention. Insofar as we are interested in the possibilities and boundaries of critical phenomenology, we view our offering here as an attempt to contribute to this open future. We are encouraged that this journal itself is a forum and space in which the terms and possibilities of critical phenomenology are up for debate. We offer the following contribution in hopes that it might directly take on some of the very challenges of the project of critical phenomenology through non-hegemonic forms of writing, as we seek—as critical phenomenologists—not only to describe the world, but to also change it.

The following reflections are presented here as they were, unedited by the three authors. Some parts of the subsequent section are written in verse form that uses “/” breaks in lieu of traditional punctuation. This is an intentional decision on the part of the authors that reflects the original autoethnographic writing style in which the passage was written. As such, we find the style to be integral to the content here within.

INTERSUBJECTIVE PHENOMENOLOGY OF RESEARCH

QMM:

December 2019

A major concept I employ in my book manuscript is that of ambiguity by way of Beauvoirian existentialism. I have also most recently begun to employ Maria Lugones' use of ambiguity, to what seem to be fruitful ends. As such, one chapter of my manuscript is dedicated to the concept of ambiguity in the history of Western, post-colonial, and decolonial philosophy and I will recruit one research assistant to help me research this concept.

One of the major figures in my next project will be the feminist thinker bell hooks, whose archives and institute are located at Berea College in Berea, Kentucky. To my knowledge, no researchers have yet made published use of the available artifacts (particularly letters) in the bell hooks archives. Because I have relationships with the archivists at Berea College and bell hooks, I plan to make use of the archives in my future work. As such, I would like to have a student assist me in the organization and research indexing of the particular artifacts that are of interest to my research.³

April 21 2020

I am thinking about a return to my work on Black feminist phenomenology and dying/ and about how I think there is some/ purpose/ to venturing within the self/ to alter/the pattern . . .

April 22 2020

I have been thinking about *eros* and pedagogy/thinking about bell/ writing:

Professors rarely speak of the place of *eros* or the erotic in our classrooms. Trained in the philosophical context of Western metaphysical dualism, many of us have accepted the notion that there is a split between the body and the mind. Believing this, individuals enter the classroom to teach as though only the mind is present (hooks 2014. 91)

³ It was clear by the end of the spring semester 2020 that the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic would be radically changing my research plans. Because of the age and the health of my interview subject, and because the college had halted all research travel funding and ability to travel with students for the summer, I knew that I would be unable to travel with my research assistant and unable to access the archives.

And

To call attention to the body is to betray the legacy of repression and denial that has been handed down to us by our professorial elders, who have usually been white and male. (hooks 2014, 191)

And Audre writing:

For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing. Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors bring us closest to that fullness... Within the celebration of the erotic in all our endeavors, my work becomes a conscious decision—a longed-for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered. (Lorde 1993, 55)

NC:

I was born and raised in Mumbai, and I learn more about how that distinguishes me with every moment in time that I spend away from it. The chaos of Mumbai's streets makes for a stern teacher, fueled every day by some nineteen million people who cross each other's paths on them. If the pedagogy of the city could be named, I would call it a strategic blend of exposure therapy (almost nothing jarring is hidden from plain sight) and the Socratic method (one is frequently confronted by agents of the city for interrogation). Fate, karma, inheritance, caste, and several other inherited frameworks of knowledge are interwoven into the fabric of sociality that make coexistence in the face of vast differences between people possible. Difference stays silent, goes unnoticed. This unnerved me because whenever I got close to trying to make sense of difference, I would hit walls of deep-seated and unbreakable ideological justifications.

I came away from home to study in the US mainly because I wanted to get some space from those walls, to try and make sense of them because I had grown habituated to one way of seeing difference which wasn't serving me. To unlearn. I came in pursuit of a new vocabulary, which is to say, finding a new way of doing research.

I remember when I was first introduced to the concept of research, it was in middle school and before I barely even understood the dictionary definition of the word. I was told by my

teachers, “Research is NOT MEsearch!” I remember the slow process of indoctrination, the initial hurdle of being unable to stop myself from alluding to my subjective experiences of the world in my exploration of things that excited me, or using the first person. The hurdle turned to habit, and as late as until my first year in college, I would still feel uneasy using the first person or claiming any authority over my own philosophical views or embodied experiences.

SE:

The project of the summer, that which was supposed to be my escape and my distraction, was our research. My role, as it was first described to me, was to assist Professor Mason with her research into the history of the concept “ambiguity.”

Back in March of 2020, when I had just found out I would be working with Professor Mason, I was filled with a flush of nervous excitement, embarrassed pride, and a sense of the importance in the work to be done. Then, the pandemic was still new in the U.S. There were vast quantities of uncertainty, that is for sure, but the worst of the devastation had not yet arrived. I felt, in the earliest tendrils of spring, that research would be grounding, fulfilling for me.

I had planned, then, to sink into it, to take my time sorting through virtual mountains of literature to find ancient traces of “ambiguity.”

QMM:

April 27, 2020

Another week in quarantine. We might not get out until June. So . . . just keep riding these waves/learning how to flow/how to deal with water/how to be less/ tied to the earth/ and my plans/ and the uncertain future

May 28, 2020

The Black community is once again dealing with/ the senseless killing of another unarmed Black man by the white supremacist police

This disgusting nausea of losing and mourning Black life/ and Black death/ make me want/

or makes me feel so angry/ so mad to love B/ so angered to love Black people/to be *in* Black love/ through resistance/ as a resistance/ is a resistance/ y'all can kill us/ but watch this fucking love grow, motherfuckers.

June 1, 2020

Today feels like a regular day/ the sun is out/ it's quiet/ but yesterday/ the sounds/ it felt like I was living in a war zone/ helicopters/ sirens of various sorts/what sounded like shots/ or fireworks/ all day long/ I was able to get outside a bit yesterday morning/ but then things started to sound scary again/ the phenomenology of hearing all those sounds/ all day/ was so traumatizing/ I won't forget it/ the context: protests began on Saturday throughout the country/ in response to the killing of George Floyd/by the police/ which was filmed and tossed around/ social media/ the official protests were on Saturday/ although they had been protesting in Minneapolis, since it happened last Monday/ the protests began at the Philadelphia Art Museum/ and then were incited by outside movements/ so looting/and rioting began in Center City Saturday night/ protestors tried to burn the Frank Rizzo statue/ and that looting and rioting spread/and reached Market and 52nd/ yesterday/ where everything is now torn up and gutted/ I live at Market and 55th/ so it was close/ and it felt so present in my body⁴

June 4, 2020

Today/okay/ thinking about work. And I met with my research assistants/ yesterday/it might be the case that I can actually get this book done this summer/Noorie was like, what is your book about?/ and I was like, fuck/ I have no idea/ I feel like I don't quite know where/ the book is going right now/ or even what the point is of having a book right now/I am so furious to look at their young innocent white and brown faces/as a Black woman/what do they know or understand about what it means to be me right now/ what do I know?

NC:

My gut reaction to feeling clogged over the summer would be to burst out of my apartment and out into the nature trail surrounding our campus. I am not a runner; I have not always enjoyed running per se, or been a regular at working out. And if you asked me I really couldn't tell you how it started or how it helped; but moments in which I felt the most emotional or directionless or confused or uncertain or plagued by questions with no answers were also moments where the urge to move my body was the strongest. Somehow, sweating did it, it helped resolve the tensions incoherently but surely; and I came back fresh,

⁴ For more on the excessive use of police force on this day and the subsequent suing of the Philadelphia Police, see Whelan et. al. 2020; Briggs and Bryan 2020.

having remembered a direction to answering said questions or finding useful digressions.

Meditation served the same purpose. Focusing on my breath helped me get further and closer to healing than focusing on the way I was feeling or the thoughts I was having.

It was through spontaneous long conversations with friends that I think I came closest to understanding what was going on. We wondered why time felt so warped, why we couldn't keep track of what day it was, why March felt like it was a week long while June lasted for a year. One summer afternoon, we talked about velocity.

Velocity a.k.a speed, movement, momentum. Where velocity is what keeps us moving, it is constantly happening to us. Gravity is velocity, air is velocity, the earth moving around the sun - velocity. The physical formula for velocity is space over time.

Pre-pandemic, it was the changing of space and physical context that was what was defining our experience of time and causing movement. But during the pandemic, it seems to be the inverse. Time supersedes space; the changing (or lack thereof) of time defines our experience of space, which remains constant. Earlier, space was changing and time moved at its whim, now we are stationary and our experience of space is defined by our experience of time.

SE:

When I think of this summer, I think of the baking heat, the bright green grass, and the never ending days. I like to say that I was not bored, just unstimulated, but I'm not sure either one is the truth.

In June, just as I began the work, my feelings towards research had already shifted.

June—with the pandemic ranging and BLM protests against police brutality following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and innumerable others—carried a profound sense of urgency with it.

Finding texts from “pastmasters.com” and citing uses of ambiguity as related to syntax and meaning was a stark contrast to the movement I was watching unfold on every media

platform. The kind of research I was doing felt like playing into the very systems I wanted to be fighting against. It felt like climbing in the ivory tower with every white academic before me—ignoring the complex reality that lay before and outside me.

This is not to say that I did not start the research project as it had been set before me, but that I (we) did not complete it. I worked, I tried to work, I stared at my computer screen, dazed from the pure lethargy of isolation and completely lost in thought.

QMM

June 6 2020

Something about that/ makes me feel guilty for the ease of what I have with B/ can't believe the way we flow/ all the shit going on in the world/ I feel like building this relationship/ is what I'm offering to the revolution/ right now/ I have to get back to reading and writing and go back to work/but it's a taxing time

June 7, 2020

It's like my own academic work is my shadow work

July 10, 2020

What is the queer thing about me? What aspect of who I am or of my life right now is not fitting into the terms of the world, an institution or organization I am involved in? (from Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "God Is Change: Octavia Butler Immersion" n.d.)

I was just reminded again/ of my/ of having to think about where and how I fit in philosophy/ and where I don't fit in philosophy because the literature is not there/ and yesterday/ noorie/ my research assistant/ said that when she reads my philosophical work/ what I write/ is very different than what/ she feels/ when she talks with me/ and I know/ this/ she said it sweetly/ but it is true/ I do/ not fit well/ or I feel like I am a queer thing in the world of philosophy/ and I feel in some way/ disconnected from my own true and authentic philosophical voice/ so the queer thing about me/ is my trying/ to use words/ to make sense using the hybrid language and perspective that I've developed/ this reappointment shit is me trying to fit into the terms/ of an institution/ that right now I despise/ or at the very least/ am exhausted of

July 13, 2020

the other morning/ B asked me/ how it felt to love him/ and then/ how it/ felt/ to be loved by him/ and I told him I would think about it/ and the answer I came up on/ was/ this image/ I will have/ forever/ of him/ naked/ and Black/at the top of the stairs/ pulling a towel back/ and forth between his legs/ with such glee/ and such delight/ and his big hair is all wet/ and shaking/ and he's smiling/ that gorgeous smile/ and that's how it feels to love him/ like that/ so childish/ and fun/ and innocent/ and/ liberated/ without care/ without worry/ youthful/ naked/ and then also thought to myself that loving him/ being loved by him/ is like/ shiny/ like he makes everything shiny/ I had a fleeting thought as I was falling asleep one night to just thank him/ and the thought was that he makes me feel safe to be a Black woman/ which feels so gross and cliché/ but it is how I feel/ it felt so strong/ that I got the nerve/ to ask him back/ he said/ at the time I was asking him/ we were standing on the porch/ and I was facing him with the side of my face buried in his chest/ and my hands were scooped up underneath his armpits and holding on to his shoulders/ like an underhanded pull up/ and we were swaying back and forth together/me slightly hanging off of him/ and he said that being loved by me felt like that/ like embodied/ content/ like a breeze/ like not too much weight/ and that loving me felt like/ a new green thing/ like a plant/ a shoot/ coming out of the ground/ new/ and not yet blemished/full of possibility/ who knows what this will turn out like/I emailed lior and sue/ complained about not being able to get paid for falling in love/ and they reminded me that/ I am a philosopher of love and the erotic/ and that life/ informs my thought and my/ writing/ so if I write about this/ then /in some way/I am/ getting paid to/ write about love/ and I /actually think there's something to that/ hanae said that I might also view this as a kind of Black feminist praxis/ erotic praxis/ the fireworks every night have stopped/ it was so beautiful to fall in love during the summer of fireworks/ and the research agenda that I made is mine to change/my mind is mine to do with what I want/ and as I sit in his lap/ facing him on the porch/ and my legs swing/ and I breathe/ open-mouthed into his neck/ the swamp of the inside of my mouth/ creating an ecosystem/ he tells me—don't fumble the ball/ about the bell/ project/ I have the opportunity to do something/ that is important to me and to/ other people/ and I'm doing a lot of waiting . . .

July 24, 2020

Talked to bell last night/ yesterday/after stalling . . . I thought it wouldn't be the right time to go there/ but adanma assured me/ it will be the perfect time/ because no one is going anywhere/so/ the plan is to go during the first week of august/ so now I can have my research assistants help me/ figure out exactly what/ I need to do between now and then/ B will go will me

July 25, 2020

Gave an impassioned speech this week to my research assistants about the changing value of research/ during this pandemic/ during this time/ what it means to take seriously/ rest as

a part of/ the revolution/ I have rested and loved/ all summer/ I don't necessarily feel ready again to write/ but maybe/ ready to think

NC:

This is the first summer I ever spent living on campus and in the US, out of lack of choice. Ever since I came to college, summer was always a time that had to be desperately filled with travels, work experiences, anything that would fill the void that would result in the face of the unstructured silence. But this summer, somewhere between my making a decision about going home and buying flight tickets, borders had closed.

Research specifically during the summer took on a languid, unstructured (“self-paced”) temporality. Prof. Mason had told me that it was supposed to be about ways of engaging with writings that are erotic and life-giving, not for feeling like you are labored or cornered into producing work. This was new, because I have been conditioned to think that time not spent labored is time wasted. Time not structured as a means to the end of producing work is time not spent wisely. Although I realized how much I wanted to break free of this internal script; it still fogged my vision/ability to work.

What I always found difficult to pinpoint in research work, then, was where I fit. In between all the citations and source materials and my interpretations and building on the text and piecing together the puzzle, was there room for the awkward insertion of my own subjectivity?

There is something to be said about the willingness to risk what you know and to be vulnerable to knowledge, to be open to being changed by what you learn and read, to look through a kaleidoscope of ideas to discover the point you were trying to make. But this seems to me to be different from the erasure that I was used to, the clinical separation between my personal subjective experience of the world and what I was taught in the classroom; as things that can inform each other only in one direction.

The pandemic was a moment where through confused iterations of spiraling thoughts it became clear to me that I had yet to become aware of and overcome much of the colonial residues in my upbringing. The main challenge of diving into work over the summer involved letting go of the learned and embodied expectations of the ivory tower and of what it means to be successful, of what it means to use time for me and not for some flashy corporate ladder-climbing gains that look good on a resume; to go on a walk with no agenda and let the mind juices and excess baggage flow out of my system and not necessarily on to a page; to think about how alone and confused yet sometimes comfortably at ease I felt living with my best friends through the beginning of this global pandemic. To think of these things as worthy of being written about.

SE:

My research was constantly, continually interrupted. It was interrupted by daily breaking news, by FaceTime calls, by my dogs and my sister, by chickens and warm breezes . . .

And it felt, I have to confess, more important to spend my time on these so called “interruptions.” Not more important in some illusory, grand way, but in the sense of what kind of activities resonated deep within me. What felt fulfilling, and healing—what felt relevant, what really mattered to me.

My sister (12 years old and stuck in our house with nothing to do) would visit me each hour like clockwork. When there was nothing else to do, which was often, we made cinnamon rolls. They would emerge from the oven warm and golden brown, tasting of sugary sweetness and the fermentation of yeast.

I spent countless hours, too, on the phone with my best friend. She had gone back to Shanghai, China, in March after Haverford College shut down due to COVID. Summer, then, found her trapped there by her expired Visa, closed American consulates, and international travel restrictions.

I processed the strangeness of the summer with her—we talked of how, out of the disasters we thought we might see in our lives, a pandemic was the only one we hadn’t foreseen. We talked about what it was like to have everything we had planned to do go up in smoke, how when I said goodbye to her in March for Spring break we said “see you in a week.” We talked about what it was like for a world that had seemed to be global to be shut down, what closed borders meant for us, what they meant for others.

I was drawn, as well, to focus on what was happening in the world around me.

I felt lost in scrolling through Instagram, reading the news hour after hour, watching my friends and acquaintances’ stories of protests, BLM infographics flooding my feed, and downloading readings on anti-racism.

Maybe this is something that does not need saying, or something I should not be saying—but I find it difficult to write about race.

Yet, I tried. I sunk into thinking and reading and writing. Though perhaps I shouldn't have, I turned inwards—I thought about race, about myself, I began to work seriously against taking my own whiteness as the blank given against which all else is measured. I thought of the parts of my identity (“woman” or “queer” or “white”) not just as overlapping, but as inseparable.

QMM:

August 18 2020

Today when I talked with bell, she asked me when I was coming back/and said that she felt that she didn't feel that we'd had enough time/ with each other/ that men/ take up so much space/and we should run away and become lesbians/ to not delay on getting pregnant/ that while 37 is “not bad”/ I shouldn't delay and delay...

And so it/ is/ with life/ and with loving/ the joy/ and the loss/over/ and over/ again/ and the heart-sinking feelings/ and the mourning/ which I guess is what I'm/ in the process of doing/ now that the summer has winded down/ or is winding down/ and/ the time of play/ and exploration is coming to a close/ back to business/ back to labor/ back to taking seriously the goals/ and achievements/ what there is/ to/ plan for/ what there is to say/ why to say it/ how to say it/ whether to say it/ I don't have the same compulsion to write to others that bell does/ I don't *need* to share what I discover through my writing and my own exploration/ with others/ it is never clear/ that or how any of this benefits/others/ why anyone would care/ or how it would be helpful to others/ or healing to others

August 21 2020

Trying to figure out how to articulate things/ how to work/ on putting things back into words/ I feel like I lost all my words this summer/ and perhaps

Perhaps/ I needed to lose the words in order to recover them again/ to infuse them with new meanings and new experiences/ but the writing has to come/ in order/ at the very least/ to keep the job/ that provides the life/ that allows the living/ and the doing/ and because maybe there *is* value in the words?

NC:

Lately I'm confronted with empty spaces/ spurts of time that I would've otherwise spent

aimlessly with my now-departed housemates in classic summertime languor, almost peacefully in denial of the pandemic wreaking havoc around us. Such is the uplifting and blinding potential of close company. It's been a week, and I feel okay about this, just feel the urge to tune in to how readjustments are in order—how will I take breaks now? How do I expose myself to different perspectives and voices as I take walks by myself in nature? Let a path be chosen for me by some random breeze rather than investing energy on intentionality—how do I become a friend to myself? Which is to ask, how do I surprise myself with ideas and thoughts and feelings and surprises that seem foreign to me? How do I learn to see myself as separate from the parts of myself that I am compelled to think are set in stone—to be open to interpretation, open to random nudges and nourishment from humor, from old memories, from binge-drinking, from playfulness, diving into and finding solace in another worldview?

SE:

I wonder if I will ever be able to write again. I wonder if I can be one person long enough to write something. I wonder if I will ever find the edges of myself again. I wonder what this summer felt like because I can't remember.

By August, with the summer nearly done, it felt like everything I had done collapsed into itself. Like the summer had slipped through my fingers before I could get a firm grasp on it.

I had let go of the research that was supposed to be done, turned entirely to reading and writing and doing that which felt important to me.

I wondered how any of us were going to move forwards. I have always been fascinated by the healing process. By the slow and gentle way the skin knits itself back together. The way it changes in color and texture. It reminds me that healing is not a process of reversion, but of generation.

ON WHAT WE HAVE COME TO KNOW, DIFFERENTLY

In sketching out what we have come to know about doing research during a pandemic, we find ourselves returning to the phenomenon of research itself. As with all good phenomenological projects, our engagement with the concept of research leads us back to the concept itself. This returning, again and again, has typified our experience of research. We have turned back to our experiences, to the histories that inform our engagements with

the phenomenon, to the intersecting ambiguities that constitute our varied lifeworlds, and to ourselves—changed, stretched, transformed.

Research, the work of searching and discovering (though not necessarily in that order), undoubtedly happened in the summer of 2020. Our phenomenological reflections of the summer illustrated how the conditions of the pandemic provided us with a much-needed opportunity to rethink and reframe what we take to be the importance or the use of our intellectual projects and where we look to provide the authority and authorization for such projects. While the planned intent was to look to the traditional sources of authority to provide the foundation for our investigation into the concepts of ambiguity and intersectionality (e.g., the archives, the library), what we experienced instead was something much more rich and profound. The research here was both theorized *and* lived, through the intersecting of our experiences.

In this way, we attempted to bring intersectionality and the “difference that difference makes” to the fore in our phenomenological reflections, in an attempt to experiment with the possibilities of critical phenomenological writing (Marcano 2010). Hence, intersubjectivity, which is assumed at the critical phenomenological outset, also figures predominately in our phenomenological investigation of research. “True to the spirit of the phenomenological method,” as Davis (2020) suggests, our returning to the phenomenon of research, through a turn to the location of authority in our own intersecting lived experiences, allowed us to see “our identities, personal and public, as intersectional phenomena—as coming-to-appear as encroachment or overlapping”; hence, reinforcing phenomenological claims that “all subjectivity is intersubjective.” Furthermore, our intersubjective phenomenological reflections point back towards the central point with which Davis ends his essay: that “*all intersubjectivity is subjectivity*” (8; italics in original).

This realization was coupled with an insight—that our lived experiences truly do inform and serve as the fertile soil of our “research.” While this feels like a hyperbolic claim, one that we have been taught to distrust as marginalized thinkers, we are again guided in this insight through the Black and decolonial feminists that are, in part, a topic of this work.⁵ Indeed, in our turn toward intersectional ambiguity, we have taken seriously/lived with the complexities and challenges of the connections and ambiguities of the mind and the body, race and gender, praxis and theory, class and ethnicity, student and teacher, the material and the ontological, the self and other . . . through a critical phenomenological framework.

We have tried to demonstrate in this piece how the practice of critical phenomenology unfolds as a process. In our phenomenological reflections on doing research, not only did we find ourselves mining untapped sources and methods of discovering knowledge (e.g., accessing research through our embodiment; discovering fuel for survival in time spent with a chosen, stranded family without access to their homes; friendship across distance etc.), but also wrestled with old ones to rewire or refresh them. We see this as

⁵ For more on how marginalized women are taught to distrust their experiences and feelings, see Lorde 1993; Lugones 2003; Dotson 2012b.

anti-oppressive praxis. We found that the answers to our questions about research often presented themselves through different mediums: through dialogue with a friend, through the experience of love, in taking a walk, in reflecting on what it means to have a border between oneself and a loved one. Our research in the summer of 2020 was about learning to love and to live amidst a global pandemic and personal/political upheaval. That the personal is political took on for us a radically new meaning.

Our work led us to confirm the need for critical phenomenology to address the ambiguities brought to the fore by intersectionality. We assert with Davis (2020) that

the praxial promise of this project is to describe intersectionality as the occasion for the *redeployment* of phenomenology. Thus, race, gender, and class [and other markers of difference] and their intersection are not ancillary to phenomenology if it is to be relevant today for addressing the ongoing crises we face daily. (3)

While various differences typify each of our critical phenomenological lenses, our reflections collectively propose the following: first, that relationality is a fundamental aspect of thought work, and second, we assert that power structures which disrupt and complicate our access to and experiences of relationality serve as barriers to anti-oppressive thought and action.

Third, our reflections hint at the possibilities for critical phenomenological inquiry to serve as a methodology of healing and sustenance. As examples of the potential for life-sustaining philosophical methodologies, our phenomenological reflections demonstrate how this method/register has served and might serve as a safe haven and empowering means for women and those with various other intersectional dimensions of difference. In turning to writing about the self during the summer, each of the authors of this piece found, in the investigation of her lived experience, a means through which to connect back to the research. Insofar as the writing and sharing of these phenomenological reflections amongst the three of us involved a bracketing of the natural hegemonic attitude toward research, we were able not only to share our lived experiences of the pandemic political moment, but also to confront how our differential social locations affected how we were positioned differently within the politics of the pandemic. For example, while each author lived through and responded to the uprisings of the summer, the differential social and political locations of each author, especially with regard to race and the context of her physical location during the summer, affected how each was able to articulate these as a dimension of the research in question here. Importantly, the fact that these differences were articulated allowed the authors to intersubjectively investigate the power and privilege differentials themselves. To announce them—not to hide them in an attempt to depersonalize or lend objective credence to the research—allowed each to access new and challenging aspects of feminist solidarity and difference. For each of us, our differences served ambiguously as barrier and opportunity to produce radically engaged research as a practice of resistance.

As such, we hope that this project takes up the challenge of the ameliorative political possibilities of critical phenomenology. Lisa Guenther (2020) asserts:

As a transformative political practice, critical phenomenology must go beyond a description of oppression, developing concrete strategies for dismantling oppressive structures and creating or amplifying different, less oppressive, and more liberatory ways of Being-in-the-world. (Guenther 2020, 16)

Our research during the summer transformed us. We hope that this offering—in its juxtapositional experimental form—might provide an example of a strategy of including diverse voices in critical phenomenological inquiry. Again, we take up the failures and limitations of this approach in the spirit of ambiguity. Insofar as our project seeks to experiment with the political possibilities of intersubjective phenomenological writing, we invite this failure, assume this failure, and hope that it inspires other diverse practitioners of phenomenology to attempt their own means of wrestling with taking seriously the intersubjectivity experienced by the phenomenological subject. Indeed, it was healing to write this piece together and to partake in the process of revisiting its failures. To take up a politics of refusal, to refuse the hegemonic presentation of phenomenological research in our chosen form has healed wounds that each of us carried about who has the authority to speak and how, about whose lived experiences count as authoritative and whose do not. We hope that the ambiguities of this work—its successes and failures—inspire and open the door to diverse approaches to meet the aspirations of critical phenomenology.

TOWARD FUTURES

We are three feminist phenomenologists who look forward to living in the space that the summer of 2020 opened up for an anti-oppressive world, a world where we honor, name, and come to know through the socio-political ambiguities of our bodies and our selves.

We are three feminist phenomenologists who find it difficult to articulate our differences here, yet hope that in doing so that we contribute to sources of healing, for ourselves and for others.

We are three feminist phenomenologists who had epiphanies by thinking together, co-constructing thought through being in conversation intersubjectively, being embodied with one another to the extent that we could, by our mattering to one another.

We are three feminist phenomenologists who found ourselves claiming to one another, quietly and skeptically at first, and now with more and more strength: if life itself is research, then our mattering matters.

We are three feminist phenomenologists who hope you decide to fall in love, or take a walk, or take a nap in the afternoon.

We are three feminist phenomenologists who feel grateful and alive to be doing this work together.

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