

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

JARRETT ZIGON
University of Virginia

C. JASON THROOP
University of California, Los Angeles

In March 2020, the world shut down. We were told to stay in our homes and only to leave if absolutely necessary. If we did leave, we were told to cover our mouth and nose with a mask, and to socially distance. Social distancing—perhaps the most poorly named public health recommendation in history, and likely the one to have the longest lasting and most widespread consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic. In worlds that are increasingly socially and economically fragmented, where everyday human connection is increasingly difficult to find, resulting in a global rise of anxiety, loneliness, and addiction, the last thing we needed to be told was to socially distance. Physical distancing would have better expressed the spatial demand of the recommendation without adding the unbearable affective-ethical-relational demand-cum-shame of denying sociality. It was in response to these foreseeable consequences of social distancing that spurred one of us (Throop) on March 19th, 2020 to organize the first Zoom meeting of what would come to be known by the playful name of Team Phenomenology.

The group formed as a response to an unfolding situation that left many UCLA graduate students who were away from their families and other networks of friendship and care—including a number of students who had just finished taking a seminar on Critical Phenomenology that winter quarter 2020—especially vulnerable to the possibility that the public health mandate to “isolate” and “social distance” would lead them to a growing sense of helplessness, loneliness, and despair. Team Phenomenology thus originally started as a weekly check-in and socializing opportunity primarily for these anthropology graduate students but also for a small handful of phenomenologically-leaning friends and colleagues around the globe (including Zigon).¹

¹ For being there at the beginning of Team Phenomenology and for our continued opportunities to think-together-with each other, we are deeply grateful to: Farzad Amouzagar-Fassie, Yael Assor, Merisa

The conversations during those first weeks centered on sharing information on the unfolding event, which was being distinctively experienced by individuals who were living in different parts of the city of Los Angeles, the broader US, and Europe. Initial discussions focused on whether or not people had access to food, how their families were doing, and if they had ways to find support if they needed it. In the beginning, Team Phenomenology was thus an effort to create a space for mutual care and support. But as we all know, it is nearly impossible to gather a group of phenomenologically-inspired thinkers in a room— even a Zoom room—for too long before they begin articulating their experiences in relation to this or that phenomenological figure, concept, or approach. Soon thereafter, Team Phenomenology—or as it came to be known even more playfully and as a gesture to the worldwide shortage of an essential household product, TP—began reading a short phenomenological text to be discussed for exactly an hour each week in relation to what was happening in the world and with us.

In the spring and summer of 2020, the world broke down. A worldly breakdown often gives rise to forms of moral breakdown, or those “moments” when some worldly event or occurrence forces a person or persons to critically reflect on their until then unquestioned way of being-in-the-world (Zigon 2007). From the persistence of the global pandemic, to the collapse of the economy, to the murder of George Floyd by police officers on camera, to the worldwide response to that injustice, the world and its human inhabitants experienced a breakdown in those months and it became impossible to ever see, hear, understand, or be in the world in the same way again. For after having experienced a moral breakdown, one’s world has shifted—even if ever so slightly—such that one can never return to the world that once was (Zigon 2007). Indeed, for some, such a breakdown can motivate one to begin to act politically, or initiate what Zigon calls an ethics of dwelling that motivates a politics of worldbuilding (2018; 2019).

In response, Team Phenomenology began reading more critically-oriented phenomenology and phenomenological hermeneutic-oriented texts. As the anthropologist Robert Desjarlais already described it in 1997, we understand critical phenomenology not only as a description of “what people feel, think, or experience but also . . . [of] how the *processes* of feeling or experiencing come about through multiple, interlocking interactions” of, for example, political, economic, and cultural forces (25; emphasis in original). Such a critical phenomenology goes beyond classical phenomenology, as Lisa Guenther (2020) has more recently argued, “by reflecting on the quasi-transcendental social structures that make our experience of the world possible and meaningful, and also by engaging in a material practice of ‘restructuring the world’” (15). Indeed, with his critical reading of phenomenological hermeneutics, Zigon has described critical hermeneutics as a theoretical-analytic of the otherwise that “not only discloses the normalizing limits of ordinary everyday existence but, more importantly, participates in the opening of new possibilities for thinking, saying, doing, or being” (2019, 15; 2018).

Berwald, Sara Castro, Anna Corwin, Vicki Eagle, Ulises Espinoza, Devin Flaherty, Gregory Flynn-Sollish, Yanina Gori, Nicco La Mattina, Abigail Mack, Matthew McCoy, Eva Melstrom, Vanessa Melo, Paul Melas, Stephanie Keeney Parks, Christopher Stephan, Rachel Parks, Megan Raschig, Alessandra Rosen, Aidan Seale-Feldman, Alexander Thompson, Lauren Textor, Sylvia Tidey and Wesley Wilson.

We also began inviting thinkers who either explicitly take up this critical approach to phenomenology and hermeneutics or engage with it. For example, we invited Alia Al-Saji, Morten Axel Pedersen, Anne O’Byrne, Judith Butler, Ed Casey, Thomas Csordas, Simon Critchely, Robert Desjarlais, Lewis Gordon, Lisa Guenther, Ghassan Hage, Martin Jay, Jonathan Lear, Rebecca Longtin, Ignacio Quepons, Dermot Moran, Fred Moten, Matthew Rattcliffe, Joel Robbins, Hans Ruin, Gayle Salamon, Anthony Steinbock, Dan Zahavi, and others to join us and to discuss their work in relation to current events. Much to our surprise, many of these guests became regular participants in the group, some joining weekly and others more intermittently.

In retrospect, however, it is perhaps not that surprising that what began as a weekly check-in for anthropology graduate students and friends soon became a weekly meeting of anthropologists and philosophers focused on critical phenomenology and hermeneutics. The core organizers of Team Phenomenology—Jason Throop and, eventually, Jarrett Zigon—have had ongoing working relations with phenomenological philosophers for nearly a decade now. A third participant of TP and a contributor to this volume, the phenomenological anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly, has been working closely with a group of phenomenological philosophers and anthropologists at Aarhus University in Denmark for even longer, a group that Throop and Zigon has since joined.² Until the world shut and broke down, this group had been meeting, thinking, and presenting together at least once a year for nearly a decade.

Neither is it surprising that Team Phenomenology so quickly and easily turned its focus to critical phenomenology and hermeneutics. Although critical phenomenology, for example, has recently begun to attract much attention in philosophy—due in no small part to the important contributions of Guenther, Al-Saji, O’Byrne, Salamon, and the establishment of this journal, *Puncta*—a strong case could be made that the longest and deepest tradition of critical phenomenology is in anthropology. For example, anthropologists such as Byron Good (1993) and Robert Desjarlais (1997) have been writing about critical phenomenology since the 1990s, and Cheryl Mattingly (2019), Sarah Willen (2007; 2019), and Jarrett Zigon (2007; 2011; 2018; 2019), among others have been ever since (Throop 2014). The field has developed to such a point that many of these same phenomenological anthropologists have begun offering graduate seminars on critical phenomenology and critical hermeneutics over the past few years. The point here is not to tell an origin story or to make a turf claim, but rather to articulate a larger context for understanding the naturalness, as it were, for a group of phenomenological anthropologists to invite a number of phenomenological philosophers to join a conversation on how critical phenomenology and hermeneutics can help us better understand our contemporary condition (Dyring and Wentzer 2021; Wentzer and Mattingly 2018; Zigon 2018).

² The Aarhus group consists of the philosophers Rasmus Dyring and Thomas Schwarz Wentzer, and the anthropologists Lone Grøn, Maria Louw, and Lotte Meinert, among others. Our same group has also had close connections and ongoing exchange with the phenomenologically oriented anthropologists Henrik Vigh and Hans Lucht, as well as the philosopher Dan Zahavi in Copenhagen.

While there are many generative resonances between philosophical and anthropological engagements with phenomenology, there are also some important differences (Desjarlais and Throop 2011; Ram and Houston 2015). Indeed, phenomenology has been distinctively recast within anthropology, with ethnographic engagements offering a unique lens to reexamine, rethink, and critique phenomenological insights (Csordas 1990; Jackson 1996; 1998; 2014; Katz and Csordas 2003; Mattingly 1998; 2014; Stoller 1984; 2008; Throop 2010; 2012; 2018; Willen and Seeman 2012; Zigon 2018). Phenomenology has also transformed, and has been transformed by, anthropological forms of writing and representation, which do not simply conform to standard philosophical modes of exegesis. Moreover, from a phenomenological anthropological perspective, the showing forth of any given phenomenon in ethnographic analysis is necessarily tethered to how that phenomenon shows itself in the unfolding of concrete engagements in the life of the ethnographer and the communities they work with and learn from. Indeed, unlike many forms of philosophical phenomenology, phenomenological anthropology is necessarily grounded upon forms of thinking that arise in the actualities of living relations that carry with them forms of ethical being-with and thinking-together-with-one-another that necessarily transcend the scope of any specific project. While the forms of critical thinking that emerge within the context of phenomenological anthropological research bears the traces of the relational and worldly conditions that first gave rise to it, it also exceeds such conditions as thinking remains tethered to generative living forms of relationality that continue along in ways that never simply abide by a given researcher's specific projects, plans, or goals, whatever they might be. Being continually open to unsettlement, surprise, and ungrounding is thus at the very heart of what propels critical modes of thinking in phenomenological anthropological research and writing.

The year 2020—to put it colloquially (and we often did)—was a shit show, and (as of this writing) 2021 is not shaping up to be much better. Phenomenologically speaking, however, it disclosed significant questions concerning the intertwining of conditions for existence and the singularity of any particular existence. The everyday experience of this disclosure, as we mentioned above, could be described as a breakdown that compelled many persons to confront for the first time the conditions of their own and other lives, as well as the many pernicious and precarious aspects of these conditions. Put another way, our contemporary condition—upon reflection—may one day prove to be the year the (philosophical) world realized the singular importance of critical phenomenology and hermeneutics. For if nothing else, the experience of facing such a radical ungrounding has opened up possibilities to see the generativity of this intertwining more explicitly and rigorously than before.

This special issue of *Puncta* brings together anthropologists and philosophers who take up a critical phenomenological or hermeneutic approach for thinking the contemporary condition—each of whom have participated in various ways in Team Phenomenology over the past year. From the possibility of inhabiting a world conditioned by a global pandemic, to the impossibility of dwelling in conditions of systemic racism, from the question of how to face a future that presents itself as looming, to a present that denies the very possibility of truth: this collection responds to these and more in the hope of showing not only the

contemporary conditions of existence, but that other conditions always remain as an ever-present potentiality.

This collection of essays, which each take up unique critical phenomenologically or hermeneutically inspired analyses, are thus rooted in a form of *thinking-together-with* that arose in response to an unfolding and unprecedented situation. The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing social and political unrest, called forth an otherwise—the formation of a community of thinkers whose mutual care and engagement generated the possibility for this volume to be. We very much look forward to this ongoing conversation continuing and hope that the contributions to this Special Issue are only the beginning as both anthropologists and philosophers continuing thinking-together-with one another about how critical phenomenology and hermeneutics can speak to the myriad forms of crisis that define our times.

REFERENCES

- Csordas, Thomas J. 1990. “Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology.” *Ethos: Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology* 18 (1): 5-47.
- Desjarlais, Robert R. 1997. *Shelter Blues: Sanity and Selfhood Among the Homeless*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Desjarlais, Robert and Jason Throop. 2011. “Phenomenological Approaches in Anthropology.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 40: 87-102.
- Dyring, Rasmus and Thomas Schwarz Wentzer. 2021. “How Life Makes a Conversation of Us: Ontology, Ethics, and Responsive Anthropology.” In *Living with Concepts: Anthropology in the Grip of Reality*, edited by Andrew Brandel and Marco Motta, 50-72. New York: Fordam University Press.
- Good, Byron J. 1993. *Medicine, Rationality and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Guenther, Lisa. 2020. “Critical Phenomenology.” In *50 Concepts for a Critical* Phenomenology*, edited by Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon, 11–16. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Jackson, Michael. 1996. “Phenomenology, Radical Empiricism, and Anthropological Critique.” In *Things as They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology*, edited by Michael Jackson, 1-50. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- . 1998. *Minima Ethnographica: Intersubjectivity and the Anthropological Project*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- . 2014. “Ajálá’s Heads: Reflections on Anthropology and Philosophy in a West African Setting.” In *The Ground Between: Anthropologists Engage Philosophy*, edited by Veena Das, Michael Jackson, Arthur Kleinman, and Bhri Gupta Singh, 27-49. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Katz, Jack and Thomas J. Csordas. 2003. “Phenomenological Ethnography in Sociology and Anthropology.” *Ethnography* 4 (3): 275-88.
- Mattingly, Cheryl. 1998. *Healing Dramas and Clinical Plots: The Narrative Structure of Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2014. *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril and the Struggle for a Good Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2019. “Defrosting Concepts, Destabilizing Doxa: Critical Phenomenology and the Perplexing Particular.” *Anthropological Theory* 19 (4): 415–39.
- Ram, Kalpana and Christopher Houston (eds.). 2015. *Phenomenological Anthropology: A Sense of Perspective*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Stoller, Paul. 1984. “Sound in Songhay Cultural Experience.” *American Ethnologist* 11(3): 559-70.
- . 2008. *The Power of the Between: An Anthropological Odyssey*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Throop, C. Jason. 2010. *Suffering and Sentiment: Exploring the Vicissitudes of Experience and Pain in Yap*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2012. “On Inaccessibility and Vulnerability: Some Horizons of Compatibility between Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis.” *Ethos: Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology* 40 (1): 75- 96.
- . 2014. “Moral Moods.” *Ethos: Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology* 42 (1): 65-83.
- . 2018. “Being Open to the World.” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8 (1/2): 197-210.
- Wentzer, Thomas Schwarz and Cheryl Mattingly. 2018. “Toward a New Humanism: An Approach from Philosophical Anthropology.” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8 (1-2): 144-57.
- Willen, Sarah S. 2007. “Toward a Critical Phenomenology of ‘Illegality’: State Power, Criminalization, and Abjectivity among Undocumented Migrant Workers in Tel Aviv, Israel.” *International Migration* 45 (3): 8–38.

- . 2019. *Fighting for Dignity: Migrant Lives at Israel's Margins*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Willen, Sarah S. and Don Seeman. 2012. "Introduction: Experience and Inquiétude." *Ethos: Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology* 40 (1): 1-23.
- Zigon, Jarrett. 2007. "Moral Breakdown and the Ethical Demand: A Theoretical Framework for an Anthropology of Moralities." *Anthropological Theory* 7 (2): 131–50.
- . 2011. *HIV Is God's Blessing: Rehabilitating Morality in Neoliberal Russia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2018. *Disappointment: Toward a Critical Hermeneutics of Worldbuilding*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- . 2019. *A War on People: Drug User Politics and a New Ethics of Community*. Oakland: University of California Press.