EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

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> *I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.*
>
> – bell hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice"[1]

I. MOTIVATIONS AND CONCERNS

As the lived realities of the COVID-19 pandemic set in, academics in the humanities and social sciences quickly began interpreting and making sense of this period of transition, uncertainty, and cascading crises (Baraitser and Salisbury 2020; Bambra, Lynch, and Smith 2021; Bratton 2021). However, since the very early days of the pandemic, some commentators sought, and indeed continue to seek, pathways to our so-called "normal" pre-pandemic lives. Much of this commentary has failed to acknowledge the burden of the pre-pandemic status quo for many marginalized people, as well as foreclosing space

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[1] This Special Issue, including this introduction, was largely written and prepared in early 2021. As co-editors, we had found ourselves returning to bell hooks's extraordinary work for guidance throughout this endeavor. Not long before publication, we received news of bell hooks's passing on Wednesday 15th December 2021 (Busby 2021). We remember and honor bell hooks, whose foregrounding of radical possibility and love in her Black feminist approach to understanding the world has taught so many of us so much. May she rest in power.

to grieve for what and whom have been lost, or to imagine life otherwise (Leotti 2020). For many people, these challenges present viscerally in lived experience, as Molly Osberg (2021) writes:

> I don't know how to metabolize such a towering sense of collective grief, and one that's infused practically everything I've ever known . . . COVID-19 is not a phase or an era or a series of habits to be unlearned. It was a largely preventable horror that altered the fabric of reality and there are people responsible.

From a critical-phenomenological perspective, this preoccupation with returning to the "normal," along with contested definitions of a "new normal," highlights a number of problematic assumptions about our shared lived reality. These assumptions largely fail to acknowledge the remarkable disparities in social privilege and power within and between societies across the globe, occluding the inextricable intercorporeality and interdependency relating individuals within communities and societies.

The idea that COVID-19 has been a "great equalizer" has long been dispelled as a "hollow platitude" evidenced through the entanglement of the pandemic with a number of contemporaneous events and social causes (Bowleg 2020, 917). Alongside the pandemic, the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others demonstrated the additional public health threat of racist police violence, leading to what many described as "twin pandemics" or the "two public health crises" of COVID-19 and racism (Altschuler and Wald 2020, 15). Meanwhile, COVID-19 cases have been disproportionately severe among racialized minorities of lower socio-economic backgrounds in the UK and in the USA, where "Pacific Islander, Latino, Indigenous and Black Americans all have a COVID-19 death rate of double or more that of White and Asian Americans" (APM Research Lab Staff 2021)—thus demonstrating multifarious social determinants of health that are largely accepted or ignored on a systemic level (Sandset 2021; Dalsania et al. 2021). Frontline workers, including health professionals, carers, sanitation and hospitality workers, and teachers, have experienced increased workloads and exposure to the virus (Salve and Jungari 2020; ONS 2020). Disabled people have contended with policies of responsibilization that have required self-protection through shielding, often without sufficient support or accessible information and involving exposure to many other risks (Rotarou et al. 2021; Shakespeare, Ndagire, and Seketi 2021). More recently, the relinquishment of compulsory mask-wearing policies has presented new challenges, with many concerned by the exclusion of immunocompromised people from public spaces, risk of new variants, and increased infection rates associated with more widespread Long COVID (Phillips and Williams 2021). These issues, to name just a few, impact variably on individuals and communities, largely depending on their social position and social power.

Many national pandemic responses have, as Benjamin Bratton (2021) notes, been dominated by a politics that "sees society not as an interdependent biological community but as a collection of atomized agents who may or may not choose to enter into social

relations" (96).[2] As Bambra, Lynch, and Smith (2021) summarize, the pandemic is "killing unequally," "experienced unequally," and "impoverishing unequally," and these inequalities are shaped by politics, policies, and preparedness that preceded the pandemic (99-100). Moreover, without redistribution of wealth, resources, and vaccinations, future waves of the pandemic will continue to disproportionately affect those already most marginalized and oppressed (112). In these ways, contemporary public health policies engage explicitly with questions of necropolitics—"under what practical conditions is the right to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death exercised?" (Mbembe 2003, 12)— and these pandemic responses raise key critical concerns about "the affectual and affective motives for why we allow necropolitical conditions not only to emerge but to be sustained" (Sandset 2021, 1423). It is the lifeworlds (and deathworlds) of these marginalized people to which critical phenomenologists must be most attentive in seeking "not only to describe but repair the world" (Weiss, Murphy, and Salamon 2020, xiv).

When the first public health measures were introduced in 2020, it became clear to us, as phenomenologists, that the fabric of our lived experience was going to be transformed— with respect to our relationships with others, the world, and ourselves, as well as the management of our bodies and daily lives. Lockdowns, social distancing, and the widespread use of face masks immediately reordered our social and material worlds. Witnessing how some commentators were accounting for these changes in problematically general terms, we felt strongly that critical phenomenology, as an approach, could positively put forth forms of analysis that would engage with the social complexity of the situation. Such a time warrants careful phenomenological analyses concerning how public policies and power affect the lives and lifeworlds of people in differential and exclusionary ways.

In the summer of 2020, therefore, we invited phenomenologists to reflect critically on how the global COVID-19 public health crisis was affecting and modifying lived experience, both through first-personal realities—such as embodiment, affect, and identity—and through relational senses of intersubjective understanding. We invited phenomenologists to engage with critical phenomenology—that is, to explicitly thematize power relations, structural forces, and unequal distributions of privilege in their phenomenological analyses of lived experience. For this reason, we titled this Special Issue "Pandemic Politics and Phenomenology." We hoped that, by bringing together a plurality of phenomenological perspectives on the pandemic, we could begin a collective dialogue

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[2] It is worth noting that responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have varied significantly worldwide and across something resembling a global north-south divide. Ekpenyong and Pacheco (2020), for example, note how "[r]esource rich and advanced health systems, like Italy's, were rapidly overwhelmed" whereas others with fewer resources but expertise developed during previous outbreaks, like Vietnam, "managed to control the outbreak without jeopardizing their health system's capacity" (388). Indeed, COVID-19 responses operate within very different affective cultural lifeworlds, external commentary of which has often failed to grasp nuance and can be spun to political ends, as in how media coverage in the UK and USA last year affected relations with China (Walker 2021). This raises serious questions about the "directionality of the knowledge transaction" in global health policy (Ekpenyong and Pacheco 2020, 388), and the necessity of a decolonial "geopolitics of knowledge" that can question whose epistemologies are privileged and to whose (dis)advantage (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020, 366). As editors, we acknowledge how our positionality has influenced the perspective offered in this introduction in these respects, giving context to a Special Issue which is largely premised on experiences in the global north.

about how phenomenologists might offer a distinctive means to make sense of ongoing world events, attending to lived experiences in their situated and particular contexts. Little did we know even then how events would transpire. Still, we ask: how does a critical-phenomenological lens serve an engagement with politics at a time like this, but also how might marginalized lived experiences challenge dominant phenomenological concepts during a time of transition in global public health?

II. WHY CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY?

Phenomenology has understood from its inception that all accounts of lived meaning are impoverished when the world is rendered in mere facts and through a scientistic logic of calculation (Husserl 1970, 6).[3] Critical phenomenology has subsequently highlighted how this effacement of lived experience from descriptions of the world further marginalizes those already pushed to its margins. It is often such difficult friction within lived experience that drives people to theory and praxis, and this critical-phenomenological perspective has motivated this Special Issue on "Pandemic Politics and Phenomenology."

As a theoretical approach, critical phenomenology combines insights regarding embodied lived experience with analyses of socio-political structures and power relations which frame, inform, and shape that experience. The approach follows from the pioneering work of twentieth-century phenomenologists Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon, who coupled phenomenological inquiry with analyses of how uneven distributions of social power shape lived experience and its concomitant social and political possibilities. As such, critical phenomenology foregrounds experiences of oppression, marginalization, embodied difference, and power. As Lisa Guenther (2020) argues, critical phenomenology aims to render salient common and invisibilized forms of injustice, through interrogating "the familiar" as a site of oppression, demonstrating how social structures—such as white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, for example—constitute not only the "norms of our lifeworld," but are also "deeply constitutive of who we are and how we make sense of things" (12-13). In this way, critical phenomenology is both a philosophical practice *and* a political practice which aims to affect "liberation from the structures that privilege, naturalize, and normalize certain experiences of the world while marginalizing, pathologizing and discrediting others" (15). These structures, as Guenther points out, are both "out there" in the world through "the documented patterns and examples of hetero-patriarchal racist domination," but they are also intrinsic to the fabric of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, "shaping the way we perceive ourselves, others and the world" (15-16).

Critical phenomenology is an approach that can take seriously the diversity of lived experiences, cultural lifeworlds, and their political contexts. It matters how we are able

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[3] As Husserl (1970) writes in the *Crisis*: "Merely fact-minded sciences make merely fact-minded people. . . . What does science have to say about reason and unreason or about us men as subjects of . . . freedom? The mere science of bodies clearly has nothing to say; it abstracts from everything subjective" (6).

to think through and relate the political and intersubjective with embodied firsthand experiences, now as much as ever. It matters whose narratives guide and mold the frameworks through which we will experience future global events, such as pandemics. Recent work in critical phenomenology has generated a toolkit of conceptual resources that have powerfully illuminated particularities of lived experience, addressing how first-person textures of embodiment are intertwined with socio-political structures and their power dynamics. Critical-phenomenological insights—regarding intercorporeality, the body schema, social isolation, affect, confiscated bodies, alienation, and marginalization, along with the lived experiences of disability, illness, and racism, among many others—have already proven useful in articulating the disruptions and upheavals in lived experience to which COVID-19, along with the public health measures introduced in its wake, has led.

To the time of writing, contemporary phenomenologists have made important critical contributions in relation to how we understand and theorize lived experience within pandemic politics, reflecting on experiences such as: social distancing (Carel, Ratcliffe, and Froese 2020; Dolezal 2020), lockdown (Carel 2020), intercorporeality (Dolezal 2020; Butler 2021), grief (Richardson et al, 2021), the uncanniness of experience (Aho 2020), anxiety (Trigg 2022), illness (Finlay 2020), racism (Yancy 2020), temporality (Heyes 2020), and contagion (Dahiya 2020).[4] Contributing to this growing body of work, this critical-phenomenological Special Issue consists of four articles and three musings—a range of new perspectives foregrounding various lived experiences affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

III. LIVED EXPERIENCE AS EVIDENCE, CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY AS APPROACH

The articles in this Special Issue offer reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic through multiple methodological approaches. While a common denominator of critical interdisciplinarity brings these phenomenological perspectives together, authors have drawn diversely from sources ranging from qualitative analyses and autoethnographic notes to contemporary journalism and empirical health studies. Taken together, these perspectives attend to the lived complexities of the contemporary global health crisis, but they also provide a glimpse at the rich theoretical toolkit and methodological potential within critical phenomenology today.

In their article, "We Feel Grateful and Alive to be Doing This Work Together: Phenomenological Reflections on a 2020 Summer of Feminist Research Across Difference," Qrescent Mali Mason, Noorie Chowdhury, and Sofia Esner together give voice to their experiences of the pandemic through autoethnographic vignettes and careful phenomenological reflection. As women situated across various intersections of difference,

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[4] As Judith Butler (2021) noted at the end of their recent lecture on Merleau-Ponty and the pandemic, critical phenomenology can supplement other modes of critique by offering "a more textured under-standing" of how power operates in lived experience.

they each reflect upon how their plans to conduct research on Black feminism and ambiguity were affected and complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the social climate resulting from widespread responses to the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in the United States during the summer of 2020. They show how refusal of, and resistance against, dominant modes of academic practice (i.e., to compartmentalize research from its context) led them to make space for working differently and compassionately together.

Hans-Georg Eilenberger, Annemie Halsema, and Lotte Schuitmaker offer a detailed analysis of contemporary discourse in their article, "Becoming a 'Vulnerable Senior' in the Days of COVID-19," through a distinctive critical-phenomenological lens. Taking an approach that combines philosophical reflection with an empirical study, the authors consider how older people in the Netherlands were discursively framed and essentialized as vulnerable as the COVID-19 crisis unfolded in 2020. They draw from phenomenological and post-structuralist work on vulnerability and precarity to interpret quotes from daily newspapers and other media to show how older people have actively contested and re-interpreted the imposed discursive framework according to their lived realities.

Danielle Petherbridge critically examines how the phenomenology of habit cultivation relates to COVID-19 public health measures in her article, "Embodied Social Habit and COVID-19: Unsociability or Ethical Responsibility?" Drawing from a range of phenomenological literature, she foregrounds the ethical obligations implicated by social interdependence and vulnerability, relating these to the responsibility entailed in active habit cultivation. Petherbridge compares COVID-19 measures, including social distancing and mask wearing, to previous public health campaigns and their relative up-take, raising important questions about agency over, and resistance against, collective responsibility in the context of a cultural habitus.

Through Ragna Winniewski's article, "Disrupted Intercorporeality and Embodiedness in Dementia Care During the COVID-19 Crisis," we are invited to consider how social distancing affects interpersonal dementia care and self-experience for people with dementia. Drawing from literature on phenomenologies of illness, psychiatry, and psychopathology, as well as medical and social science, Winniewski offers a highly interdisciplinary perspective, motivated out of critical concern for how public health measures can affect people with dementia in differential and exclusionary ways. In particular, she argues that intercorporeality is crucial for holistic dementia care, shedding light on the significant disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic for people with dementia and their carers.

In addition to the four peer-reviewed articles presented in this Special Issue, we are very pleased to include three further reflective pieces through *Puncta*'s musing format. These shorter form reflections open up additional spaces for phenomenological consideration and draw our attention to other important issues relating to the pandemic.

In their musing, "Differential Experiences of Social Distancing: Considering Alienated Embodied Communication and Racism," Luna Dolezal and Gemma Lucas heed various Black writers who have drawn parallels between the alienated bodily communication of social distancing and their prior experiences of marginalization as a result of racism. The authors thus reflect on how social distancing may differentially impact individuals with lived

experiences of racism, since both kinds of social encounter can feel laden with suspicion, avoidance, fear, and distrust. Dylan Trigg reflects in his musing, "COVID-19 and the Anxious Body," on how COVID-19 as a phenomenon has rendered the body an object of anxiety and has disrupted bodily potential for intersubjective expressivity. His explorations of pandemic-related contingency trace several key phenomenological concepts, ultimately affirming that a critical approach is not only illuminating but necessary when engaging phenomenologically with a major public health crisis. In the final musing, "Embracing Misfit Bodies: A Reflection on My Brother's Dementia in the Time of COVID-19," Sara Cohen Shabot explores issues relating to the spread of COVID-19 and her brother's dementia on both personal and philosophical levels. Reflecting on concepts of vulnerability and "misfitting" in particular, as well as anxiety, uncertainty, grief, and privilege, Shabot here offers a moving account of personal crisis in times of global crisis.

As editors of this Special Issue, we have been struck by the diversity of methodology offered in response to the theme "Pandemic Politics and Phenomenology." In particular, these articles demonstrate the range of lived experiences available as "evidence" to phenomenologists, and the necessity of careful attendance to the social and political context within which these lived experiences are *made available*—particularly when researchers turn from first-person reflections to broader qualitative studies and reports. After all, first-person experience often motivates critical and theoretical undertaking. As bell hooks (1991) says in "Theory as Liberatory Practice":

> When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two—that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other. (2)

Phenomenological research often involves engaging with plural experiences in different ways—through self-reflection, collegial dialogue, qualitative research, or community engagement, to name just a few examples. As critical phenomenologists, we remain attentive to how power structures the ways in which these experiences are rendered, legitimized, or ignored as "evidence" (Stanier and Miglio 2021).[5] At a time when research

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[5] There is growing public acknowledgement of the relevance, and indeed the importance, of approaches and analysis that are attuned to differential experiences of health phenomena as they are lived through. Many high-profile medical bodies offer public and community engagement policies; for example, the World Health Organization's "Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-being for All" (n.d.) underscores the importance of centering "lived experience" in "knowledge generation, policy-making, and health responses." It is also important, however, to emphasize that these policies have been adopted following decades of disability activism and patient-led initiatives, which have pushed for lived experiences to be taken seriously in the context of health care (Ginsburg and Rapp 2013). As Miles Sibley (n.d.), co-founder of the Patient Experience Library, discusses, there has always been a major discrepancy between the way medical evidence has been treated in contrast with patients' experiential evidence; despite significant volumes of feedback being gathered, it is not "seen as evidence" or "deemed worthy of investigation."

and evidence are such important and contested fields of biopower, we suggest that the articles in this Special Issue show how critical phenomenology distinctively offers an approach to evidence (rather than a form of evidence as such). As studies of COVID-19 proliferate, critical phenomenologists can helpfully intervene in, and enrich, ongoing discussion of public health by emphasizing the relevance of meaning and sense-making, by problematizing generic statements about shared experiences, and also by helping to mobilize collective endeavors.

IV. A NOTE ON PUBLISHING DURING A PANDEMIC

We believe strongly that critical phenomenology offers a distinctively valuable lens through which to understand pandemic politics. However, the pandemic and its political fallout have, of course, been lived realities for everyone, including scholars of phenomenology. The editors of *Puncta*'s 2020 Special Issue—"Critically Sick: New Phenomenologies of Illness, Madness, and Disability"—highlighted how the pandemic was exacerbating deep-seated inequalities and affecting marginalized people with profound material consequences (Lajoie & Douglas 2020). People across the globe have endured much and more since then, and the cost and grief of such endurance should not be underestimated; to borrow an expression from Alia Al-Saji (2020), "the weight of its own duration makes a difference" (99).

In producing this Special Issue, we have wanted to acknowledge the exceptional circumstances under which everyone has been working. Writing for publication has simply not been a possibility afforded to everyone during such a challenging period, especially those experiencing multiple intersections of marginalization. Many people have been balancing various responsibilities of work and care and have been pressured to work "as usual." We have tried to offer flexible editorial support, taking into account where possible that personal circumstances would evolve over the course of writing. However, there are many perspectives that might have spoken to the theme of "Pandemic Politics and Phenomenology" which have not made it into this final issue. Several authors submitted wonderful papers that unfortunately could not be completed for this Special Issue. We also note the lack of perspectives from the global south, and that the pandemic is entangled with many other collective issues, such as ecological crisis, physical gatherings of protest and vigil, and unequal internet access, which also warrant careful reflection. Many more lucid critical-phenomenological interventions, we suspect, will develop in the months and years to come. We hope this Special Issue contributes constructively to ongoing discussion, and we look forward to reading future contributions to critical phenomenology of pandemic politics in *Puncta* and elsewhere. We offer our sincere and heartfelt thanks to all authors and contributors, as well as our generous reviewers and the *Puncta* editorial team, for their work in bringing these articles and musings to fruition.

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