

THE DIFFERENCE OF FEMINIST PHENOMENOLOGY: THE CASE OF SHAME

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Is feminist phenomenology just a phenomenological inquiry into the specific phenomenon of “woman,” or carried out from the specific point of view of a woman?² In other words, is it a species of applied phenomenology, where phenomenological method or practice is taken as complete and competent, and simply put to work by a new subject or in relation to a new object? If this is the case, sexed embodiment may be disclosed as the origin of meanings and values that have previously been missing from the phenomenological account—but it is a version of phenomenological practice that has already been established which yields the disclosure. When feminist phenomenologists commit to this line of thinking about what feminist phenomenology is, they find all the resources needed to do feminist phenomenology already there in Edmund Husserl, or Emmanuel Levinas, or Maurice Merleau-Ponty, waiting to be set to work on the phenomenon of woman. But does the phenomenon suffer in the process?

Or does feminist phenomenology pose a challenge or even a threat to phenomenology as it has been practiced? Is it, in other words, disruptive and transformative in its nature and its aims? Does the object of concern for feminist phenomenology or the particularity of the subject undertaking the inquiry shape things in such a way that the inherited practice is not simply deployed, but destroyed? And if so, what emerges as the *practice* of feminist phenomenology from the ashes? If feminist phenomenology is not *simply* an act of destruction, what else is it? In other words, what is the difference of feminist phenomenology?

In what follows I approach these questions first through an examination of what two feminist phenomenologists, Sara Heinämaa and Johanna Oksala, each with very different relations to the phenomenological canon, have to say about feminist phenomenological practice. I then turn to Simone de Beauvoir, whom we might credit with the distinction of being the first feminist phenomenologist, to try to articulate what is different about her phenomenology, i.e., what those of us who practice feminist phenomenology might count as a positive inheritance. Both of these discussions require talking about feminist phenomenology rather than doing it, while the real difference of feminist phenomenology only emerges in the practice itself. In order to try to capture something about this difference, I take the phenomenon of shame as a case study, and compare three recent phenomenological accounts of shame.¹

Before embarking on this undertaking, however, it is necessary to clear away some debris. There is something that stands in the way, not only of feminist phenomenology,

¹ Both in my account of Beauvoir’s phenomenological practice and in my discussion of shame, I draw heavily on my other published work. I’ve designated these sections with footnotes in the text.

but of any feminist inquiry in almost any philosophical context. It is an affective problem, *not* a cognitive problem. It has important implications related to the difference between the two conceptions of feminist phenomenology already mentioned (as enacting or destroying the practice itself). The problem is *reverence*. Reverence for the figure or the text, so important to philosophy's affective world, is often disrupted by feminist thought. The disruption occurs, however, beneath the level of conscious awareness. There, disturbed reverence does its work, acting as a factory for the manufacture of resistance to feminist philosophical ideas, while never being recognized or acknowledged for what it is: a visceral, intense, affective attachment, that makes one feel as if one's very way of life, system of values, and well-being are at stake when this affective modality is injured.

I raise the problem of reverence here in order to warn against its workings as readers move through the rest of the text. It would not be a mistake to read this essay as two essays (and indeed it is the length of two essays) the first of which (part I) is meant to provide a clearing in which the account of feminist phenomenology presented in the second (parts II-V) stands some chance of being heard.

I. WOMEN WITH CAN(N)ONS: BLOWING THINGS UP AND OTHER FEMINIST METHODS, OR THE REVERENCE PROBLEM

Philosophy, at least as I have known it, is a reverent discipline, where deep affective attachments often mark the philosopher's relationship to figure and text. By this I mean that the relationships that compose philosophy, the relationships that are foregrounded in its self-understanding, are saturated by an affective tone or mood in which awe, adulation, and respect predominate. In continental philosophy, where I have my training, this is perhaps even more true than it is for the rest of the discipline—perhaps here it is even pathologically true—but I don't think that relations of reverence are by any means limited to the continentalists who may be most openly passionate about living on their knees.

This is not to say of course that philosophy is only reverent, or that it cultivates reverence in all its relationships. On the contrary, there are many different affective moods or states that are cultivated in the culture of philosophy—defensiveness, narcissistic entitlement, triumphalism, *schadenfreude*, gratuitous nastiness—to name only a few. Of course, I enact some of those when I write that. But if we think about the relationships that are foregrounded in the stories philosophers tell ourselves about our discipline and its history—the stories we tell about our own entrance into the lineage of philosophy—often these are father/son stories; teacher/eager student stories; wise sage and seeker after wisdom stories; rarely mother/daughter stories. They center on key figures or texts, Socrates or Plato or Descartes or Kant or Hegel or Husserl or Heidegger—and almost Beauvoir in my philosophical world—being the center of a reverent love. This mode of fetishization amounts to the cultivation of a certain erotic religiosity in relation to specific texts that are deeply adored, or a kind of awe in relation to certain figures who are regarded as elevated progenitors. These relations are echoed in living relations between scholars and their own teachers, or scholars and the living thinkers they admire, so that conferences or symposia or keynote lectures, peopled by these admired figures, are accompanied by the subtle sounds of genuflecting, the light pop-

ping sounds of knees used to too much sitting, reaching toward the ground.

Paul Woodruff has this to say about the virtue of reverence: “Reverence is the well-developed capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have” (2001, 19). Now philosophers may not agree on when and in relation to whom such feelings are appropriate, but I think there is a kind of felt consensus that reverence is part of the warp and woof of our philosophical lives, so that to give up on reverence is, for all intents and purposes, to give up on philosophy.

I want to think about this affective mood in relation to reactions to the arrival, on the philosophical scene, of feminist philosophers, particularly when they arrive in significant numbers, which is what has happened slowly, over the last decades. I also want to think about this affective mood in relation to the requirements of feminist philosophy, and our approaches to masculine philosophical canons.

To make things far too simple, we could say that in the early days of feminist criticism of the canon, there were two ways of reading *the problem of women* (this goes for questions of race, too) (Witt 1996). One of these ways is very palatable to the reverent ones, and one of these ways is very threatening to them. It is perhaps too obvious to state that a canon is not a once-and-for-all established collectivity. What we call a “canon” is always under duress, always contested, and always subject to revision. But it also has a certain historical stubbornness that we have to contend with. When feminists began to criticize the canon, or to criticize particular figures in the canon in relation to questions of sex and gender, this criticism took two broad forms. First, feminists paid attention to what these canonical figures said about women, about men, and about sexual difference. “The problems of the woman reading philosophy intensify when the talk turns to women,” wrote Nancy Tuana, “she has no doubt that she is the subject of the discourse, but she cannot recognize herself in what she reads” (1992, 3). Feminists criticized specific passages in specific texts—they engaged in what Charlotte Witt called “the cataloguing of explicit misogyny” (1996, 4). Now, the reverent ones, who first reacted with horror that anyone would comment on the stains on the robes of the messiah, have, over time, gotten pretty comfortable with this. They think it’s okay. The reason they think it is okay is they do not think it matters very much. Kant said some awful, in a flattering kind of way, things about women; he said some awful, in an absolutely unflattering kind of way, things about Africans. He was a man of his time, we can acknowledge that, lament it, set it aside and get on with things. The reverent ones are not worried about this. They also are not very interested in it. As Tuana wrote, they believe that “a philosopher’s gender biases, although perhaps historically interesting, are not philosophically significant” (1992, 5). In fact, “a philosopher’s gender biases, although perhaps reprehensible, are independent of his larger philosophical framework” (5). Or, as Witt writes of her own graduate education in the 1970s, “we all shared the assumption that whatever Hegel thought about women just wasn’t all that important” (2006, 537). It is a curious side problem that doesn’t impact the enterprise of scholarship in the reverent mode.

The problem is, feminist criticism does not and cannot stop there. The problem is, you notice things when you are engaged in this kind of project and reading closely (Tuana 1992, 5; Witt 1996, 4). You notice, for example, that the temporality of the relation to the African other that Kant seems to imagine, and the temporality of the relation between European men and women (where European women are *unmündlich*, or immature in relation to men, i.e., stuck at an earlier developmental stage, and Africans—presumably men and women—are stuck at a “primitive” stage) seems to permeate the whole

structure of Kant's work (Mann 2006). You suspect there is a more than accidental relation between these things. You think someone should probably point this out, so you do. This upsets the reverent ones who believe that to speak of such things, to point out that the entire temporal structure underlying a work of great genius is encrusted with the colonial, masculinist enterprise, does not fall into the category of what we call "scholarship" at all. It is, rather, an act of near-violence, like shitting on the steps of the temple or laying your grubby hands on the Ark of the Covenant, or having sex behind the altar, or skinny dipping in the baptismal pool with your drunken high school friends.

It is the kind of act that blows things up. You have essentially taken a cannon to the canon, let shrapnel loose in the chapel. The kind of feminist criticism that enacts this sort of irreverence is often regarded as beneath contempt, or slightly ridiculous. Embarrassing really. The only possible responses are to mount a spirited defense in which you insist that this *not*-philosophy is not philosophy—the feminist critics are surface dwellers like sociologists or historians (Alcoff 2000a, 841)—or to ignore the act altogether, pretend it hasn't happened, and go on with the worship service. Stop up your ears and hum hymns.

The crucial point is that feminist scholarship can only be received as scholarship by the reverent ones on the condition that their reverence is affirmed and secured in advance. The affective mood is paramount in importance to the scholarly questions, and this set of passionate affective commitments will determine the fate of feminist thought once it leaves the mouth or pen of the feminist thinker. These affective commitments are *at stake*, but *unthematized*.

I want to point out that this is a slightly different claim than the one we are perhaps familiar with, which Witt, among others, has put forward. She argues that it is because philosophers think of themselves in a certain way, and think of philosophical practice in a certain way, that philosophers cannot hear the claims of feminist critics as anything but a call to war. "The gender neutrality of philosophy is normative," she writes, "and therefore not amenable to mere empirical refutation" (2006, 542). In other words, proving that a particular bit of philosophy is not gender neutral, or that thousands of particular bits—which starts to seem to add up to the whole thing—are not gender neutral, does not seem to shake philosophy's belief in its own gender-neutrality. What gets in the way is "the powerful self-image of philosophy as a nonsituated (gender-neutral) and nonpragmatic discipline, a self-understanding that is extremely resilient and resistant to alteration" (Witt 2006, 549). Now the problem with this claim—that it is the way that philosophers understand their work to be "nonsituated and nonpragmatic" that causes them to be unable to engage feminist thinking—is that the more situated and pragmatic philosophers, like the pragmatists, for example, or practitioners of some versions of hermeneutics, or the Marxists in some cases, tend to be as unable, or nearly as unable, to hear the claims of feminist critics as the rest.

I suspect that the philosophers' "self-understanding" is less fundamentally at stake than something that operates beneath and before any sort of conscious self-conceptualization. The passionate affective investments and intensities that undergird things like an articulable self-understanding, those affective intensities to which we don't necessarily or easily acquire conscious access, but which nevertheless send us into fits of defensive life-or-death reactivity, are at play. These affective investments run in directions that in no way faithfully mirror one's conscious self-understanding at any given historical moment. In fact they might even run in the opposite direction to one's own self-under-

standing, so that they tend to make one literally incoherent at certain moments—which does not seem to diffuse the intensity of the passions in question.

We can call these commitments aesthetic in the broad sense, in the old sense of that term, meaning they are carried in the body, they are in evidence in our gestural life and rooted in our image-world, they are constituted in stories and legends, in the metaphors we choose, in the tone and tenor of our speech more than its content. They are at home in the philosophical imaginary (to use Michelle Le Doeuff's 1990 formulation) but may never cross over into conscious awareness, or only partially and in fragments. When these commitments are threatened, we are likely to experience the threat at one level but understand it on another. We experience it as a threat to our very existence, to our place in being, to the entire complex of meaning that makes a life this sort of life—in this case the philosophical life. But because we do not necessarily or automatically have conscious access to what is going on, even as it undergirds and shapes what we call consciousness, we respond with arguments or claims that don't make any sense, we flail around to find a response that will do justice to the sense of injured reverence, which, unnamed and unthematized, dominates such engagements and motivates the flailing.

This is why arguments against feminist philosophy as such, as opposed to specific arguments made from actual engagements with specific claims made by specific feminists, tend to make so little sense. Let me give an example, popular in the last couple of years. If you trawl the philosophy blogs, which I try to always avoid, or if you listen to what your colleagues are saying (which I try to do when I can bear it), you will encounter the claim that there is no connection between feminist philosophy and the welcoming of women into philosophy on equal terms with men. In other words, philosophy's demographics and philosophy's response to feminism have no relation. One can have, it is said, a high opinion of women and a low opinion of feminist philosophy—*all of it*, very apparently without having read any of it—at the same time. The stronger version of this claim is that the presence of feminist philosophy is actually turning women away from philosophy, that the reason philosophy's demographics are so bad is that women think if they become philosophers they have to become feminists. I heard this claim directly from the mouth of the chair of one of the country's top notch programs in continental philosophy. Now this is an intelligent man. He has got to know that philosophy's demographics problem didn't start with the arrival on the scene of feminist philosophy, historically. If he were thinking, in that moment, he would have to consider that the school of thought that affirms the equality and dignity of women is important to promote the equality and dignity of women in the historically and currently hostile climates and androcentric cultures of most philosophy departments. If he wanted more evidence he could simply review the demographics of philosophy departments and find a suggestive correlation between an emphasis on feminist philosophy and a better gender balance—though tracing this correlation might be too sociological an endeavor for such an elevated intelligence. Instead, his fear disguises itself as a reasoned claim and speaks, unexamined, unreflected—unrecognized by him as fear speaking. His fear that he no longer belongs, that a bombshell has been dropped right into the heart of this reverential affective field, that a cannon has been discharged in the canon, emerges as incoherent thinking. The thinking and its incoherence are symptoms of experiencing oneself to be under siege on another level and being unable to speak about it, or even think about it, at that level.

The question is, if this is what we are up against, how does, how can, feminist philosophy work against or with or in relation to the problem of reverence? What can we hope

for if no amount of feminist thinking—no matter how sharp, how careful, how thorough and how right—stands a chance against this impassioned, life-or-death affective mood? What if we are facing a problem of dimensions, so that the dimension in which we work is not the dimension that must be reworked in order for feminist philosophy to remake the world of philosophy in the ways we wish to remake it? What if the dimension of ideas, conscious reflection, and careful argumentation, is strangely autonomous from philosophy’s imaginary domain—and therefore more or less powerless against it—while at the same time being utterly dependent on it? How does feminist philosophy operate, when it does, on philosophy’s imaginary domain, rather than just on its conscious commitments?

Monique Wittig, thinking more about literature than philosophy, worked and reworked this question over the course of her entire writing career. She famously advocated the occupation of patriarchal literary forms. Her own work mimicked various literary forms: the bildungsroman (*The Opoponax*), the epic poem (*Les Guérillères*), the anatomy textbook and the *Song of Songs* (*The Lesbian Body*), *Dante’s Inferno* (*Across the Acheron*), etc. She also wrote a single, seven-page essay on what it means to occupy a patriarchal form, entitled “The Trojan Horse” (1992).

At first it looks strange to the Trojans, the wooden horse, off color, oversized, barbaric. Like a mountain, it reaches up to the sky. Then, little by little, they discover the familiar forms which coincide with those of a horse. Already for them, the Trojans, there have been many forms, various ones, sometimes contradictory, that were put together and worked into creating a horse, for they have an old culture. The horse built by the Greeks is doubtlessly also one for the Trojans, while they still consider it with uneasiness. It is barbaric for its size but also for its form, too raw for them . . . But later on they become fond of the apparent simplicity, within which they see sophistication. They see, by now, all the elaboration that was hidden at first under a brutal coarseness. They come to see as strong, powerful, the work they had considered formless. They want to make it theirs, to adopt it as a monument and shelter it within their walls, a gratuitous object whose only purpose is to be found in itself. But what if it were a war machine? (68)

Wittig goes on to claim that “any work with a new form operates as a war machine, because its design and its goal is to pulverize the old forms and formal conventions” (68-69). Her first novel, *The Opoponax*, won the *prix Médicis* and catapulted her to fame on the French literary scene in 1964. Julia Balén (2004) cites *The New York Times* Book Review in her memorial for Wittig. Of *The Opoponax*, Balén writes:

One of its most revolutionary aspects is her use of pronouns, a project she developed throughout her *oeuvre*. Resisting language’s insistent generalization of the masculine and particularization of the feminine, Wittig brilliantly and effectively used the non-gendered pronoun “one” to articulate lesbian childhood experiences as the general. This allowed her to, in her own words, “locate the characters outside of the social division by sexes and annul it for the duration of the book.” Claude Simon

expressed evidence of her success when he wrote in his 1964 review of the book, “I see, I breathe, I chew, I feel through her eyes, her mouth, her hands, her skin.” He, in effect, became lesbian—for the moment, neither man nor woman. All of her fiction continued this project of resisting what she came to call “the mark of gender.” (5)

Straight, non-feminist readers, men and women, fell in love with the book. It was only after loving it that they realized they became lesbian for the duration of its reading.

Wittig takes Marcel Proust as her model here. In a discussion of Proust, she extols the way his literary forms practically lulled people to sleep. “At first everybody thought [*Remembrance of Things Past*] was only a *roman à clef* and a minute description of Parisian high society” (1992, 75). It was only slowly, over time, that it became clear that literally “everybody ends up being homosexual,” and that Proust had succeeded in “turning the real world into a homosexual-only world” (75). “Characters and given moments are prepared, like so many layers, in order to build, little by little, the subject as being homosexual for the first time in history”—but by that time the “sophisticates” were already smitten, i.e., were themselves already homosexualized in the reading (74).

Wittig is completely unabashed about trying to universalize the lesbian point of view. In *Les Guérillères*, the third person feminine plural pronoun *elles* is gradually universalized over the course of the novel, becoming the subject of history, so that by the end, this *elles* includes subjects with bodies that we would tend to regard as male—designated in a collection of subjects by the third person feminine plural. “For in literature,” she writes, “history intervenes at the individual and subjective level and manifests itself in the particular point of view of the writer. It is then one of the most vital and strategic parts of the writer’s task to universalize this point of view” (1992, 74). The Trojan horse works because the Trojans recognize, and then begin to love, its form—by then it is too late, it has become part of them, they belong to it as much as it belongs to them. The horse unleashes a force that destroys them. “It is the attempted universalization of the point of view that turns or does not turn a literary work into a war machine,” Wittig writes (75).

If I were to say, today, that I think we ought to embrace the objective, as feminist philosophers, of universalizing the feminist point of view—I could be accused of engaging in blasphemous slander. I can almost hear my readers’ objections firing like little involuntary muscle spasms, foot cramps, and charlie horses—some of you seem to be groaning in pain. These reflex-reactions take two forms, at least. First, you think we ought to know, by now, that there is no singular feminist point of view to universalize—Bonnie Mann, of all people, ought to know that. Any student who has taken a course in feminist philosophy, only one, already knows that. Second, feminists are all about particularizing and specifying, not universalizing: to universalize is to repeat the patriarchal and colonial gesture that messed everything up in the first place. It is an arrogant move, one that defies the plea for epistemic humility that characterizes almost all feminist, anti-racist, and decolonial work.

So let me try to calm those cramping muscles and see if I can keep you with me here, for at least a little while longer. Even if we think we do not, all feminists do agree on one thing: the importance of articulating and promoting the emancipatory aspirations of women—the emancipatory aspirations of some women, somewhere—is an important and valuable and even urgent historical undertaking. How to do that, what it means to do that, which women are in question in each particular moment, what their emancipatory aspirations look like, what it means to be a woman, and who gets

to or has to be one—even if that category is itself doomed to disappear—all of these things are points of disagreement. But for now, while folks called women, or folks who call themselves women, continue to exist, and while the category continues to operate quite robustly in our languages and our lived experience (in no matter how contested a fashion), the emancipatory aspirations of the people who are categorized as women or categorize themselves as women—and therefore live as women, however variously positioned or situated—are worth something, are worth a great deal. A feminist is someone who carries with her, consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly, this deep, felt sense of the worth of, the dignity of, the importance of, and the concerns and experiences of people called women, in whatever specific context they receive that designation. This is the affective world of belonging of a feminist: it is about what matters, it is about the deep affective sense of something or someone *matter*ing enough that it/they *should* matter to everyone. What it means to be antifeminist is *not* to carry this deep, felt sense of the worth of, the dignity of, the *matter*ing of, and the aspirations of people so designated, at least not as such. So when I say we want to universalize the feminist point of view, what I mean is that we want to universalize this deeply felt sense that women matter, in whatever specific context we are busy with. Of course it is possible to have the sense that only some women matter, in some contexts, which is what white feminists have been challenged on by women of color and decolonial feminists, and what straight feminists have been challenged on by lesbians, etc. We could say that many feminists, too, have failed to universalize this deeply held conviction that *women matter*.

But why universalize at all? Is not the one consistent plea in contemporary feminism, critical race theory, and decolonial thought a plea for epistemic humility? A plea that we recognize what we know as partial, tentative, situated, and local? Of course that plea deconstructs itself because if everyone joins in this new appreciation for and cultivation of humility—which is, after all, the hope—we will have successfully universalized the point of view that advocates a refusal to universalize one's point of view. So we speak of strategic, historically specific, practical, temporary, or tentative universalizations (Butler 2000).

Universalization, here, does not masquerade as observational acuity, as it does in traditional phenomenology, as I will argue in the second half of this essay. In traditional phenomenology, the phenomenon simply gives itself to the supposedly universal, generic subject, in and through its supposedly universal structures and values. The structures are taken to be universal in the observational sense, while the values are universal in the normative sense. The universalization I advocate is normative in the aspirational sense at the level of value. Women's lives *should* matter, to everyone. Making them matter is a political undertaking. Wittig's universalization requires the popularization and aestheticization (making beautiful, and making familiar, in this case) of a *particular* point of view at the level of experience. My approach is to advocate a phenomenology that strives to do justice to the particular at the level of experience, in order to reveal the sort of world (for which we are responsible) in which a singular life unfolds, and to universalize its *matter*ing, its *importance*. In both cases, if the undertaking is effectual, the reader enters into the point of view of a particular other and the world is revealed differently as a result. What is universalized is an understanding and embodied experience of the world as shaped by particular injustice, as subject to a reordering of both values and material relations in the direction of justice, and as demanding a shouldering of

responsibility for the values that might affect such a transformation.

So how do we understand the relation between Wittig's plea for the universalization of what she called the lesbian point of view (but we could think in terms of any liberatory point of view) and the problem of reverence that we feminist philosophers face in our philosophical lives?² Is it not the case that this is precisely what the reverent ones are so afraid of: that their exclusive point of view (concomitantly, their superior world of values, the special mattering of what matters to them) will become obsolete? Of course, the answer to that question is, has to be, yes. Feminist philosophy, if successful, will destroy the way of life you love, will undo your place in existence, will undermine everything you hold dear. It really is very, very scary.

At the same time, there is a new place in existence, a new set of affective commitments that you are already learning as you touch the legs of the great wooden horse, marvel at its form, recognize it as a horse like but unlike any other horse. By the time the warriors emerge from its belly, it is already too late. You have already been taken in, you've already changed—even if you don't quite know it—because the world you exist in changed the minute the horse was pulled through the city gates. Because you accidentally fell in love with, or at least in league with, that horse, as it became part of the space of your existence. It started to belong to you. You started to belong to it.

Let me give a very mundane example. It is no longer possible for most philosophers, in my context, to write using “he” and “him” and “his” as the universal pronoun. I have been surprised to read the work of my most reverent colleagues, who now use “she” as the universal pronoun. This may seem to be a mere superficial adjustment, and usually, I'm the one who reads every superficial advance as actually a deep retrenchment—usually, I am the most pessimistic person in the room—but, I am going to argue for an optimistic assessment of this change. Sometimes this use of the feminine is done in an absolutely silly and misleading way, as when someone writes, “for Kant, Enlightenment meant the arrival of the autonomous moral subject, she...” I find this very annoying, to say the least, but a certain amount of bumbling is to be expected. Those same philosophers cannot, unselfconsciously, in their own voice, write “the subject, he...” or “the moral agent, he...” or “the citizen, he...” anymore. Something about their world has been disrupted. Their language has had a hole blasted in it: they write, “the subject...”—gap, gasp, space, abyss—*she*. Now this is not a smooth transition. There is nothing natural or innocuous or slick or easy about the form of this sentence. It startles—the gap, gasp, space, abyss is linked to the pronoun. But it is easier for the reverent ones, now, to write “the subject, she” than it is to write “the subject, he.” What happened? “The subject, he...” has come to designate a false universal, more importantly it has come to *feel* like a false universal; it has come to be experienced, in the body, as an arrogant, colonizing point of view. It has come to be experienced as a kind of speech that makes one narrow and outdated—if you write that, it itches. There is a giant hole in language that is *experienced in the body* as a sort of opening, a clearing, an empty space—fear and possibility. The decision “she” is made. The word “she” is written. The writer experiences himself in this moment, no doubt, as having enacted a kind of generosity. But adaptation to a new world feels good, if also strange. To write “he”

²This is not to say that one liberatory point of view is equivalent to another. It is precisely in their specificity that liberatory points of view must work toward universalization, mattering to everyone in their specificity. Most recently the Black Lives Matter movement has actualized this aspiration in extremely effective and persuasive terms.

would be stranger still. He finds he no longer belongs to a world in which it is possible, unselfconsciously, without an awareness of the lifted feminist eyebrow, to write, “the subject, he...”. But when he confronts the gap, the abyss, and writes “she,” he affirms his belonging to a new world in which the point of view that claimed the injustice of the masculine universal has won the day—he has internalized the raised feminist eyebrow in the form of his new, still awkward speech. The raised feminist eyebrow is almost his own eyebrow, it is becoming his own eyebrow. Of course it is terrifying to lose one’s eyebrows in the midst of cannon fire, but it helps to feel the new ones growing in.

How do we get the Trojan Horse through the gates? The biggest problem with philosophy’s incapacities in relation to feminism is that the vast majority of philosophers can go through their entire training without ever encountering feminist thought in a sustained, in-depth, meaningful way. They are assigned, maybe, one feminist essay in a class about something else, without much context or pedagogical finesse, and they are willing from that experience—which simply serves to produce an *injured sense of reverence*, but doesn’t build anything—to proclaim their low opinion of the whole feminist endeavor.

In my own department, feminist philosophy was institutionalized as a requirement, for every graduate student, before I joined the program. At first, the students who come to us who have not had any exposure to feminist philosophy—and there are many—eye the horse with suspicion, but then, over time, in forced close proximity, many of them, maybe even most of them, start to recognize its form: it starts to look and feel like philosophy to them, they start to love it a little bit. By the time the war machine is unleashed, they already belong to its world, it already belongs to them. By the time their eyebrows are singed off, the new ones have already started to grow in.

In the discipline as a whole, the institutions are more resistant, the sense of reverence more established and tenacious. How does one occupy a patriarchal philosophical form, work its limits, infiltrate it, crack it open?

II. THE (IM)PROPER MATTER OF CONCERN FOR FEMINIST PHENOMENOLOGY

How does one occupy *phenomenology* as a particular patriarchal, philosophical form? The question may make it sound as if I am about to offer my readers a how-to lesson, a manual full of instructions for the aspiring feminist phenomenologist, as if we could functionalize this project and break it down into steps A, B and C. But the feminist phenomenologist is not in the business of manufacturing things, according to a set of pre-established rules, and I have no toolbox full of phenomenological implements to offer. In fact, the first thing I will claim about feminist phenomenology is that it does not provide a set of principles in advance. The approach is shaped as much by the *matter of concern* which draws the philosopher’s attention, as by the philosopher herself, or to put it more succinctly: the nature of the inquiry is constituted substantially by the nature of its object.

Indeed, if I were to try to say what characterizes feminist phenomenology in general, I would have to start with the most basic or primary phenomenon with which it concerns itself. We must start by asking not, “Which phenomenological implements does the feminist thinker employ?” but “What commands her attention?” or “What

animates her curiosity?” Only then can the inquiry turn to the philosophical practice appropriate to the phenomenon in question. To clarify, I am not asserting here that the matter of concern is wholly active and the one concerned is wholly passive in the development of the practice. I am suggesting, rather, that the practice arises in the relation between the matter and the philosopher, with all its specificity, its historical peculiarity, and its unique affective modalities. The question can be posed this way: what is the relation between the matter of concern and the philosopher, such that the practice develops in this way rather than that?

Interestingly, those who are known as feminist phenomenologists do not even agree on the answer to this question. Let me give you an example from two well-known figures in feminist phenomenology, Sara Heinämaa and Johanna Oksala. What is at stake in the difference between the two is nothing short of the proper object of feminist phenomenological concern, and because the matter of concern and our relationship to it constitutes the practice, what sort of practice feminist phenomenology is.

In Heinämaa's 2003 study of Beauvoiran phenomenology, entitled *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir*, she claims that in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir undertakes a phenomenological study in the tradition of Husserl, which she suggests is passed down to Beauvoir through Merleau-Ponty. “I argue,” she writes, “that Beauvoir's discussion of femininity and sexual difference is phenomenological in its aims and its methods. Her basic starting points are in the Husserlian idea of the living body that she found developed in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*” (xii). It was Merleau-Ponty who convinced Beauvoir of Husserl's claim that “phenomenology is... a philosophy of corporeality and intersubjectivity” (xii). Phenomenology, on this account, is *already competent* to take up questions of sexual difference, it is simply a matter of turning our attention to a new object.

If we ask what feminist phenomenology is *about* in Heinämaa's view, what it concerns itself with, we have a clear answer in her claim that *The Second Sex* is “not a thesis about women's socialization, but a phenomenological inquiry into the constitution of the meaning of sexual difference” (2003, xiii); it is “not an argument against femininity” but “a disclosure of a feminine way of relating to the world” (xiv). In other words, “the fundamental question about the sexual difference” is: “what does it *mean to be* a woman, and how does the world appear to such a being” (xvii). Beauvoir, like Luce Irigaray, who Heinämaa believes to have inherited and further elaborated Beauvoir's project, convinces us that “we need to turn back to experience and study the whole of it from a new view point, that of the female body” (xvii), which is not primarily about “a demand for equal value,” but instead “implies a philosophical investigation into the origins of values and valuations” (xix). The feminist phenomenologist directs her attention to a different sort of existence than other phenomenologists, which is the source of values and valuations that have not yet been countenanced by phenomenology; but, it is the same phenomenology that enables this new inquiry.

I want to pay attention here to the claim that *The Second Sex* is “not a thesis about women's socialization,” and that Beauvoir does not offer us “an argument against femininity.”

Take the claim that *The Second Sex* does not offer a thesis about women's socialization. On the first reading, this flies in the face of even the most well-known passages of Beauvoir's text, passages in which she talks about the effects that adult behavior and expectations have on children, such as when parents and other adults praise girls for

how they appear, but praise boys for what they do; see, for example (2010, 292–295); passages in which she describes the second weaning, which boys undergo but girls do not (285–287); passages in which she laments the physically restricted world that adults offer to girls (over and over again Beauvoir expresses outrage that girls are not allowed to climb trees—see for example: 60, 300–1); the famous passage in which Beauvoir discusses the self-alienation of the boy in his penis, and the girl in her doll and the deep impact these differences have on the formation of one’s self-consciousness (292–294); not to mention those places in the text in which she discusses the messages of fairy tales, the operations of the myths (throughout, but especially Part III). Now the word “socialization” might be a reductive word for what she is describing and criticizing. It would be better to say that Beauvoir offers us a rich, critical account of the girl’s relentless encounter with the norms and material conditions of femininity in language, in institutions, and in embodied practices. “Socialization” may be a mundane way of capturing that, but certainly we could not claim that Beauvoir is *not* giving us an account of, even a thesis about, socialization! In fact, her thesis is clear: *the socialization of girl children trains them for complicity with their own subordination, it gives them an existential stake in the injustices that rob them of their full humanity.*

Similarly, how do we reconcile Heinämaa’s claim that Beauvoir does not offer us “an argument against femininity” when Beauvoir refers over and over again to femininity as *mutilation*, and suggests in one striking and powerful passage that femininity with all its delights must be sacrificed if liberty is to be won? Comparing the case to the great and beautiful, old southern plantations in the United States, which depended on slavery for their greatness, of “feminine charm” Beauvoir writes: “[D]oes such a fleeting miracle ... justify perpetuating a situation that is so damaging for both sexes? The beauty of flowers and women’s charms can be appreciated for what they are worth,” she continues, but “if these treasures are paid for with blood or misery, one must be willing to sacrifice them” (2010, 764).

Now, to be sure, Beauvoir uses the French term for femininity in more than one sense. Sometimes, *féminin* simply means “pertaining to women,” but often it shares the specific valence of the English term, which always carries with it shades of pink, i.e., the delicacy of lace, connotations of weakness, childlikeness, a sometimes-charming, sometimes-vicious mendacity, and the absence of courage, competence, and honor. “In exchange for her freedom,” Beauvoir writes, “[woman] was given fallacious treasures of ‘femininity’ as a gift” (2010, 757). “To be feminine,” Beauvoir says, “is to show oneself as weak, futile, passive and docile” (348). A woman’s femininity is, in fact, in conflict with her humanity, as Beauvoir observes again and again: “being an autonomous activity contradicts her femininity,” the girl “already knows that accepting herself as a woman means resigning and mutilating herself” (725, 308). “The conflict will last as long as ... femininity is perpetuated as such” (755).

So, on a first reading, I find Heinämaa’s claims that Beauvoir is not centrally and fundamentally concerned with the socialization of girls and is not offering a critique of femininity deeply misplaced. Certainly, Beauvoir does not claim that *all* significant structures of women’s existence are always and only exploitative and destructively normative. The dimensions of injustice which tend to close time and determine a woman’s future, are deeply entangled with stubborn tendencies toward resistance, spontaneity, and freedom. These are not usually *entirely* crushed by the normative weight of feminine destiny. The girl is a becoming, not a being, and not always simply complicit. She resists

spontaneously, repeatedly, sometimes in destructive ways, sometimes in surprisingly creative and positive ways. Beauvoir, in this dimension of her thought, is not giving us a *reductive* thesis about socialization, but a thesis about the possibilities of freedom in the face of a life-long confrontation with values and material arrangements generated in a society run by men.

Similarly, Beauvoir does, indeed, give us many, many arguments against femininity understood not as what pertains to women, but as a certain stylization of gender around values of weakness, vulnerability, childlikeness, incompetence, narcissism, dissimulation, self-sacrifice, parasitic existential dependence on masculinist judgment, and material dependence on men's money. In some sense, the entire one-thousand page treatise is an argument against femininity. But if Heinämaa is referencing femininity in its first sense, as denoting simply that which “pertains to women,” if she only means to suggest, by saying that she does not give us an argument against femininity, that Beauvoir does not claim that women should become men, then Heinämaa offers us an important corrective to those who have read Beauvoir as a “masculinist.”

I worry about this tendency in Heinämaa's work—to sideline the importance of the more overtly political dimensions of Beauvoir's philosophy; even to deny that those dimensions are properly part of her phenomenological project. By stripping sexual difference of the material and cultural context of injustice that constitutes it, *as it is lived*, Heinämaa constrains the phenomenon in advance, peels away history and power, so that sexual difference can appear as *properly phenomenological*.³ She *strains out* the elements of Beauvoir's thought that are *improper* to phenomenological inquiry in its classical form. This stripped-down object, still called sexual difference but unrecognizable from the perspective of *lived* sexual difference, lends itself to an investigation through the phenomenological method passed down from Husserl, without disrupting or challenging that practice. Reduced to an ahistorical difference between bodies, sexual difference lends itself to an affirmation of the competence of the classical phenomenological method. Certainly, one of the motivations in reading Beauvoir in this way is just to see her taken seriously, finally, but might there also be a costly albeit not consciously willed acquiescence to an impassioned paternal lineage—an avoidance of danger—a circumvention of the problem of injured reverence in relation to a certain canonical figure? And, if so, at what cost?

Oksala gives a very different account of feminist phenomenology in her new book, *Feminist Experiences: Foucauldian and Phenomenological Investigations* (2016). First, she suggests that “in its traditional formulations phenomenology can't address the question of gender or sexual difference at all” (97), since “the question of gender or sexual difference cannot arise in the phenomenological analysis of transcendental subjectivity,” because transcendental subjectivity “must rise above or look behind these mundane phenomena”—that's how it gets to be transcendental (98). No wonder, then, that she suggests that feminist phenomenologists have tended to look to Merleau-Ponty, with his emphasis on the unachievability of a complete transcendental reduction, and his centralizing of the lived body and embodied style (99).⁴

Oksala's example in this section is Heinämaa. She cites Heinämaa's claim that “the principle difference” with which feminist phenomenology concerns itself “is the experi-

³ See Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir* (2003) and Heinämaa, “Transformations of Old Age: Selfhood, Normativity, and Time” (2014).

⁴ It is interesting that Heinämaa reads Merleau-Ponty as the loyal inheritor of Husserl's project, while Oksala, in keeping with a number of other feminist thinkers, reads Merleau-Ponty against Husserl.

ential difference between two types of living bodies, women's bodies and men's bodies" (quoted in Oksala 2016, 100). Oksala worries that this sort of conclusion might "push us back into defending a form of corporeal essentialism" (99), and that accounts of sexual difference exclusively focused on the difference between living bodies are simply too limited, even reductive, to do justice to the phenomenon of sexual difference as it is given. "The extent to which gender or sexual difference is a philosophical question," she writes:

. . . is not an issue that can be settled by just studying bodies, even if they are understood phenomenologically as opposed to biologically. It would thus be simplistic to conclude that . . . the philosophical meaning of gender could be reduced to the difference between two types of bodies. (100)

For Oksala, the proper matter of concern for any feminist philosophical inquiry is both "what kinds of beings these women are" and "how the facts about them are conceptualized, organized, and legitimized" in a situation of injustice (4). To do justice to the phenomenon as it manifests in the world, she suggests, any feminist philosophical inquiry "must also encompass a study of the culturally specific ontological schemas in which those bodies and experiences gain value and meaning" (101). In other words, to do justice to the phenomenon of sexual difference one must pay attention to the conditions of injustice under which the phenomenon is given and by which it is constituted in its particularity.

Oksala's account of the feminist phenomenological project is unapologetically interested, unreservedly political. "A key objective of feminist philosophy is to expose, analyse, criticize, and ultimately change the power relations that produce and organize society, or more fundamentally reality, in a way that makes it unequal or unjust for beings who are constructed and classified as women" (2016, 3). In other words, feminism is "first and foremost a form of *social critique*" (3). She suggests that "phenomenology can provide a fruitful theoretical and methodological framework for feminist philosophy, but only if it is radically modified" (13). As long as feminist phenomenology regards itself as a "faithful assistant to the phenomenological project . . . dealing with its marginal or regional subthemes," it will fail to do its work (88). Instead, "it should be understood as a critical current going through the whole body of phenomenological thinking reaching all the way down to its most fundamental tenets" (89). For phenomenology to be feminist, Oksala suggests, it needs to embrace the challenge of "destabilizing phenomenological thinking" as we have inherited it (96).

Oksala turns to Foucault to engage these questions, and suggests that Foucault might be a better source for feminist philosophical reflections than the classical phenomenology of Husserl.⁵ She finally opts for what she calls "post-phenomenology," which she connects with what thinkers like Anthony Steinbock take up under the heading of "generative phenomenology" (1995). On Oksala's account, this sort of phenomenological practice decenters the notion of experience constituted by the subject in favor

⁵Space does not permit me to go into any detail about Oksala's turn to Foucault, so I simply note it, but there is something worrisome here. We have, to simplify things too much and move too quickly, arrived at a point where the conflict is between Husserlian phenomenology and Foucauldian post-phenomenology. Feminist phenomenologists can and should draw on every available and competent resource, but our main task is to discover and establish the practice that is demanded by the phenomenon of sexual difference, which no "father-figure" will provide whole cloth.

of the event, which is not constituted by but *undergone* by the subject (Oksala 2016, 96). Generative phenomenology claims more broadly to be able to deal with a temporality that extends beyond the life of the individual subject, with the sorts of historically established structures and institutions that shape and constitute subjective experience, but pre-exist the subject of that experience, or endure after her passing.

To summarize, the proper matter of concern for feminist phenomenology is, on Heinämaa's view, embodied sexual difference, at a level that is prior to the political and social dimensions of its formation. On Oksala's view, one cannot reduce the phenomenon of sexual difference to embodied difference; embodied differences themselves are only adequately understood as ensconced in a subject-world relation that is forged in the fires of sedimented, historical relations of power, bound to institutional structures that materialize those relations, and to linguistic arrangements that bear the marks of injustice. The proper object of feminist phenomenology exceeds the bounds of the female body, the woman subject; it includes the ontology of the event and asks after woman in her historical becoming.

It is my contention that we already find the beginning of the practice Oksala calls for in Beauvoir.⁶ Now, all, or at least most, of the great men who are phenomenologists have been quite willing to talk *about* phenomenology, sometimes they talk *about* it more than they actually practice it. But Beauvoir mostly just does it, simply undertakes the practice, so it is harder to discern the shape of her phenomenological approach. But there is a positive inheritance for feminist phenomenologists here that departs from and undoes the tradition out of which it emerges. Phenomenology understood not as a toolbox, but as a practice that must be practiced: a kind of doing that must be undertaken, a kind of thinking that must be thought, in order to be understood.

III. BEAUVOIR'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL PRACTICE

What Oksala calls post-phenomenology, what might be called critical phenomenology, what I would simply call feminist phenomenology, admits its own active, ethical motivations. It seeks not just to describe the world in other words, but to change it—particularly to intervene in those power relations that have sedimented into conditions of injustice. Beauvoir takes as her object of concern, not sexual difference as such, as if there were such a thing, but sexual difference as it is constituted through injustice.

The matter of concern and her relationship to it shape her philosophical practice. I will mention four things which characterize this relation.⁷

First, Beauvoir does not presume that one can “bracket” one's prejudices at the outset of an inquiry, or that one can in any immediate way neutralize the force of interested, located, particular participation in the ethical background of the inquiry. Instead, one must pass through the prejudices, keeping them close at hand and working on them, in order to begin the never-complete task of neutralizing their hold on us. Loosening the

⁶I am pushing back on Oksala's turn to Foucault, here. While poststructuralist thinkers like Foucault and Butler have a great deal to add to a feminist phenomenological inquiry, my view is that much is lost when one abandons a phenomenological approach. Beauvoir practices phenomenology differently rather than sacrificing it, as Foucault and Butler tend to do (though not always).

⁷A good portion of the section that follows was previously published (Mann 2014a, 4–29; 2014b).

intentional threads is not possible through an act of the will, nor will any amount of “imaginative variation” that I do by myself, sitting in a room, accomplish it. One cannot put one’s belief in the actuality of women as a naturally given phenomenon out of play by some rigorous act of internal mental discipline, because the very consciousness which must discipline itself to put such things out of play has already been shaped by the prejudices it seeks to neutralize. Feminists will be (and have been) extremely skeptical of claims to have “set aside” prejudices through an imaginative or meditative practice in order to reach the essential structures of experience, given that these prejudices are not only deeply entrenched, historically and culturally sedimented, and institutionalized, but are also tied to real material interests and entangled with profoundly personal processes of identity formation; they are, in fact, part of what shapes our imaginative and meditative capacities in the first place.⁸ If one’s very consciousness is formed in the fires of one’s value-laden prejudices, one cannot, by an act of conscious determination, put them out of play.

For Beauvoir, if there is an *epoché* it is a matter of labor, not of willpower. In her hands, setting aside our preconceptions turns out to be tedious, enraging, and exhaustive hard work; a painstaking reconstitution of our ability to perceive and imagine in ways that exceed the rigid confines of historically sedimented prejudice. Those hundreds of pages addressing the data of biological science, history, literature, specific case studies, and the myths of sexual difference are that work; a working-through which slowly, painfully reinstates the contingency of the contingent-which-has-been-rendered-necessary.

Second, Beauvoir’s practice of “imaginative variation” requires more than fanciful reflections on the possible modes of existence of a phenomenon. Recognizing that the imagination is as much a force for binding an individual subject to her limited perspective as it is a force for freeing her from it, imaginative variation takes on the form of a kind of relentless migration between various points of view, each of them bound by particular interests with ethical consequences. This results in the sometimes maddening polyvocality of Beauvoir’s text. For her, imaginative variation involves the perspective of a plurality of others, which she constantly moves into and retreats from. Beauvoir’s infamous practice of citation, in which long paragraphs, sometimes pages, are borrowed from other authors, can be understood in this light. Her reader is continually led into perspectives that are not Beauvoir’s, or that are possibly becoming Beauvoir’s. No matter how tiring, no matter how infuriating, this placing of oneself into an overwhelming plurality of particular, interested, value-laden perspectives is the practice that begins to allow for the cessation of the force of one’s own prejudices, for a reconstituting of one’s own passionate commitments. We might say, as perhaps Hannah Arendt would, that Beauvoir restores plurality to the world we share, against a sovereign point of view that demands to be the single, essential perspective.

Third, Beauvoir’s practice involves a certain kind of movement, which I will call, borrowing a term from some of my students in the process of struggling with Beauvoir’s

⁸ The most well-known conversation about this question is that between Joan Scott (1992) and Linda Alcoff (2000b), in which Scott challenges the authority of experience precisely on the grounds I have mentioned here and Alcoff defends a phenomenological account of experience as important to feminist claims. Judith Butler writes, “[t]he questioning of taken-for-granted conditions becomes possible on occasion; but we cannot get there through a thought experiment, an *epoché* or act of the will” (2004, 107–108).” Oksala replies to this concern as well as the Scott/Alcoff debate (2016, 50–52). Oksala’s claim is that the phenomenological method must be modified since we cannot “by some supreme methodological step such as the *epoché* ... leave all our ontological commitments behind” (105).

phenomenological approach, an *oscillation*.⁹ This oscillation is from the most concrete, particular, and located events and perspectives, to the general features of human experience, and back again.

Beauvoir uses literature richly and relentlessly to move her reader into the acute experience of the minutest details of a particular life. Just as she puts us into the body of a girl watching her mother do the dishes, crushed by the insight that this repetitious act is the shape of her future, we are launched into a discussion of the temporality of freedom, which applies to all human existence (2010, 475). Just as she works the generality of the crossed temporalities of transcendence and immanence, we find ourselves in the perspective of a housewife confronting a ball of dust under the couch with a ferocity that shows her very existence is at stake in the confrontation (475). This relentless motion is what allows Beauvoir to let the particularity of the phenomenon speak, to resist the violence of the patriarchal fantasy of the generic universal. Consequently, the results of Beauvoir's inquiry remain messy and ambivalent. One does not so much succeed at separating the general features of human existence from their contingent, empirical formations, as one begins to note how they are entangled. One does not arrive at pure consciousness or pure experience or even the ontological dimension of human existence extricated from the dreary, messy realities of how it is lived by particular subjects in particular, ethically laden situations. Beauvoir's "reduction," in other words, does not lead "behind" or "beneath" contingent features of human existence, but back into them, into their intertwinement with and parasitic dependence on the general features of human existence. The work of phenomenology, in Beauvoir's hands, does not bring us to "pure consciousness," "pure experience," or to "the ontological dimension of human existence," but to a consciousness burdened by material interests, experience shaped by situation and ontology entangled with ethical failure and political injustice.

Fourth, I want to suggest that the relation between the philosopher and the matter of concern that demands her attention is one that, while capable of moving through various affective modalities, is not simply referenced to an attitude of wonder as we generally understand it. While curiosity marks the inception of any philosophical inquiry, curiosity itself can be light and airy, or fiercely determined—it can be inflected with reverence (as it is when we call it wonder) or skepticism, aspirations to mastery or genuine humility. In the case of feminist phenomenology, the beginning of an inquiry is often inflected with a kind of irritation, the sense that something is wrong and must be righted, and at other moments it is fuming and outraged: as when Beauvoir spends nine pages at the beginning of her chapter on motherhood exploring the hypocrisy of French anti-abortion politics (2010, 524–533). Curiosity may be disgusted, or humorous, or both at the same time. All of these affective modalities belong to feminist philosophy, and they signal that it is a deeply interested endeavor, that something matters in a primary way, that fundamental values are at stake. In other words, detachment is not an affective attitude that pertains to feminist philosophy broadly, nor to feminist phenomenology specifically. The disruption of reverence that feminist philosophy effects is catalyzed by this *irritated* or *outraged* curiosity. The way that the matter of

⁹I first paid attention to this term as apropos for Beauvoir's approach when it was used by Oscár Ralda in a graduate course on Beauvoir at the University of Oregon, and then discovered that a former student, Megan Burke, used the same term in a published paper on Beauvoir. Burke writes, "this relation and oscillation between the general and the particular is key in Beauvoir's work as it requires us to remain attentive to both the lived experience of the individual and to the lived experience of the social collective in which an individual finds herself" (2017, 170).

concern *matters* imbues feminist thinking with intensely interested affective attitudes.

While Beauvoir's work provides a positive inheritance and starting point for feminist phenomenologists, this does not mean that her phenomenological practice is not to be criticized, adapted, and transformed by contemporary thinkers—or even rejected outright if it proves to be incompetent in relation to certain phenomena.

IV. THE CASE OF SHAME

If feminist phenomenology can only finally be learned through its practice, then it is important to look at a specific case, in order to disclose the difference of feminist phenomenology. In 2014, three books were published that all treat shame phenomenologically. In Anthony Steinbock's *Moral Emotions: Reclaiming the Evidence of the Heart*, shame is treated in its own chapter, as the second moral emotion of self-givenness. Dan Zahavi published *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame*, in which he claims that shame discloses dimensions of the self and self-experience that are mediated by others, even as he continues to maintain that, at the most fundamental level, selfhood is neither dependent on others nor socially constituted. In my own book, *Sovereign Masculinity: Gender Lessons from the War on Terror*, I explore shame's role in masculine identity-formation. Sovereign masculinity is taken to be an imaginary and aspirational status, which both plagues and exceeds identity. In the U.S. American context, it helps link the viscerally lived personal aspirations of vulnerable persons to nationalist bellicosity and the conceit of American exceptionalism.

While I began to develop my account of shame in *Sovereign Masculinity*, here I will draw more from an essay I wrote shortly after the book was published, entitled "Femininity, Shame and Redemption" (2018). I want to explore the differences between Zahavi's, Steinbock's, and my own accounts of shame, in order to show, or try to show, the difference of feminist phenomenology at work.

THE HUMAN AGAINST LIFE: SHAME AS MORAL AMELIORATION



In our philosophical tradition, the human is often pitted against life. There are, of course, divisions, ruptures, and conflicts within the western philosophical tradition over the status of life, but I am emphasizing one dominant thread here. It weaves a tight connection between what counts as human, the experience of shame, and the relation of both to life. We could start almost anywhere in the history of western thought and pick up this thread. In Plato's *Phaedo*, those most human of all humans, the philosophers, are schooled by Socrates in the moment before his own death on the affinity between philosophy and death. In thinking, the philosopher seeks to escape the encumbrance of his body, and in death he is finally completely released from animal life. For the Christians, eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is equated with the knowledge of one's nakedness and gives rise to the first human experience of shame. This is shame in the face of what we might call one's animal vulnerability to death, and it results in the expulsion of Adam

and Eve from the Garden of Eden; to know one's nakedness is to know one's submersion in animal life, finitude, the vulnerability of the body. In Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic, the master becomes the master through his willingness to put power before life, to stake his life in order to achieve sovereignty. The slave's shame is in choosing life over power. Later, the slave realizes his power in another way; by coming to dominate, through the work of his hands, the very forces of life he succumbed to before, he overcomes shame.

One of the most explicit formulations of this conceptual entanglement of shame, life, and our notions of "the human" is to be found in the work of the German phenomenologist Max Scheler, who claims explicitly that "man's intention beyond himself and all life constitutes his essence ... he is a thing that transcends its own life and all life" (1973, 289).¹⁰ Steinbock follows Scheler's account of shame in *Moral Emotions*, arguing that shame is a self-revelatory emotion which discloses "the relation between life and spirit" (2014, 67). Citing Hegel, Scheler, and Agamben, Steinbock notes that all of them treat shame as "a matter of spirit in relation to life" (68). "For Scheler," Steinbock writes, "shame is an originary experience of the tension within the human being of person and life" (72). Referring to Hegel, he notes that "shame is the awakening of consciousness to life as evidence of the interval between spirit and life" (72). Steinbock tells us that shame happens when we are in the midst of the flow of existence as spirit but are suddenly turned back on ourselves such that our existence as life is exposed.

For Steinbock, shame is "at its core ... a positive self-giveness grounded in self-love" since to be ashamed I have to experience "a diremptive movement whereby I am revealed to myself" in a way that threatens that positive self-giveness (2014, 82, 83). Shame is a positive moral emotion because it exposes me as vulnerable to the other, and undoes pride, the mistaken belief in my own self-groundedness. In Steinbock's religious phenomenological account, by bringing me to awareness of my existence as life, shame redeems me from that same dimension of existence by assuring me of my essential relation to the divine before whom I am shamed. Shame is ameliorative because it makes me confront the possibility that all I am is life, indistinguishable from all other life, and rescues me from this possibility by returning me to my original relation with God. Citing Steinbock positively, Zahavi agrees, suggesting that "rather than being inherently debilitating, shame might also, in short, play a constructive role in moral development" because it can "motivate me to reorient my way of living," though he notes in a footnote that there may be kinds of shame that are purely destructive. This reorientation is a recuperation of the sense of oneself grounded in love which shame disrupted, revealing it as grounded in divine love (215).

So, here comes that feminist irritation. This is a long history. It is a long history in which shame is associated with life; it is understood to be the affective modality of the person's relation to life-in-himself; it is credited with pushing him away from immersion in life toward the higher dimensions of human existence as spirit. At the very same times and in the very same contexts in which this historical association develops and persists, women of all classes and statuses, along with men who are poor, or slaves, or colonized—so perhaps eighty percent of the humans that are in geographic proximity

¹⁰ For Scheler, the key term is not "the human" but "the person," since the human is just another form of biological life, but he is trying to work out the distinctiveness of a kind of existence that other thinkers have used the word "human" to name. I think it is fair to say that in a broader inquiry, Scheler's notion of the "person" is part of the larger Western quest to distinguish the human and the animal, and we can use the term "human person" to link these efforts.

to, or in relation with, those thinking these thoughts—are irredeemably bound to life in the imaginary domain of the dominant class and through the material arrangements that support that imaginary. These eighty percent are given the sphere of life as their sphere of belonging and the shame of life as their inevitable lot—and this giving is manifested in the material and institutional forms of life that also constitute the thinker’s world. The imaginary domain that develops historically and that persists, in which the thinker’s *idea of himself* emerges as spirit against life, is intertwined with and dependent on the material arrangements that secure the subordination of these others. Shame is always being worked on and at work in two related dimensions: his own shame which is transitional to higher realms of human existence and moral standing, which he takes to be the generic human experience, and the backgrounded prereflective awareness of the other’s shame, a *shame-status* rather than a *shame-event*, which fixes her in the lower realms, indicates permanent and unremitting moral failure, and as such, excludes her from the “generic” humanity at the center of this account. The ameliorative character of shame, for her, is excluded from the outset.

This relation is exceedingly well-studied, but Steinbock, writing in 2014, does not feel compelled to take note of it, reiterating affirmatively that shame arises in the tension between life and spirit and compels the subject to assume his spiritual inheritance or his moral obligations! Shame is discussed *in abstraction* from history and power (see below), as if it is an inheritance that belongs to all of us in the same way, with the same limits and possibilities, as if, after this history, the social location of the one shamed were not constitutive, at least co-constitutive, of the phenomenon. Further, the account flies in the face of actual empirical work on shame, which shows that it is anything but ameliorative. Shame, as it is lived rather than simply imagined, not only shuts down higher cognitive functions, but effectively shuts down the subject’s ability to encounter certain others as deserving of moral consideration.¹¹

THE TIME OF SHAME



In a section of the text entitled “The Temporality of Shame as Presencing,” Steinbock takes up the question of whether or not shame has a futural dimension. He argues that, whether I am ashamed of myself now in reference to who I once was, or ashamed of a past self in relation to who I am now, “the temporal determination of shame as presencing” is consistent (2014, 91-92). Shame involves both self-diremption and internal coherence: that past self that I am ashamed of is somehow distinct from who I am now, but is also still me. “Shame reveals me both as disjoined from and connected to myself,” he notes. (93). Thus, shame has the effect of making me present to myself, revealing both a gap and a tie between myself as I am

¹¹ See especially Tangey and Dearing’s summary of empirical research on shame in *Shame and Guilt* (2003). Steinbock does acknowledge something he calls “debilitating shame,” but he argues that the debilitating part is not actually the shame, but “the disordered heart” of the person who experiences the shame. It is the disordered heart that subordinates what he calls “spiritual values” to vital values or use values or even values of commodification. “Such a disordered heart,” he writes, “can produce a debilitating shame” (2014, 81). Needless to say, focusing on the shamed one’s “disordered heart” in a social context of deep injustice and near insurmountable pressures, seems cruel and insufficient when there is an actual case in view, rather than an imaginary one.

and myself as I once was. As for “anticipatory shame,” Steinbock claims that it is not yet shame, and that the anticipation of shame is more related to shyness (96).

He concludes that “shame itself does not seem to possess a futural directedness” (93). In other words, when we are ashamed, we are ashamed of a past or present self, and thus shame does not have a futural dimension at all. “If something is going to count in shame, then it is going to be given as accomplished” (93).

Zahavi agrees that shame, at least “the interpersonal experience of shame that I am currently focusing on[,] might best be characterized in terms of a ‘frozen now’ ... the future is lost, and the subject is fixed in the present moment” (2014, 223). Citing Jean-Paul Sartre, Zahavi argues that “in shame I experience myself as trapped in facticity, as being irremediably what I am (rather than as someone with future possibilities, as someone who can become otherwise)” (223). Even more strongly, “the acute feeling of interpersonal shame does not leave room for the exploration of future possibilities of redemption” (223).

Steinbock’s account is a bit more nuanced when it comes to shame’s relationship to a possible future, since shame stands in close relation to the hope of recovery (2014, 94). He notes, however, that the self that is to-be-recovered has a present temporality, since the person who will be recovered is “who I am,” or we might say “who I really am.”

Turning to gendered shame in the final section of this essay, I will agree with Zahavi that there are modes of shame in which all hope for redemption is crushed, where the crushing of hope, indeed, seems to be the productive work that the shame accomplishes. But as we will see in a moment, the problem with the conviction that shame *generally* has no futural dimension, is that it underplays the profoundly important role that hope for redemption plays in the shape and experience of other important modalities of shame. In some gendered shame, the hope of redemption is intensified and concentrated to such an extent that it is what enables shame to do its assigned work. It is, in other words, a central structuring feature of the shame *as it is lived*. It makes no sense to treat this dimension as if it were not proper to shame itself, once we pay attention to the lived instance. Even more, I will argue, the redemptive aspirations that shame unleashes in one modality provide the setting for the occasion of shame in the other, so that future-oriented shame is a necessary stage in the production process of the future-killing shame to come.

SHAME ABSTRACTED



One key source of feminist irritation in relation to discussions of shame found in our philosophical tradition is that the philosophers’ discussions, however compelling, remain persistently and consistently abstract—i.e., they remain disconnected from the specific living of shame in the specific historical and cultural context of the inquiry. They remain attached to the fantasy of a generic self, undergoing generic shame, in a generic situation. In relation to the movement I described above, the *oscillation* that Beauvoir maintains, these texts are simply static—they stake out their territory in the general features of human existence and refuse to move into the particular, to observe how shame actually works in *this* or *that* world, who it belongs to and how it belongs to them, who lives it in one way rather than another, what it effects, and how it is embedded in and preservative of structures of power. There is a violence to this move to the pseu-

do-generic (perhaps unconscious, perhaps unwilling), which tends to bury the living phenomenon in its differentiations in the “generic” subject’s narcissistic universalizations.

In *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame*, Zahavi recognizes shame as a phenomenon that challenges his notion that the experiential self is primary, i.e., is before or beyond or excessive to what he calls the narrative self, which is embedded in and shaped by history, normative structures and practices, and bound by power. He acknowledges that shame tells us something about “the nature of the self” which demands recognition of an intersubjectively mediated form of self-relation (2014, 208-13). Citing Sartre, he asserts that “pure shame” is the realization that “I need the mediation of the Other in order to be what I am” (Sartre 2003, 312, quoted in Zahavi 2014, 213). Shame is an emotion that reveals “the exposed and interpersonal nature of the self” and “testifies to our exposure, vulnerability, and visibility” (235).

This does not change Zahavi’s conviction that “there is a core dimension of our selfhood that is presocial” (2014, 235). He simply asserts that this “core dimension” is not what is “at stake in deep shame” (235). However, deep shame does not necessarily imply a learned set of social values or expectations that are betrayed in the shame experience either, as the notion of a narrative self—which for Zahavi is the historically and normatively constituted self—would presume. “On the one hand, we have a minimal take on self that seeks to cash it out in terms of the first-person perspective,” he writes,

. . . on the other hand, we have a far richer normatively guided notion that firmly situates the self in culture and history. Whereas the minimal notion captures an important but presocial aspect of our experiential life, the narrative notion most certainly does include the social dimension, but it does so by emphasizing the role of language. (237)

This would imply, if I have understood Zahavi correctly, that all shame is self-reflective, and cannot occur at the pre-reflective level. In order to solve this problem, he introduces the notion of an “interpersonal self,” which occupies the space between the “experiential self” and the “narratively extended self:”

[I]n contrast to the experiential self, the interpersonal self is clearly a socially constituted self. We come to be the social selves we are, not only by experiencing ourselves in our interaction with and emotional response to others, but also by experiencing and internalizing the other’s perspective on ourselves. This interpersonal self will feed into and is an important precursor to the subsequent development of a more normatively enriched and diachronically extended narrative self, and can thereby serve as an important bridge between the two previously discussed dimensions of self. (238)

What Zahavi likes about this notion of an interpersonal self is that it allows us to affirm that shame is, at least in many instances, a social emotion, without having to accept the idea that it is, at its root, a socially constructed experience:

I am ... not denying what should be rather obvious, namely, that many shame experiences are culturally nested and presuppose narrative capacities. In its developmentally primary form, however, shame precedes the learning of particular social standards. (238)

What this seems to imply is that there is an interpersonal realm of human life that is social, but not in the full sense; it is not yet normatively constrained, not yet inflected by power, not yet beholden to an historical inheritance. It suggests that there is a place for the generic self and his shame, where the normative force of particular social standards is not yet at issue, even though other people are. So now we have two dimensions of the self that are not normatively constituted, that are prior to the sociality of the subject who is subject to power.

Let me say that I think it is, indeed, very important to provide an account of shame that does not conclude that shame is experienced only after the values of the social world are adopted and internalized by a lucid consciousness—so that I can only be ashamed of something that I have done if both I and the person shaming me agree that what I have done violates important values. I agree with Zahavi that shame is experienced pre-reflectively, that it is primarily and significantly experienced this way, and that while it is prereflective it is also intersubjective or social—he ends by calling it *interpersonal*. But why do we need the extra step of claiming that the “interpersonal” is somehow distinct from or free of the sedimented historical and normative weight of the culture more broadly? Is not the interpersonal, in fact, always burdened by that weight? Is it not a primary site of the re-production of those values, so that shame is not about a response to values that are already consciously accepted or adopted, as belief, *but one of the very events of their pre-reflective inscription*? Is there a border between the cultural and the interpersonal? What is it made of? I would similarly ask if there is a border between the cultural and the core experiential self. On what basis can we claim that these dimensions of the self are not all impacted by the world they emerge in? Is Zahavi giving us, with the notion of an “interpersonal” dimension of human existence, another justification for speaking in abstractions?

When specific examples are used, they are sometimes stunningly mundane, making the specific instance of shame seem positively bathetic. When they are gendered examples, they wear their propensity toward abstraction from history and social stratification on their sleeves. Zahavi uses an example from Scheler, and he, like Scheler, refuses to notice the gendered power at work in the example; he treats it in fact as if it had nothing to do with gender and power. “Scheler distinguishes,” he writes, “the anticipating and protecting shame of the blushing virgin, which, on his view, is characterized by lovely warmth, from the painful experience of repenting shame” (2014, 215). This is simply an example of how shame comes in different forms, for Zahavi. But is it the core self or the interpersonal self or the narrative self that experiences the shame of the blushing virgin as “lovely” and “warm”? Is that her experience, or his experience of her? Does the old and dusty trope of the “blushing virgin” bespeak a dimension of human experience unaffected by power? To whom? Not to the feminist phenomenologist, I assure you.

A second example is one Zahavi borrows from Cristiano Castelfranchi and Isabella Poggi to explore the question of the distinction between “the other’s evaluation and the underlying value” at work in the shame event (2014, 226). The example involves giving mouth to mouth resuscitation to “a girl after you have saved her from drowning” and

being accused, by onlookers, of sexual assault, or as he puts it, “taking advantage” (226). Since you know you were not committing assault, you do not share the valuation of the onlookers, but you do share the underlying value that sexually assaulting an unconscious woman is not a good thing. Zahavi does not think this situation would involve shame, but something else. He goes on to imagine that it might involve shame if one were to be “struck by the girl’s beauty” in the process and experience an “illicit element of arousal” (226). This is a rather light-hearted example, for Zahavi, one that is stripped of the weight of any ethical background. The image of a beautiful, unconscious, and wholly vulnerable girl (he does not call her a woman) is apparently the right stage on which to play out the drama of men (the “you” in Zahavi’s heteronormative account is implicitly male) trying to figure out how valuation and underlying values might be distinct. Does the appearance of yet another comatose woman being brought back to life by a male rescuer not draw our attention to how such examples are superficially abstracted from the weight of history and power and context—while at the same time reiterating and reaffirming the relations of power that constitute that context? Is the light-hearted affective modality evidenced in the telling of the story not as significant to the meaning of the text and its values as whether valuations and underlying values are distinguishable? Is the only shame in the story the shame of the rescuer?

In this whole tradition of thinking the relation between the human, life, and shame, from Plato to Steinbock and Zahavi, the discussion is radically, systematically abstracted from how shame is lived, and especially from how shame is lived by women. The subject’s fantasy of himself as a generic subject, living generic shame, in a generic world, is secured by these philosophical moves. This is why Scheler is so wrong when he says that “in the phenomenological attitude ... what is meant is intuited. It is not observed” (Scheler quoted in Emad 1972, 361). Now I am not suggesting these reflections bear no relation to how shame is lived at all. In fact, I think they do uncover important dimensions of shame, but they also cover over or obscure other dimensions that are equally or more significant. By divorcing themselves from particular, historically weighted, socially located experiences of shame, Steinbock and Zahavi (1) both completely ignore the overwhelmingly gendered nature of so many shame experiences and ignore the fact that gender is a primary site of shame, (2) give us a wildly rosy picture of shame in comparison to how shame actually plays itself out in lived lives by suggesting that shame is in some primary sense ameliorative, (3) miss the complexity of the lived temporality of shame, and (4) do not seem to see the *work* that shame is doing to *secure* social stratification and to reinforce and reproduce specific relations of domination and subordination.

TOWARD A FEMINIST PHENOMENOLOGY OF SHAME

Elsewhere, I have argued that gendered shame is a central mechanism of the apparatus that secures the continued subordination of women across a number of class and race contexts in the mediatized, late-capitalist west.¹² I include, in that account, the powerful first-person narrative offered by Amanda Todd, the Canadian teenager whose story, which she wrote on note cards and released to the public on YouTube, went viral

¹² Much of the work in this section was previously published as part of an exploration of shame and feminine identity formation (Mann 2018).

in 2012, a few months before she took her own life (Todd 2012). I understand Todd to be a *thinker*, who has published a text she hopes will be read; someone who is not only providing a story about shame but also an account, however rudimentary, of its central structures.¹³ She takes us into the lived dimensions of shame, and shows us that shame in contemporary western, late-capitalist life is a deeply personal and viscerally lived affect, on the one hand, and a feature of our social and political world on the other. I argue that it is one of the structural features that key the inner life of the subject into the broad patterns of power and social control which characterize exploitative relations between persons who are differently socially situated.

In order to make sense of Todd's account, we must distinguish between two kinds of shame. "Ubiquitous shame" is the name that I give to that shame-*status* that attaches to the very fact of existing as a girl or woman, or of having a female body, captured so powerfully in such common phrases as "like a girl" and "such a pussy." I argue that this shame is paradoxically characterized by a promise of redemption, i.e., its *futural* temporality. "Unbounded shame," on the other hand is a thick, relentless, engulfing shame, often catalyzed by a shame-*event*, that *combusts* in certain contexts, until it snuffs out any hope for redemption. This shame has suicide as its logical endpoint. The threat of it is part of the thick atmosphere of danger which accompanies women's becoming in this context and at this time, especially in adolescence. The two kinds of shame are related, I claim, in that one sets the stage for the other: ubiquitous shame with its promissory temporality is the "set up" for the decisions that catalyze the events that issue in unbounded shame for some girls and women.

Empirical studies of shame are important here. They are consistent in characterizing shame as an affect so powerful that it bends the body over on itself, buries the face in the hands, and hangs the head. Silvan Tomkins associates shame with an excruciating, intolerable visibility. "Shame is the affect of indignity," he writes, "the humiliated one ... feels himself naked, defeated, alienated, lacking in dignity or worth" (1995, 133). "Shame has the power to make us feel completely worthless, degraded from head to foot," Jacoby writes (1994, 21). Shame can undo the self, unmake social ties, disable moral concern, and destroy the lifeworld of the one who is shamed.

Following Beauvoir, and maintaining an oscillation between the general and the particular, we note that the adolescent life is possessed, like all human life, but perhaps more intensely, by an urgent need to *justify itself* in the eyes of others (2010, 285). This is a generalized existential need, but it takes a specific form when and where shame is deeply gendered.¹⁴ One of Beauvoir's most significant insights is that gender itself is an *operation of justification*.¹⁵ In other words, the way you live your gender is a key part of how you establish your worth in the eyes of others, and thus in your own lifeworld. Your aspiration to be a man of a certain kind or a woman of a certain kind, is fundamentally about whether and how you are valued, and by whom, and for what. Think about adolescents posting selfies on social media, think of the comments on those pho-

¹³ I do not mean to suggest, by this, that she is not also a victim of gendered violence who is suffering. It is important not to reduce her to that status, however, and to recognize that she is also thinking about what has happened to her, and trying to articulate important dimensions of that experience.

¹⁴ I am not claiming here that women experience shame more than men, far from it. In *Sovereign Masculinity*—especially in Part II—I argue that gendered shame is absolutely central to masculine identity-formation (Mann 2014a).

¹⁵ I make the case that Beauvoir offers us an account of gender as justification in other publications (Mann 2014a, 29–47; Mann 2012).

tographs: “you’re so hot,” “what a slut,” “he’s ripped,” “such a pussy.” These comments are assignments of value, attached to a certain way of doing or being your gender. The negative comments are acts of stigmatization.¹⁶ If my gender is a source of joy or pain, if it sometimes seems to be a life or death matter, it is because it is one important way that I justify my existence to others or become, for them, an object of contempt.

Today, assignments of status arrive equally quickly from close proximity and vast distances, instantaneously in fact, from collectivities of others who have little in common except for their presence in certain virtual spaces. These conditions have altered the scene of shame in important ways.

There is perhaps no story that has come to represent the contemporary scene of shame more than the story of Amanda Todd, a seventh grader who, after having uploaded some sexy videos of herself and her friends, fully clothed, was stalked online by a 36 year old man in the Netherlands (see Lau 2012; BBC News 2014; Todd 2012). After a year of chatting, and him asking, Todd finally “flashed him,” i.e., provided him with an image of herself lifting up her shirt and baring her breasts. As is the practice of those calling themselves “cappers” on the internet, he captured that image in order to try to extort private sex-shows from Todd over the course of the next three years by threatening to release the photo to everyone she knew. Her refusals resulted in the photograph being released to all her Facebook friends at three different schools, and circulating broadly on child porn sites, as she and her family sought to flee the abuse by moving twice and unsuccessfully tried to get the police to pursue an investigation. The posting of the photograph resulted in repeated waves of what is now called “slut-shaming” at each new location. The cruelty of her peers was almost unimaginable.

Of course the fact that something so utterly mundane as a picture of a girl’s breasts should give anyone the kind of power that it gave the central perpetrator, should enable such cruel *collusion* between him and Todd’s peers, should produce the lethal shame that it did, already speaks volumes about the social *situatedness* of shame. One cannot abstract this shame from its context and hope to understand why it mattered in the way that it did *at all*. There is an entire misogynistic economy at work here, which secures the power of the photograph in advance.¹⁷

That power, in this case, eventually becomes the power of life and death. After a particularly acute event of shaming at her school, Todd drank bleach in her first attempt to kill herself. The failed suicide attempt and Todd’s turn to self-harm in the form of drug and alcohol abuse and cutting, resulted in a further escalation of the tirade of online abuse from people in Todd’s close proximity and people far away—a truly unbounded scene of shame. Todd fought back by trying to rescue her online reputation over and over again. She challenged the stalker to “come and meet me right now,” thinking she would lure him into a situation where he could be arrested. Then, in September of 2012, Todd posted a silent YouTube video of herself with note cards in which she told what she called her “never ending story,” a video that went viral and finally gained her some virtual support. A month later, she killed herself.

Was this an expression of Todd asserting her humanity by valuing herself *beyond* life? Did suffering through this shame give her the *gift* of self-disclosure such that she

¹⁶ Didier Eribon gives an eloquent and convincing account of insult and stigmatization in *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (2004).

¹⁷ See Ringrose et. al., “Teen Girls, Sexual Double Standards and ‘Sexing’: Gendered Value in Digital Image Exchange” (2013).

recognized her worth as spirit-over-life, a realization expressed through her suicide? The sheer absurdity of posing such questions in relation to this lived instance of shame discloses that, while shame might turn the human against life, might produce an impossible choice for death over life, the “diremption” between spirit and life is not ameliorative but cruelly, brutally, wrong. Todd’s story is instructive, then, for those of us schooled in the pretty optimism of abstract accounts.

I include here a string of citations from Todd’s own telling of her story:

It [the message] said ... if you don’t put on a show for me I will send ur
boobs

He knew my adress [*sic*], school, relatives, friends family names

Christmas break...

Knock at my door at 4am...

It was the police...

[they told her that her picture was circulating online]

I then got really sick and got...

Anxiety, major deppression [*sic*] and panic disorder

[2nd School: as she continues to refuse his demands, the perpetrator makes a fake Facebook page saying he is going to be a transfer student to the school and is looking for friends, in order to expose her again]

My boobs were his profile pic...

Cried every night, lost all my friends and respect
people had for me ... again ...

Then nobody liked me

name calling, judged...

I can never get that Photo back

It’s out there forever...

I promised myself never again...

Didn’t have any friends and I sat at lunch alone

[After leaving the second school]

6 months has gone by ... people are posting pictures of bleach, clorex
and ditches

tagging me ... I was doing a lot better too... They said ...

She should try a different bleach. I hope she dies this time and isn’t so
stupid.

They said I hope she sees this and kills herself..

Why do I get this? I messed up but why follow me.

I left your guys city...Im constanty [*sic*] crying now...

Everyday I think why am I still here?

[*sic*] Im stuck...whats left of me now...nothing stops

I have nobody... I need someone. (Todd 2012)

The recurrent themes in Todd's story, told in her own words, are social isolation, social abandonment, and hopelessness. The eternal time of the picture repeatedly overwhelms geographic distance and the time of Todd's life story—"nothing stops" she writes, revealing the frustration of a future that simply repeats the past. The stalker destroys any fragile sense of an open future that emerges each time she flees to a new school, with shame as his weapon. Unbounded shame closes time. Seeking some way out, she tries to kill herself three times.

This shame undoes the self. This acute, excruciating, endless, geographically unbounded shame has found its ecological niche in contemporary forms of social media. It is a future-killing shame, and suicide is its logical conclusion. But there is another shame that precedes and prepares the ground for it, that is harder to make visible, in part because it lives in close proximity to something we might call pride. In order to fully grasp the economy of shame in which adolescent girls' lives unfold, we have to understand both modalities of shame, and more importantly, we have to understand their relation.

This other shame, ubiquitous shame, attaches to the social status of the feminine, and plays a pervasive part in the prereflective constitution of feminine ways of being in the world. When Sandra Bartky (1990) writes about this kind of shame, she suggests that shame enters the lives of men against a background assumption of male power in the form of singular shame-events. Shame in the lives of women is more like an atmosphere or environment that affectively shades the subject-world relation, what I am calling here "shame-status." If every generic account of shame is abstract, it is because we do not live shame generically, but as specific, socially situated subjects—in fact, shame is a powerful force in *situating us* socially as subjects.

If we pay close attention and stay attuned to the phenomenon, we see that unlike unbounded shame, ubiquitous shame is temporally structured around its own redemptive aspirations; we see that feminine shame's futural fixations are a key aspect of creating the specific vulnerabilities of emerging women/subjects to the unbounded shame that now characterizes our social world. Here we see why an account of shame that associates it with a present and past, but never a future temporality, misses something important about gendered shame. While this shame is *ubiquitous*, i.e., everywhere, it is punctuated by pride and hope.

Ubiquitous shame results in a "pervasive affective attunement" that exposes a "generalized condition of dishonor," as Bartky suggests, but we also find a promise of redemption at the very heart of ubiquitous shame; it is the feature of ubiquitous shame that distinguishes it from unbounded shame and structures the young woman's vulnerability to sexual predation (1990, 85). The imaginary domain of the girl is structured by a promise, as Beauvoir indicates, a place in adult existence is being prepared for her; she will be a prestigious object—she will, through the force of her beauty, have power over men—in other words, she is promised that her present abjection will be converted into admiration, desire, adulation. She will become the essential in that promised future moment when her mere physical presence will instantiate a powerful agency. "Because she is doomed to passivity and yet wants power," Beauvoir writes, "the adolescent girl must believe in magic: her body's magic that will bring men under her yoke, the magic of destiny in general that will fulfill her without her having *to do* anything" (2010, 352–353). The adolescent girl spends her free time in front of the mirror, or today, taking sexy pictures of herself

after a long period of preparation, and posting them online where her friends affirm her project of becoming bait by “liking” the pictures and commenting on how hot she looks. She pursues a hyper-stylized beauty, shaving, plucking, styling her hair, applying layers of make-up. In the mirror, she purses her lips, she practices looking like the photo she will take of herself. Then she injects her future into the present moment through the vehicle of the self-produced pornographic portrait. “For the girl,” Beauvoir writes, “erotic transcendence consists in making herself prey in order to make a catch” (349). Her future sediments into the body, stylizes itself in the gait, the tilt of the head, the protrusion of the lips, the photo-ready smile.

From the perspective of the girl living it, time is not closed, time is promissory. Hope is not extinguished, it is intensified and concentrated. At the heart of ubiquitous shame, there is the promise of redemption. Her dawning bodily awareness of her own powerlessness is punctuated by the anticipation of an exquisite, eroticized power that is given to her as structurally constitutive of her future. It is not that she is unaware of danger, but she risks herself in the midst of this fairy tale. She has already experienced, for years, the pervasive micro-practices that constitute the world as belonging to boys. She has already heard, long before she had any understanding of what they meant, the words “slut” and “bitch” and “whore” as disclosive of something essentially stigmatized about women in their sexual being. She has come of age in an image-world replete with stories of women’s shame, but these stories are punctuated with visions of triumph. The redemptive moment is the climax, in which the shamed girl gets her dignity or her power back.

Redemption in a masculinist economy of desire is concentrated around three events: the provocation of male desire; the marriage proposal; the wedding day—nearly every cultural coming of age story, for girls, is organized around the sorts of words and images that collect affective energy around these three moments. Ubiquitous shame is a powerful force for collecting that affective energy and intensifying it. These are the events in a woman’s life which crystallize hope, those elements of a life where shame falls away and dignity is restored. The bride is immune from shame on her wedding day (which is why it is so much more her day than his); the girlfriend is exempt from shame at the moment of the proposal. The moment of desire is more ambiguous. It must be handled perfectly if the girl is to convert that desire into redemption. She has to provoke the desire, and then keep it going—she has to feed it, in other words—but she risks everything in feeding it. If it turns away, the weight of a closed future settles in. If she “lets herself be used,” i.e., capitulates in the wrong way, at the wrong time, or to the wrong person, in the wrong circumstance, everything is lost. But the provocation of male desire is the first moment of the redemptive promise, the first step on the salvific path our cultural imaginary puts in front of her, and as such *must* be cultivated, sustained, undertaken.

Her hope is her vulnerability—her vulnerability is, in other words, embedded in the temporal structure of the experience. Amanda Todd tells us, in the simplest and most deeply explanatory terms, what made her succumb to the request for a photo of her breasts: “then got called stunning, beautiful, perfect, etc...,” she writes (2012). Girls fighting for their self-worth in a masculinist economy of desire, against a backdrop of ubiquitous shame which is largely constituted by and through the hope for relief, can give no other explanation for their actions than the presence of male desire or adulation. When they inevitably mistake extortionist practices for the promised desire they have been relentlessly trained to wait and hope for, they are condemned for being “stupid” as well as being “sluts” (Ringrose et al. 2013).

What Todd's words disclose to us is nothing less than the shape of the world she inhabits, the urgent intensity of the promise of redemption: "stunning, beautiful, perfect," "I thought he liked me" (2012). The existential desperation to rescue the self from ubiquitous shame is a motor driving the girl to, in the words of Lynn Phillips, "flirt with danger" (2000). As Phillips discovered, girls facing these choices understand themselves to be fully agential and responsible, intensifying their sense of personal failure when things go wrong.¹⁸ The redemption narrative has been a feature of her world since she was able to walk and talk. As the time of redemption draws near in adolescence, its promise feels tangible, believable, necessary and *destined* for the girl whose status is constituted by a background condition of ubiquitous shame that saturates her self-world relation without being thematizable. In an economy of masculine desire, in which value extraction and depletion, value-acquisition and surplus, are the terms of the logic, she is surrounded by stories and images of women rescued by male desire, women whose value is secured by the proposal, the wedding. Those moments of rescue require the provocation of male desire as their progenitor, their origin. This becomes an urgent existential necessity, for so many girls, in adolescence. It is the shape of this imagined future, paired with a deep determination not to succumb to the ubiquitous shame of feminine existence, that secures the girl's complicity in her own destruction and that makes her susceptible to unbounded shame. As Todd puts it "Im stuck...whats left of me now...nothing stops" (2012).

V. THE DIFFERENCE OF FEMINIST PHENOMENOLOGY

All I have been able to do here is gesture toward the difference of feminist phenomenology; a more robust account must wait for another day. To try to both summarize and anticipate: a feminist phenomenology of shame can never be satisfied with an abstract, generalized account. It must do justice to the specificity of shame as it is lived in the present, bound as it is to historically sedimented forms of power, specified as it is by its relation to time, ensconced as it is in structures of injustice, *at work* as it is in the reproduction of social stratification. The general features of human existence that make us deeply vulnerable to others are always in play, but always in their entanglements with the specific events and patterns of experience that mark the world for particular subjects. The general features of existence—like not being self-given, like sociality, like the interpersonal dimension of the self, like time—are never innocent. They never give us permission, in other words, to fantasize a "generic subject" who undergoes shame in a generic way, in a generic context. They do not invite happy stories of sexual difference as the generative site of meaning when we consider how they are actually lived in the midst of more or less brutal relations of power by actual people.

The difference of feminist phenomenology is constituted by the interested, impassioned and ethically burdened relation between the phenomenologist and the matter of concern that shapes the phenomenological practice. She knows she cannot imagine away

¹⁸They understand themselves this way at the time. As they gain distance from the events and experience, they are often much more forgiving of their younger selves.

the prejudices that shape her inquiry through an act of the will. She has to *enter into* the perspective of an other and allow it to work on her. She has to travel between the particularities of *this* shame, *this* life, *this* situation, and the generalities in a constant, oscillating motion. The phenomenon gives itself precisely in the intensified space between general features of human existence and radically particular specifications that are historically situated, bound up in material interests, ensconced in structures of injustice. She must work to keep this space open. She cannot attach herself to generic “findings,” such as “shame has no futural dimension,” but must instead follow the phenomenon, to see how time, for example, is revealed in it, and to see what time reveals. She may discover, as we have here, that *this* shame’s futural dimension is constitutive of the experience itself. She cannot attach herself to happy thoughts, such as “shame redeems the moral person,” as she witnesses lived shame destroy and undo, hears testimony of crushed hope, sees evidence that *this* shame produces a desire for death. Hers is an interested practice, often undertaken in irritation or outrage, always aimed at justice.

The driving motivation here is not reverence for either figure or text. There is no loyalty to an already established philosophical practice when it proves itself incompetent in relation to the phenomenon *as it gives itself*. The phenomenon, in its particularity, its historical specificity, its situatedness, is not *subordinated* to the practice. She may occupy a recognized philosophical form, but she does not *venerate* the form, she infiltrates it, works its limits, and allows the phenomenon to crack it open.

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