

FROM DESCRIPTION TO TRANSFORMATION: A DECONSTRUCTIVIST INVESTIGATION OF A PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD

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I. DESCRIPTION AND TRANSFORMATION

In the foreword of his *Phenomenology of Perception*, first published in 1945, Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that the question of what phenomenology *is* can only be answered by looking at what phenomenology *does*. Phenomenology is about “describing, and not explaining or analyzing,” he states (2012, xxxi). Now, decades later, a new movement in phenomenology redefines what phenomenology does—or rather what it is *supposed* to do. In their introduction to *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, with the decisive title “Transformative Descriptions,” Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon state that critical phenomenology is “an ameliorative phenomenology that seeks not only to describe but also to repair the world” (2019, xiv). Following this definition of critical phenomenology’s task, one may thus ask: is describing simply not enough to deal with a world that needs, as quoted above, “repairing”? Or, alternatively, might there be ways of transforming the method of description itself, in order to make it a useful tool apt at fostering critical alterations?

In order to answer these salient questions, I will in this paper take Merleau-Ponty’s claim about phenomenology being concerned with “describing” as a starting point to address some key points of the phenomenological method of description. Instead of arguing either in favor of or against phenomenology, I am interested in approaching both the potentials and the limits of this methodological tool within a social and political context. More precisely, I will investigate whether phenomenological descriptions can help in *transforming* a situation or experience that needs social and political change. In other words, if we can agree that describing is necessary to define what is going wrong, the task

that remains is to investigate whether and how describing must already be conceived as transformative of the situation to be described.

With this in mind, I will argue that description can serve critical changes, under the condition that the transformative power of language is taken into account. Following deconstructivist approaches,¹ I will argue that by describing our embodied experiences, we also transform them. This is because of how language itself is structured. Instead of understanding language as a pure tool of description, we should consider the social structures inherent to it, assuming that doing this opens a way to a situation that is *otherwise*. Such an understanding of language counters concepts of articulated language as self-transparent acts of expression of a given content. To this extent, again following deconstructivist approaches, I will stress language's profoundly social character. Building on the work of Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida, I will flesh out the complex structure of language as a multiple configuration of address. Thus, I will suggest that description can itself be a transformative tool—under the condition that we consider the social linguistic conditions that necessarily transform the experience to be described. In order to do justice to the social character of language, I will argue, first, that descriptions should include reflections on who they are addressed to and who they risk excluding. Second, I will claim that descriptions should aim at transparency with regards to how others already shape them. Finally, I will point to the political implications of such an understanding of the relationship between language and description, suggesting that focusing on the social structure of language from a critical perspective demands work on the conditions of address.

II. DESCRIPTION AND THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL TRADITION

In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty identifies an already present ambiguity in the phenomenological project. Building on the work of Edmund Husserl, Merleau-Ponty states that phenomenology should “provide a direct description of our experience such as it is, and without any consideration of its psychological genesis or of the causal explanations that the scientist, historian, or sociologist might offer of that experience” (2012, *ixx*). However, one may ask what a “direct description of an experience as it is” would look like. Assuming that describing without transforming the experience described is possible, would this be something we ought to strive for?

In a short text ambitiously titled “Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” Claude Lefort (2012) replies to the philosopher's demand for “direct description.” He outlines some preliminary hints regarding where the phenomenological problem of description might lie. He writes:

Merleau-Ponty never questions the phenomenologist's position; he works out his position only to establish more securely his right to meet up with

¹ My use of the term deconstruction is not limited to Jacques Derrida's philosophy. Rather, “deconstruction” is used to refer to philosophical approaches on language which I investigate in relation to the complex structure of address.

the things themselves such as they are given to our experience; he does not wonder how it is that their access is governed by language, or how our installation within language conditions the movements of the description. (Lefort 2012, xxvi)

Lefort's initial problematization of the phenomenological method makes it clear that the status of description in phenomenology has always been a contested one. In particular, it implies a key question regarding the relationship between experience and language. Can transformation take place through description?

Merleau-Ponty's claim that there is an immediate givenness of the world within the perceptual experience of the subject results in notable methodological difficulties. For an experience to be describable as such, it must be accessible in some sense. However, one must ask *to whom* a specific set of experiences is accessible. Is the phenomenologist capable of describing the world through everyone else's eyes? Who can we speak for through our descriptions? Given that our experiences are both diverse and singular, should we not assume that everyone else's experience is impossible to access in an immediate way? Vice versa, which problems and potentials emerge from strictly reducing articulation to one's own experiences or that of one's own social group?² Are there empirical conditions, which can lead us to convictions that should not be bracketed within the process of description, but which represent the very basis on which descriptions become necessary in the first place? Further, if we assume that descriptions can be transformative, what potential might they have to foster social and political change? And finally, what kind of conception of language is needed in order to account for its socially transformative effects?

III. DESCRIPTION IN CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

Critical phenomenologists give answers to the above-mentioned questions. Authors such as Sara Ahmed (2006), Alia Al-Saji (2017, 2021), Lisa Guenther (2019, 2021), Johanna Oksala (2016, 2023), Mariana Ortega (2016), and Gayle Salamon (2018a, 2018b) all expand as well as renew the phenomenological method by carving out its potential for fine-grained social critique. They do so by acknowledging socially constituted differences within embodied and perceptual experiences, not least with regard to salient social categories such as race, gender, and class. Hence, they do not, for instance, only speak of the body as such, but question *which* body is at stake in a specific context. Critical phenomenology therefore offers descriptions of experiences of marginalized groups, assuming that these are insightful for a society as such to foster an understanding of the mechanisms of oppression, but also for rendering audible the ways in which the social situatedness of the describing subject fundamentally influences—if not determines—the description they will give.

² See Linda Martín Alcoff (1991) and Johanna Oksala (2023).

However, there has to be more to critical phenomenology than broadening the scope of experiences to be described. Like traditional phenomenologists, critical phenomenologists, too, must aim at clarifying their methodological stance, not least with regard to phenomenology's transcendental heritage. As Johanna Oksala explains, *critical* phenomenology needs to develop its own "distinct method" which should be distinguishable from classical phenomenological approaches, and it must clarify how the classical method can be "appropriated for the task of contemporary social critique" (2023, 138). However, this appropriation should not represent a simple extension of the themes covered. If critical phenomenology were to be defined only by the material it analyzes, it could not count as a branch of philosophy in its own right, but it would amount to "a non-philosophical application of phenomenology" (138). Accordingly, for this critical project to succeed, one must strive for more than, in Alia Al-Saji's (2017) words, "a shift in what is being described." Rather, critical phenomenology is about finding the courage for "creative reconfigurations of phenomenology" (146). Therefore, there must be a shift in *how* we describe—and how we define the task of description altogether. In short, in order to do justice to critical phenomenology, that is, making use of description in a way that is apt for critique, one must aim at *transforming* the phenomenological method itself.

In "What's Critical about Critical Phenomenology?," Gayle Salamon (2018b) investigates how the gesture of description must be adapted for social critique. She writes: "if phenomenology offers us unparalleled means to describe what we see with utmost precision, to illuminate what is true, critique insists that we also attend to the power that is always conditioning that truth" (15). Hence, if the task of critical phenomenology is to describe while, at the same time, paying careful attention to the power structures behind what we gather is true, phenomenological description can never take place *ex nihilo*. On the contrary, it must not only be formulated from a specific stance within a specific historical and social setting, but it must also operate on the basis of assumptions that emerge from the social situation at stake. For instance, in the case of someone giving a description of a lived experience of racist violence, the person who would receive it as such a description has to have an understanding of what racism is and, to some extent, acknowledge that it exists on a structural level. In other words, critical phenomenological description is performed on the grounds of key critical assumptions such as the belief in the existence of fundamental inequality in the distribution of privilege or lack thereof; that is, unequal conditions with regard to the scope of experiences persons can have.

Accordingly, as Oksala makes clear, the phenomenological reduction as a method of detaching oneself from one's presuppositions should—at least within a critical context—not be confused with presupposed neutrality in an ethical or political sense (2023, 145). Instead of merely accepting, as a given, that experiences take place within a profoundly racist and sexist society, we should, she states, reflect on "how we have come to experience and understand the world around us as gendered and racialized, and how race and gender could be experienced otherwise" (142).

Viewed in such a way, critical phenomenology's self-ascribed project cannot be satisfied by providing an accurate articulation of a status quo but aims at opening up a future in which the occurrence of sexist and racist violence could become less pervasive altogether.

The historically, socially, and politically justified “presupposition” that the world we live in is constituted in a racist and sexist way is, then, not what needs to be bracketed away within the act of description, but what makes fine-grained description necessary in the first place. In short, in order for description to be a critical methodological tool, it must serve the cause of transformation, the latter implying changes of material conditions within a specific political and historical context. Lisa Guenther provides a cogent summary of this point:

As a transformative political practice, critical phenomenology must go beyond a description of oppression, developing concrete strategies for dismantling oppressive structures and creating or amplifying different, less oppressive, and more liberatory ways of Being-in-the-world. In other words, the ultimate goal of critical phenomenology is not just to interpret the world, but also to change it. (2019, 16)

Going back to Merleau-Ponty’s definition of the phenomenological task as describing rather than interpreting, Guenther’s methodological approach goes beyond the scope of classical phenomenological methods (as described by Merleau-Ponty in the foreword to the *Phenomenology of Perception*), in a two-fold way: first, by referring to interpretation as one aspect of what is required within phenomenology and, second, by stressing the necessity of going even further than interpreting the world—by changing it.

In the above-mentioned quote, Guenther delivers an account of description that strives to be both interpretative and transformative. Thus, she opens a way to conceive of description as something else than a direct linguistic expression of a given experience. Critical description, in Guenther’s understanding, both precedes and follows an interpretation of concrete “oppressive structures” (2019, 16). However, when she states that the critical phenomenological task goes beyond description based on interpretation, as it involves changing the world, she establishes a difference between interpretative description and political transformation. At the same time, as a critical phenomenologist, Guenther’s main tools to participate in changing the world remain practices of description. So might the method of description, after all, have transformative-political potential in itself? To approach this question, I would now like to propose putting phenomenology in dialogue with another philosophical field, namely deconstruction. In what follows, I will explore the encounter between phenomenology and deconstruction guided by the question of whether, and under what conditions, the method of description can become an ally of social transformation. An investigation of deconstructivist approaches on language and phenomenological description shall prove helpful.

IV. DECONSTRUCTION OR BEING (UN)DONE BY LANGUAGE

For now, debates on fruitful encounters between critical phenomenology and deconstruction remain limited.³ This may come as a surprise, as there are many theoretical overlaps. In terms of its overall methodological premises, deconstruction resembles critical phenomenology in that it is attentive to both the potentials and limits of traditional Western philosophies which remain hidden to the eyes of their authors. Just like critical phenomenology, deconstructive work requires a careful and detailed reading of philosophical traditions and concepts by the person engaging with texts. Further, deconstruction, too, is not about negating the content or method of the text to be deconstructed but about taking it so seriously that a *surplus* of sense offers itself, an excess of meanings which unfolds regardless of the author's intentions in writing the original text. In other words, deconstruction pays attention to the complex logics undermining the explicit, intended logics of texts. As such, it seeks to uncover new and unforeseeable material for thought. However, critical phenomenology and deconstruction differ fundamentally in the way they accomplish the rediscovery of classical (phenomenological) works.⁴ For Derrida, at the very heart of the transcendental phenomenological description of the lived body is inscribed an uncontrollable alterity.⁵ In *The Voice and the Phenomenon*, Derrida writes: “phenomenology appears to us to be tormented, if not contested, from the inside, by means of its own descriptions” (2011, 6).

Derrida remains suspicious of classical phenomenology's self-definition as a philosophical method. On many occasions, he insists that deconstruction should not be understood as a method at all (1999, 284). As he has it, deconstruction cannot consist of set of strict guidelines to be applied. It cannot simply be implemented by an autonomous writing subject in control of language; such a view of deconstruction would merely reduce it to an application of the subject's will. Hence, deconstruction “cannot be applied, after the fact and from the outside, as a technical instrument of modernity. Texts deconstruct *themselves* by themselves” (1989, 123; emphasis in original). In short, Derrida gestures towards the power of language, which destabilizes the power of the writing subject.

Following Derrida, there is an irreducible and structural withdrawal at stake, which takes place at the very core of the phenomenological description and is due to language itself. Although Derrida does not give us a tangible method at hand, he offers clues as to how he wants his philosophical project to be understood:⁶ “If I had to risk a single definition of deconstruction . . . I would say simply and without overstatement: *plus d'une langue*—both more than a language and no more of *a* language” (1989, 15; emphasis in original). “More than a language” signifies something other than “more than one experimental

³ See Stella Gaon (2021) and Perry Zurn (2019).

⁴ Altogether, Derrida does not perceive deconstructivist work as a type of critique. Rather, in his view, the term critique, in its philosophical connotation, must itself be deconstructed (1999, 284).

⁵ Without being able to delve into details here, it should be mentioned that, for Derrida, this alterity lies in the temporal and intersubjective character of experiences.

⁶ Derrida has, in fact, given several definitions of deconstruction—all of them of paradoxical in character (Lawlor 2014).

world” to describe; it does not refer only to the diversity of perceptual experiences which are available for description. What Derrida suggests, rather, is that language itself precedes the speaking, writing, and describing subject. If there is always more to language, then there is always more to the world than the language I speak, and, accordingly, there is always more to the language I speak than what I can comprehend and access.

The French word *plus*, signifying both “more” and “no more,” also stresses the subject’s potentially unbearable lack of control over language. The formulation points to a specific historical situatedness of the writing subject or group of subjects. Importantly, Derrida’s reflection on the multiple dimensions of language is anchored in his own relationship to the French language, that is, the language of the colonizer in his birthplace, Algeria. In fact, his tentative definition of deconstruction should also be conceived of as a reply to colonial power(s) and as a rebuttal of colonizers’s attempts to neutralize existing pluralities of language on colonized territory and stabilize their hegemony. More generally, I suggest that deconstructivist conceptions of language should be approached in such a twofold way: both as a way to thematize the structural alterity and uncontrollability of language, and as a groundwork to discuss the relation between contingent power structures, oppression, and language. For instance, Derrida’s famous statement, “I only have one language; it is not mine,” points both to the context of colonialism in which he was brought up, and to the structural withdrawal and lack of control that the subject faces through their fundamental intertwinement with language (1998, 1).⁷ The world we are born into is always already linguistic, and language is shaped by social and historical dynamics and power structures. Hence, as individuals, we cannot master language in isolation from others.

In sum, Derridean thought focuses on how language both *does* and *undoes* the subject. Following deconstructivist approaches, we are incessantly subjected to language. Our being as such is inseparable from our linguistic being. However, we never get to fully *make* language our own. Accordingly, language does not belong to one subject that could make use of it, be it within the act of describing or to express or represent a given sense or experience. Language occurs and materializes between multiple subjects within specific historical settings. Language indissolubly links us to others as beings that are socially constituted. And further, language operates within mechanisms of oppression and violence that shape the specific historical context it occurs in. In short, language is structured socially and historically.

V. LANGUAGE AS ADDRESS

To accurately characterize the deconstructivist understanding of language, I suggest it is imperative to turn to a concept largely ignored in phenomenological debates until now: the idea of language as address. By pointing to the structure of language as always

⁷ This implies that all tentatives to reduce deconstruction to *either* a political, e.g., anti-colonial, *or* an abstract-structural project are dismissive of deconstruction’s complex multiple logics as well as its self-understanding (Syrotinski 2007).

already addressed, Derrida (1979) makes it clear that solipsistically formulated description can only ever be phantasmagorical.⁸ When we speak, write, or describe, we already address ourselves to others. If one can speak of a “primary function”⁹ of language in a deconstructivist sense, then it might be that of a call, a movement towards the other in and through language a movement which is structured as an address.¹⁰

An understanding of language as a structure of address has various political implications, some of which remain overlooked by Derrida. Butler’s reflections on the role of address in shaping subjectivity particularly highlight one such political consequence of viewing speech as address. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler (2005) takes up the question of how to conceive of a subject differently than as a solipsistic, reflexive entity. They do so by analyzing the ethical conditions of self-narration: “giving an account of oneself.” This notion suggests that the linguistic structure of speaking for ourselves, speaking as an “I,” is intertwined with the question of taking responsibility (for the self-narration at stake). They then go on to explain that “I”—in the linguistic as well as in the existential and social sense of the term—cannot *be* if no conditions of address are given. If I am always already interwoven with other subjects—subjects I need to address myself to, and to whom I respond when they address themselves to me—then my existence is not conceivable without the very possibility of interdependent acts of addressing. Through their reading of Adriana Cavarero’s *Relating Narratives*, they claim that an “I” who is not in relation to a “you” would lose its very meaning—linguistically as well as socially. As Butler explains:

For Cavarero, the “I” encounters not only this or that attribute of the other, but the fact of this other as fundamentally exposed, visible, seen, existing in a bodily way and of necessity in a domain of appearance. *This* exposure that I am constitutes, as it were, my singularity. I cannot will it away, for it is a feature of my very corporeality and, in this sense, of my life. (2005, 33; emphasis in original)

In this sense, address is nothing less than a condition for survival,¹¹ which is why Butler writes: “the scene of address can and should provide a sustaining condition for ethical deliberation, judgment, and conduct” (49). In other words, one must reflect under which conditions, both intersubjective and institutional, *address* takes place or should take place. Thus, what Butler names a “scene” of address offers a possibility to reflect on the place and

⁸ For the implications of this, see Derrida’s reading of Husserlian phenomenology in *The Voice and the Phenomenon* (2011).

⁹ The word “function” risks suggesting that language can be operationalized according to an autonomous will.

¹⁰ Hence, I do not claim that this is the only or the most important function of language as such. It is sufficient for me to point out one aspect that is particularly relevant in the context outlined here.

¹¹ Linking together Lisa Guenther’s (2013) work on solitary confinement to the notion of address as a question of survival could offer a useful starting point to combine deconstructivist approaches to language with a critical phenomenological methodology. The claim that the situation of prisoners in solitary confinement must be understood as a kind of death could then be translated into the strict necessity of a possibility to address oneself to others.

time in which addressing occurs. Scenes of address are embodied and situated. Address is fostered under certain material conditions and rendered difficult under others.

Accordingly, it follows that comprehending address merely as an intersubjective and/or ethically motivated interaction between at least two individual subjects would be insufficient. Butler has pointed out on many occasions that modes of address can include scenes of violent institutional interpellation exemplified, for instance, in the paradigmatic illustration of a police officer hailing an individual on the street (1997, 106–31). Indeed, as Butler underlines in an interview given to *The New York Times* on the vital necessity of the Black Lives Matter protests, there are various *modes* of address, some of which have larger political relevance than others.

Sometimes a mode of address is quite simply a way of speaking to or about someone. But a mode of address may also describe a general way of approaching another such that one presumes who the other is, even the meaning and value of their existence . . . We make such assumptions all the time about who that other is when we hail someone on the street (or we do not hail them). That is someone I greet; the other is someone I avoid. That other may well be someone whose very existence makes me cross to the other side of the road.

In the context of anti-black racism, “presuming who the other is” and addressing them as such, implies:

[figuring] black people through a certain lens and filter, one that can quite easily construe a black person, or another racial minority, who is walking toward us as someone who is potentially, or actually, threatening, or is considered, in his very being, a threat. (Butler and Yancy 2015)

Therefore, rather than hastily jumping to the conclusion that address is always already ethical, Butler invites us to reflect on the various existing *modes* of address and on the material, historical, and social situations in which these addresses occur.

In “Violence, Nonviolence,” Butler (2015b) questions the mode of address adopted by Jean-Paul Sartre in his preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. Butler asks, notably: “To whom is this preface written?” (171). They soon offer their own answer by showing how Sartre’s words are directed at “white brethren” only (172). Sartre invites white readers to listen to something that has in fact not been addressed to them. By doing so, Butler states, Sartre is establishing a way of “acting upon that reader, positioning him outside the circle and establishing that peripheral status as an epistemological requirement for understanding the condition of colonization” (174). Sartre seems to claim that his white fellows have been excluded from the scene of address. He attempts, thus, to reclaim that same space. Butler writes:

When Sartre effectively says “‘You’ are not the intended reader of this text,” he constitutes the group who ought to undergo the deconstitution

of their privilege; in addressing them, however, he does not deconstitute them, but rather constitutes them anew. (2015b, 176)

By striving to broaden the scope of Fanon's scene of address, Sartre not only appears to identify his peer group with the colonized that is usually erased from this very scene, he also reinstalls the power of his very group by returning to them the privilege of the "always already addressed." Even if a further deconstruction of this Butlerian analysis is beyond the scope of this paper,¹² it should now be clear that the mode of address inscribed into articulated language always echoes and is inscribed in various, complex power structures.

VI. TRANSFORMING DESCRIPTION, DESCRIBING TRANSFORMATION

I would now like to return to the central methodological focus of this paper: the contention that taking seriously the structure of language as address demands a fundamental reconceptualization of the phenomenological method of description. Admittedly, this constitutes a tall order. And if it can, under what specific conditions does the theoretical reconfiguration of phenomenological description become possible? As should have become clear, such a questioning is more than an abstract philosophical problem. It directly relates to critical inquiries on the discursive as well as material exclusionary effects of specific descriptions.

However, as mentioned earlier, an investigation of the transformative potential of descriptions informed by deconstruction must be attentive to both political and structural aspects of language. Language always happens with a structural lack of control. Thus, the goal of reconceptualizing phenomenology's method of description in light of deconstructivist insights cannot only consider what description should and can do. It also requires that we take into consideration what description does and *undoes*—specifically, we need to recognize that whoever describes can never fully regulate or master language. The question remains, however, how such a conception of language can inform the method of critical phenomenological description? And conversely, how can such a renewed critical descriptive phenomenological project help to carve out new nuances in deconstruction?

Attentive phenomenological readers might think of the influence of Emmanuel Levinas's (1979) philosophy and, in particular, of his notion of the *face* that calls for a response. In fact, within the framework of Levinasian thought, the face can be understood as a gesture of address that falls together with an ethical imperative for responsiveness.¹³

¹² Such a detailed reading of this text would require further investigation into Butler's (2015b) own reading of Fanon, especially with regards to what they conceptualize as Fanon's self-address. See also Eyo Ewara's (2020) problematization of this notion in Butler's text.

¹³ I hereby do not refer to Levinas as a phenomenologist but as a philosopher who has extensively engaged with phenomenology. I would justify this distinction as a gesture of taking Levinas's own suspicion with regard to quick usages of the term "phenomenon" seriously. In his understanding, the face, that is, the

Derrida expressed skepticism towards some of Levinas's reflections in *Totality and Infinity*, as he judged the ethical notion of the face to be pre-linguistic (1978, 92).¹⁴ Nonetheless, I would argue that linking Levinasian ethics to deconstructivist conceptions of language as address opens up new and interesting theoretical possibilities. While Levinas does not explicitly thematize the salient political and social implications of the notion of address, his thought still holds promising insights for the project of establishing a dialogue between (critical) phenomenology and deconstruction. Both movements, for instance, connect in their foundational aim of uncovering the hidden meanings and potential in classical authors's works.¹⁵ But how can such a dialogue be achieved? The question of if and how the descriptive method can include deconstructivist conceptions of address remains.

My suggestion here is that if language is confronting us with the limits of what we can actively and consciously do with it, then completely reducing it to a methodological tool of expression must remain impossible. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Butler (1988) refers directly to the theme of an expression of a given content in phenomenology. Interestingly, they connect this topic back to the question of gender: "There is, in my view, nothing about femaleness that is waiting to be expressed; there is, on the other hand, a good deal about the diverse experiences of women that is being expressed and still needs to be expressed" (530–31). At first glance, this statement seems to suggest the necessity of broadening the scope of experiences to be described in critical phenomenology. However, Butler also adds: "caution is needed with respect to that theoretical language, for it does not simply report a pre-linguistic experience, but constructs that experience as well as the limits of its analysis" (531).¹⁶

If language "constructs" experience, then linguistic articulation cannot be reduced to a tool of expression of a given state or situation. In fact, if we can agree with the Butlerian claim that experience itself is formed through language, then we might have to admit that

Other, cannot be reduced to a phenomenon. See, for instance, the following passage, which explicitly refers to the phenomenological method of description:

I do not know if one can speak of a "phenomenology" of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears . . . I think rather that access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! (Levinas 1985, 85)

¹⁴ On this point, see Carla Schriever (2018, 71–72).

¹⁵ Take, again, Lisa Guenther's (2013) work on solitary confinement, in which Levinas's work serves as its constitutive grounds.

¹⁶ Note that by referring to the constructive character of language, Butler does not imply that nothing exists outside of language. Rather, they indicate that we do not have an access to the world, which would not be mediated through language. See Butler's reflection on the relationship between body, language and description (2015b, 20–22).

taking descriptive articulations to be expressions able to simply capture an already-set reality is theoretically insufficient. By extension, it follows that we may at times even lack the words to provide a complete account of the very analysis we undertake. At the same time, however, characterizing the position of the describing subject as one of “insufficiency” undervalues both the depth of Butler’s account of language as well as the importance of descriptive work. For Butler, the point is not that language is insufficient, nor that our grasp of it is lacking; rather, their contention is that language can be conceived of as *transformative*. It “constructs” experience and shapes the world we live in.

If this is the case, then we can finally assume that there are ways in which descriptions, as acts of linguistic articulation, are in themselves transformative and even creative. However, this transformation would be the effect of an encounter. Transformative descriptions would need to be understood as a collective act, as a multiple structure of address belonging to more than one (if they belong to someone at all). As Butler writes, “categories and descriptions” are a part of the world we live in “before we start to sort them critically and endeavor to change or make them on our own” (2016, 24). In other words, our descriptions are embedded in multiple descriptions that have preceded us, only some of which have been directly addressed to us.

By making explicit that, for example, the body one describes is not a given entity with contingent experiences that allow for direct linguistic transposition, but that in its complexity it always already refers to a historicity and to power structures that transcend our own subjectivities, Butler displaces and decentralizes the subject. They radically rethink the subject in its constitution through concrete power relations. In the last few years, furthermore, Butler (2015a, 2022) has increasingly highlighted this embodied dimension of experience, thereby, again, explicitly referring to phenomenological authors and scholarship. These recent layers of their work amount to highly relevant starting points for a dialogue with critical phenomenology and should be included in future discussions of Butler’s readings of phenomenology as well as its limits.¹⁷

Critical phenomenologists, too, have been attentive to the concrete conditions of access to phenomenological descriptions. Take, for instance, Sara Ahmed’s article, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” in which she analyzes Husserl’s situatedness as a philosopher starting with the physical position from which he performed most of his phenomenological work: the calm, sheltered setting of the philosopher’s desk. Husserl’s “familiar world begins with the writing table, which is in ‘the room’. . . . *It is from here that the world unfolds*” (2007, 151; emphasis in original). Ahmed then opposes the starting point of Husserl’s descriptions to that of Fanon.

Following Fanon, Ahmed thematizes how racialization modifies the ways subjects perceive, are perceived, and describe these experiences of both self and outside perception. In Fanon’s descriptions, the habitual world is full of risks of oppressive, discriminatory, and violent encounters. Being racialized fundamentally influences, if not determines,

¹⁷ These discussions are often centered around the relationship between phenomenological concepts of embodiment and performativity. On expressivity, see Sylvia Stoller (2010); on habit formation, see Maren Wehrle (2021).

the relationship to the world: habitual movements, gestures, “the being-at-ease” or lack thereof, to take up a term by Mariana Ortega (2016), with which a space is inhabited—such conditions of experience depend on the histories inscribed onto bodies. As Ahmed makes clear, “bodies are shaped by histories of colonialism, which makes the world ‘white,’ a world that is inherited, or which is already given before the point of an individual’s arrival” (Ahmed 2007, 153). This is why “race then does become a social as well as a bodily given, or what we *receive* from others as an inheritance of this history” (154; emphasis in original). Race, as a both socially and bodily given, fundamentally changes the ways in which bodies orient in space: “*we inherit the reachability of some objects*, those that are ‘given’ to us, or at least made available to us, within the ‘what’ that is around” (154; emphasis in original). In other words, the surrounding that both frames and constitutes the experiences to be phenomenologically described, is inseparable from the (racial) situatedness of the describing subject. As Ahmed argues, when Husserl faced persecution as a Jewish-born person during the national-socialist regime,

he literally lost his chair: he temporarily lost the public recognition of his place as a philosopher. It is no accident that such recognition is symbolically given through an item of furniture: to take up space is to be given an object, which allows the body to be occupied in a certain way.
(160)

It is in this sensitivity to the tangible and embodied articulations of power or lack of power that the force of critical phenomenological descriptions lies. After all, Ahmed’s own attentive work towards uncovering the underlying conditions of Husserl’s phenomenological descriptions takes place *through* critical phenomenological descriptions.¹⁸ With this in mind, I would now like to return to my leading question: *can we achieve political and social transformation through description?*

As should now be clear, I propose taking the complex functioning of language as address seriously, against the reduction of language to a tool of representation or expression of already given experiences. Understood in such a way, description as a mode of addressing oneself to others then becomes a way of inscribing oneself into the world, of leaving a trace in it, albeit one which may initially appear blurry, nearly invisible. Searching for the transformative potential of description thus can open up new perspectives on what a distinctly *critical* phenomenological practice might look like. In this vein, Guenther has hinted at the profound modification the critical phenomenological task entails by referring to Audre Lorde’s intersectional feminist poetry. “For Lorde, poetry is both a descriptive practice of illuminating and articulating one’s experience and also a transformative practice of changing the conditions under which one’s experience unfolds” (Guenther 2019, 14). This quotation is significant for several reasons. Guenther’s claim that practices, which are *both* descriptive and transformative can help change the very *conditions* of the experiences to be

¹⁸ In fact, Ahmed herself even refers to a scene of interpellation, which she identifies in Althusser’s work (2007, 157–58). It is the same scene that Butler offers an in-depth analysis of in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997, 106–31).

described and transformed. Guenther's statement helpfully draws out the methodological shifts implied in our endeavor. Following her reasoning, I suggest that we must aim at opening up a space for such descriptive and transformative practices to come forth—not only for ourselves, but also for others we are irreducibly linked to. Understood in this way, a methodological rearticulation of phenomenological description not only implies reflecting on the conditions under which our experiences and our phenomenological descriptions of them take place; it also demands that we reflect on the ways in which the descriptions of those experiences can render other descriptions possible, or risk to foreclose them. As I have shown, philosophical work on conditions of address requires a careful exposition of the power relations structuring these modes of address.

Again, taking critical phenomenology together with what I have called deconstructivist approaches to language can prove helpful here. The following questions should, further, provide some initial hints as to how reflecting on the mode of address in one's descriptions can critically inform the phenomenological method. Such questions that critical phenomenologists could ask include: How am I to describe in order to give space to other descriptions? What mode of address do I employ within my descriptions? Does my description foster other descriptions to come forth? If so, by whom? What language risks excluding specific groups from responding to my description, by adding descriptions of their own experiences? What are the limits of what I can describe? And finally, who are my descriptions addressed to?

Hence, taking the power of a socially structured language into account demands that we strive for an inclusion of others within this transformational linguistic process. Such an approach goes beyond a sheer broadening of the scope of experiences to be described. Rather, it is to be conceived of as a transformation of the method itself, which entails a transformation of the social effects investigated by phenomenological descriptions. In addition, critical phenomenological reflection on the method of description should include a conceptualization of how each linguistic act is shaped by a social linguistic environment. For instance, how can I give space to the encounters with others that rendered my descriptions possible in the first place? Hence, for one's own descriptions, describing in a critical way might require *describing the process of description itself*—including others we have learned from and the limits one sees oneself confronted with during that process. Such an additional methodological step is needed to prevent the critical phenomenological descriptive method from reflecting only the experience of the isolated philosopher at his writing table, as Sara Ahmed would have it. Rather, our descriptions should aim at showing how every reflection is based on our fundamental intertwinement with others.¹⁹

I argue that approaching the method of description through the methodological insights developed in this paper can help us see how description must not function as a mere summary of a problematic status quo but, rather, that it carries in it the opportunity to transform the situations described by phenomenologists from a critical perspective in

¹⁹ I thank Alia Al-Saji for her response to my question as to whom our phenomenological descriptions are addressed. By addressing her descriptions “to other racialized folks,” she showed a way that critical phenomenological description can offer tools to oppose academic philosophical practices of exclusion and white privilege.

socially and politically desirable ways. In other words, critical phenomenology needs, as Alia Al-Saji has put it, “description—which listens, checks, and questions”; description “so attentive that it can become transformative” (2017, 152).

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

My aim in this paper has been to examine whether the phenomenological method of description can be understood as transformative on a social and political level, and thus, able to go beyond the careful observation and diagnosis of the ways in which society needs to be changed. I have drawn on critical phenomenological approaches, which propose to use the phenomenological method of description for the goal of social transformation. Following contemporary debates in critical phenomenology, I have argued that phenomenology must not only broaden the scope of experiences to be described, including experiences of sexist and racist discrimination, but it must strive to transform its own method to become apt at serving critical causes. For such a methodological shift to take place, I have stressed the theoretical advantages of turning to deconstruction and to its specific conception of language as socially constituted and transformative. The concept of language as a structure of address seems particularly suited to support critical attempts aiming at the modification of the method of description. Following both Derrida and Butler, I discussed language not as an expressive tool used to translate given experience, but rather, as something which shapes the experiences described. I have argued that the transformative potential of language is due to its inherently social character, in the way that articulated language is always already addressed to others that shape the experience at stake. However, it should be clear from my argument that such multiple structures of address are neither exclusively nor primarily set on an intersubjective level; they should be understood to reflect concrete material power structures. Hence, I have argued that in order to foster change that is desirable from a critical perspective, one needs to work on the conditions of address. Such a deconstructivist approach sheds new light on the method of description and is thus apt at informing and broadening critical phenomenological approaches. Description can function as a collective tool of critical social transformation if it includes a reflection on the mode of address it employs, as well as on the methodological ways to attest to how others have participated in the description one has delivered. Hence, description, as linguistic articulation, can not only prove transformative but, if embedded in an attentive consideration of its own social character, appropriate for fostering critique. In consequence, I argue that linking critical phenomenology to deconstruction opens up new theoretical avenues for such practices of transformative description.

Acknowledgments

This paper was a starting point for many lively discussions with colleagues whose help is gratefully acknowledged. Special thanks for their detailed comments go to Dylan Trigg (University of Vienna) and Mihnea Chiujea (Freie Universität Berlin). This research was supported by the FWF Austrian Science Fund and is part of the FWF project P33428.

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