PHENOMENOLOGICAL VARIATION AND INTERCULTURAL TRANSFORMATION: MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHENOMENOLOGY AND ABU-LUGHOD'S ETHNOGRAPHY IN DIALOGUE

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ABSTRACT. This paper develops phenomenological resources for understanding the nature of intercultural understanding, drawing on the work of Merleau-Ponty in dialogue with feminist anthropologist Abu-Lughod. Part One criticizes Western framings of non-Western violence against women that render the experience of non-Western Others inaccessible. Part Two discusses how certain strains in Western feminism reinforce some of these problematic framings. Part Three offers a phenomenological account of our experience of other persons, and Part Four argues that intercultural understanding takes the form of a "variation" between one's own and the other's experience. Part Five explores the implications of this phenomenology of cross-cultural understanding for interpreting dynamic cultural transformations, and the politics of violence against women, in an interconnected and unequal world.

Keywords: Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Lila Abu-Lughod; critical phenomenology; feminist anthropology; multiculturalism

This paper develops phenomenological resources for thinking about the nature and demands of intercultural understanding in a world shaped by the legacy of Western colonialism and imperialism, drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's lectures and essays on phenomenology and the social sciences from 1960 and 1961 in dialogue with Lila Abu-Lughod's ethnographic study of a particular Bedouin community in Egypt in the late 1970s. The motivation for this paper is twofold. First, it aims to criticize framings in Western popular consciousness, and also in certain academic discourses in the West, of what are seen as abhorrent "non-Western"

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(and often "Islamic") practices, particular with regard to the treatment of women. Second, it aims to phenomenologically describe the lived experience of cross-cultural understanding in an increasingly interconnected world deeply shaped, in Alia Al-Saji's words, by "colonial durations," and in so doing to begin to transform our possibilities for seeing and encountering one another in more honest and just ways.[1]

I begin, in Part One, with an account of a so-called 'honor' killing that took place in Berlin in 2005, and explore the manner in which 'honor killings' have become potent symbols in the Western cultural imagination and in human rights discourses of Islam's violent oppression of women, despite having no basis or justification in Islamic religion. Part Two engages with Merleau-Ponty alongside postcolonial feminist scholars in order to critically assess how political and academic debates between "universalism" and "cultural relativism" have shaped understanding of the oppression of women in non-Western cultures in both epistemologically and politically problematic ways. I argue that phenomenology offers us a better route into making sense of the lived experience of intercultural understanding that does justice to the genuine insights of both universalism and cultural relativism while avoiding the "pitfalls" of each. In Part Three, I offer a phenomenological account of our experience of other persons, drawing on examples from Abu-Lughod's ethnography of a Bedouin "honor" society in the Western desert of Egypt.

Part Four—the principal focus of the paper—argues that intercultural understanding takes the form of a phenomenological "variation" of the other's experience in light of one's own and one's own experience in light of the other—a practice that simultaneously enables the other to appear in her complex humanity rather than as an exotified stereotype, and the self to transform its conception of its own self and cultural world. In Part Five, I explore the implications of this phenomenology of cross-cultural understanding for interpreting the nature of dynamic cultural transformation in a deeply interconnected and unequal contemporary world—dynamic cultural

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[1] Alia Al-Saji, "SPEP Co-Director's Address: Hesitation as Philosophical Method—Travel Bans, Colonial Durations, and the Affective Weight of the Past," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 32, no. 3, 2018, 331-59. For arguments concerning the transformative nature of phenomenological description, see Gayle Salamon, "What's Critical About Critical Phenomenology?" *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology*, 1, 2018, 8-17; Laura McMahon, "Phenomenology as First-Order Perception: Speech, Vision, and Reflection in Merleau-Ponty," in Kirsten Jacobson and John Russon (eds.), *Perception and Its Development in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 308-37; and John Russon, "Phenomenological Description and Artistic Expression," in Peter Costello and Licia Carlson (eds.), *Phenomenology and the Arts* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 3-24.

transformation at the heart of recent "honor" crimes. I conclude with some suggestions regarding not only the contributions that phenomenology can offer intercultural understanding in the contemporary world, but also the imperative for phenomenological research to engage with social scientific research into the diversity of human experience in a multicultural world.

1. An "honor" killing in Berlin

On February 7, 2005, 23-year-old Hatun "Aynur" Sürücü was shot by her 18-year-old brother Ayhan Sürücü at a bus stop near the Berlin apartment where she lived with her six-year-old son, Can. The nine Sürücü siblings were born and raised in Berlin to ethnically-Kurdish parents from Turkey. At the age of sixteen, Aynur was married to a cousin in Turkey (a not uncommon practice among the Turkish community in Germany), before fleeing the latter's abuse and returning, pregnant, to her parental home.[2] When living with her infant son in the Sürücü's crowded apartment became untenable—in large part due to the verbal abuse suffered by three of her brothers, and the likely sexual abuse suffered by one of them—Aynur availed herself of German social services to move into a home for young mothers and eventually into her own apartment, and to enroll in college to become an electrician. During these years, Aynur participated in modern German youth culture, making close friends, dating young men and developing a significant romantic relationship with one of them, and going to dance clubs and parties. She also stopped wearing the *hijab* customary for girls and women in her Turkish Muslim community. Despite her three brothers' ongoing abuse and threats, she worked to maintain a relationship with her family of origin, who doted upon her son Can. After an argument one evening about her new lifestyle between Aynur and her brother Ayhun, Ayhun shot and killed his older sister in an attack that was evidently pre-meditated.

Thanks in large part to the murder being labeled an "honor" killing, this story became a national sensation in Germany in the following weeks after Ayhun was arrested for the murder, along with brothers Alparslan and Mutlu as accomplices (Ayhun, a minor who confessed to the murder, was imprisoned for ten years; the older brothers were acquitted due to lack of evidence first in Berlin and

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[2] For a discussion of the historical and socio-economic situation of Turkish immigrants to Germany in general, and of the practice of arranged marriages between daughters and relatives back in Turkey in particular, see Katherine Pratt Ewing, *Stolen Honor: Stigmatizing Muslim Men in Berlin* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008), 15-19 and *passim.*

later in Istanbul).[3] "Honor" killing names the phenomenon of a member of a woman's family of origin—in many cases a brother—murdering the woman for bringing dishonor upon the family through real or perceived sexual impropriety according to strict norms of marriage and patriliny. Though they have historically occurred among communities from non-Muslim regions of the world, "honor" killings are most often associated in popular reporting and human rights discourses with Muslim communities originating in the Middle East, Northern Africa, and Central and Southeast Asia.[4]

It has often been observed that the veil worn by many Muslim women has come in the popular Western imagination to symbolize both the "backwardness" of the Islamic world and its perceived oppression of Muslim women.[5] Something similar can be said of "honor" killings. Though "honor" killings in fact have nothing to do with the religion of Islam but rather arise (and rarely) from certain mores within Arabian patrilineal communities that predate Islam, the "honor" killing has become in the popular Western imagination a potent symbol for the barbarity of Islamic "cultural traditions," a barbarity that is seen as particularly detrimental to Muslim women.[6] Indeed, German-American anthropologist Katherine Ewing notes the manner in which headlines in German newspapers interchangeably attributed the motive for Aynur Sürücü murder to her removal of her headscarf and to her supposedly sexually licentious lifestyle, rhetorically reinforcing stereotypical links between violence against Muslim women—seen in its extreme in the "honor" crime—and Islamic religious traditions, symbolically encapsulated in the veiling of women.[7] Such stereotypical links between the oppression of women and Islamic religious traditions are not merely confined to tabloid media representations and

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[3] Patrick Kingsley, "Turkey Acquits 2 Men in Berlin 'Honor Killing' of Their Sister," *The New York Times,* May 30, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/30/world/europe/turkey-germany-honor-killing.html. Accessed January 17, 2021. See also Ewing, *Stolen Honor*, 189.

[4] For example, "honor" killings have taken place in Hindu regions of rural India. See Diane E. King, *Kurdistan on the Global Stage: Kinship, Land, and Community in Iraq* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2014), 134 and Ewing, *Stolen Honor*, 166.

[5] See, for example, Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Harvard: Harvard UP, 2013), 35-46 and Alia Al-Saji, "The Racialization of Muslim Veils: A Philosophical Analysis," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 36.8, 2010, 875-902. See also Frantz Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled," *A Dying Colonialism*, transl. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 35-68. I have explored this issue in the context of how Algerian women revolutionaries deployed "traditional" and modern clothing in their resistance to French occupation in "Religion, Multiculturalism, and Phenomenology as a Critical Practice: Lessons from the Algerian War of Independence," *Puncta*, 3.1, 2020, 1-26.

[6] Diane King, "The Personal is Patrilineal: *Namus* as Sovereignty," in Diane King (ed.), *Middle Eastern Belongings* (London: Routledge, 2010).

[7] Ewing, 156.

the Western popular imagination. They also inform reports by human rights organizations. For example, Amnesty International's 2012 "Culture of Discrimination: A Fact Sheet on 'Honor' Killings," though it does not explicitly call honor killing an Islamic phenomenon, uses exclusively examples from Islamic contexts while claiming that "[s]o-called honor killings are based on the deeply rooted belief that women are objects and commodities, not human beings entitled to dignity and rights equal to those of men. Women are considered the property of male relatives and are seen to embody the honor of the men to whom they 'belong.'"[8]

Framing the murder of Aynur Sürücü as a barbaric "Islamic" crime is problematic in two, complementary manners. First, and most importantly, it renders the singular, complex reality of a young woman invisible, burying this lived experience under exotified stereotypes.[9] Ambiguously entitled *A Regular Woman*, even a recent cinematic treatment of Sürücü's story that seeks to humanize the young woman in her concrete experiences, interests, and relationships, casts the murder and the events surrounding it as a violent clash between a recalcitrant, traditional religious culture stuck in a barbaric past, and a flexible, modern world on a path of equality and progress.[10] "Good" Muslims in the film are ones who have assimilated to majority Western culture in their dress, speech, gender relations, and employment, a choice presented as open to all and happily embraced by Sürücü, but refused by the "bad" Muslims exemplified by Sürücü's family of origin and the fundamentalist Imam presented as guiding her brothers violently sexist views and actions. As one online review (uncritically) puts it, *A Regular Woman* "doesn't leave much doubt that Islam and Muslim cultures, in particular, have some serious civilizing to do if they want to wholly join the 21st century."[11] Despite the film's humanizing ambitions, then, the cultural personal and complexity of Sürücü's own lived experience as a women of Turkish heritage living in Germany at the turn of the 21st century is, once again, obscured by stereotypes—stereotypes that, as we shall see further shortly, have deep roots in the history of colonialism. The second, complementary problem with the framing of Sürücü's murder as a barbaric

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[8] "Culture of Discrimination: A Fact Sheet on 'Honor' Killings," *Amnesty International*, 2012. Retrieved 17 January, 2021. See also Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 116.

[9] On the manner in which cultural imperialism simultaneously stereotypes and renders invisible, see Iris Marion Young, "The Five Faces of Oppression," in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), 39-65, 58-61. See also Al-Saji, "The Racialization of Muslim Veils," 881-82.

[10] *A Regular Woman*, dir. Sherry Hormann (Vincent TV, 2019).

[11] Roger Moore, "'A Regular Woman' Narrates the Horrors of her 'Honor Killing,'" *Movie Nation*, June 22, 2020. https://rogersmovienation.com/2020/06/22/movie-review-a-regular-woman-narrates-the-horrors-of-her-honor-killing/.

"Islamic" crime is that, in dehumanizing the "Other," the "Westerner" is enabled to remain complacent and self-satisfied in her own modern, secular "normality," such that she can fail to critically interrogate both abiding problems at play in modern "Western" cultures like Germany and the United States, and the deep historical connections between European colonialism and American imperialism, on the one side, and "breakdowns" in traditional cultures thanks to modern colonialism and its legacies, on the other side. In what follows, we shall see a prominent manner in which these dual problems are at play in some contemporary discourses of Western feminism, and introduce Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological method as a route out of some of these difficulties.

2. Universalism, cultural relativism, and the promise of phenomenology

Framed as results of "a culture of discrimination," in the words of Amnesty International, or as a "clash of civilizations," in Samuel Huntington's infamous words, the status of phenomena such as "honor" killings is often debated in Western contexts along the competing lines of "universalism" and "cultural relativism."[12] Broadly speaking, universalism is the view that, as feminist philosopher Shannon Hoff critically characterizes it, "there are universal or transcultural values that are indifferent to the particularities of context and can simply be transferred to other sociocultural worlds."[13] For example, "universal human rights" are understood to belong to all human individuals, regardless of historical or cultural circumstance. Epistemologically, universalism is an example of what Merleau-Ponty calls "logicism" in his lecture "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man" (1961): it takes scientific and moral thinking to take place in a "special sphere, the place of thought in the strict sense of the term, where the philosopher may get in touch with an intrinsic truth."[14] In feminist philosophy, we find prominent examples of universalism in Susan Moller Okin's "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" (1999) and Martha Nussbaum's "Women and Cultural Universals" (1999), which argue for

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[12] See Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993) (https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1993-06-01/clash-civilizations), and Edward Said's critical response, "The Clash of Ignorance," *The Nation*, October 4, 2001. (https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/clash-ignorance/).

[13] Shannon Hoff, "Hegel and the Possibility of Intercultural Criticism," in Susan Dodd and Neil G. Robertson (eds.), *Hegel and Canada: Unity of Opposites?* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 342-67, 342.

[14] "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man," transl. John Wild, in James M. Edie (ed.), *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1964), 43-95, 48. Hereafter cited as PSM. See also Merleau-Ponty's sustained criticism of rationalism or "intellectualism" throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, transl. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012). Hereafter cited as PP.

universal standards—Kantian rights and Aristotelian capabilities, respectively—according to which we can morally criticize the oppressive practices of any given culture.[15] From a universalist perspective, oppressive "cultural practices" such as honor killings must be unequivocally condemned—and certainly never politically protected under claims to cultural "group rights"—on pains of being guilty of ethnocentrism; as Okin argues, "[w]hen a woman from a more patriarchal culture comes to the United States (or some other Western, basically liberal state), why should she be less protected from male violence than other women are?"[16]

Cultural relativism, by contrast, is the view that so-called "universal" values in fact arise in specific historical and cultural contexts. Universal human rights can (at least in their formulation in Western contexts and international bodies in a Western-centric world) be traced back to principles articulated in the European Enlightenment, which holds tacitly individualistic and rationalistic premises concerning the nature and dignity of the human being.[17] Epistemologically, cultural relativism is an example of what Merleau-Ponty calls "sociologism" (and interchangeably "psychologism" and "historicism") in "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man," which is the position that all human thought and values is "conditioned by physiological, psychological, sociological, and historical causes," and thus cannot proclaim any access to universal truth.[18] The political consequences of such a view are that Western values masquerading as universal standards of judgment should not be used to morally assess the practices of non-Western cultures; rather, cultural practices must be assessed on their own internal terms. Now, cultural relativism has a rich history in twentieth-century anthropology, which did an enormous amount to challenge the Western-centrism at play in both the history of European colonialism and the history of anthropology itself.[19] But in its vicious form in

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[15] Susan Moller Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" in Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha Nussbaum (eds.), *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 7-26; Martha Nussbaum, "Women and Cultural Universals," *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 29-54. For a helpful criticism of the position of universalism in feminist philosophy, see Alison M. Jaggar, "'Saving Amina': Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue," *Ethics and International Affairs*, 19.3, 2005, 55-75, 57-59.

[16] "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?," 20.

[17] On the Western and Christian roots of "universal human rights," see John Russon, *Sites of Exposure: Art, Politics, and the Nature of Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2017), 81-86, 88-89, 91-92. For a criticism of the individualistic nature of modern rights, see Shannon Hoff, "Rights and Worlds: On the Political Significance of Belonging," *Philosophical Forum*, 45.4, 2014, 355-73.

[18] PSM 48. Compare to Merleau-Ponty's sustained criticism of empiricism throughout PP.

[19] For a defense of cultural relativism against common misunderstandings and criticisms, see Clifford Geertz, "Anti Anti-Relativism," *American Anthropologist*, 86.2, 1984, 263-78. For an appreciation of the contributions of cultural relativism that also considers some of the inherent contradictions of its own universal claims, see Elvin Hatch, "The Good Side of Relativism," *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 53, 1997, 371-81.

political and academic debates concerning how to respond to the oppression of women in non-Western cultures, it can take the form of a moral relativism that holds that understanding and criticism across cultural lines is impossible—a position that seems simply to abandon women to their terrible fates.[20]

Exemplars of both universalists and cultural relativists have demonstrated deeply impoverished visions of culture in their arguments. When a universalist like Okin accuses non-Western cultures of being "bad for women"—elaborating on often sensationalist examples to illustrate her point—she displays an attitude of what feminist philosopher Uma Narayan calls "death by culture": she assumes that "culture" can be named as a sufficient explanation for the oppression and violent deaths of women in non-Western contexts.[21] Ascribing to (non-Western) "culture" such explanatory power offers a vision of (non-Western) cultures as monolithic and ahistorical, while at the same time tacitly presuming that the Western cultures of the universalist authors are in fact a-cultural, dynamic, and historically emancipated (at least in comparison to their non-Western counterparts).[22] Such impoverished visions of non-Western cultures coupled with a "West is best" attitude has deep roots in the history of colonialism, and has been more recently used to justify recent American military interventions in the Middle East, such as the invasion of Afghanistan following the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.[23]

Despite its roots in a rich appreciation for the complexities of non-Western cultures on the part of anthropologists, vicious forms of cultural relativism can also hold visions of non-Western cultures as simple, homogeneous, and static. As Nussbaum argues, in their calls to preserve certain non-Western cultural "traditions" from Western judgment and influence, (vicious) cultural relativists often oversimplify the culture in question (speaking, for example, about "Indian culture"), ignoring the vast diversity *within* cultures as well as competing internal interpretations of its

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[20] See Nussbaum, "Women and Cultural Universals," 35-36.

[21] Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminisms* (New York: Routledge, 1997), Chapter Three. For related arguments, see Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 30-34, 41, 127; Abu-Lughod, "Writing Against Culture," *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1986), 137-62; and Leti Volpp, "Blaming Culture for Bad Behavior," *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities*, 12.1, 2000, 89-116. Nussbaum, the other feminist philosopher offered as an example of a universalist above, cannot be said to be guilty of this charge; see "Women and Cultural Universals," 36-37 and "A Plea for Difficulty," in Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha Nussbaum (eds.), *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 105-14.

[22] Narayan, 50.

[23] Such justifications were used both by Republican politicians and mainstream American feminists. See Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Chapter One and Janine Rich, "'Saving' Muslim Women: Feminism, U.S. Policy and the War on Terror," *International Affairs* Review, Fall 2014.

"traditions" across individuals and social groups and throughout history.[24] Furthermore, as Abu-Lughod argues, while "[c]ultural relativism is certainly an improvement on ethnocentrism and the racism, cultural imperialism, and imperiousness that underlie it; the problem is that it is too late not to interfere."[25]

I would like to suggest that the philosophical method of phenomenology offers a third route that is more epistemologically- and politically-sound than are either the extremes of universalism or cultural relativism when it comes to accounting for our lived experience of critically understanding others across cultural lines, and for attending to the richness and complexity of cultural existence. By inquiring into what our lived experience of understanding across cultural lines is actually like, phenomenological description articulates both the manners in which we are deeply shaped by our cultural and historical circumstances (as the relativist would have it), and the ways in which such shaping is lived not as a prison but as the source of our insight and agency (as the universalist would have it).[26] It is precisely *through* rather than *apart from* the resources afforded us by our cultural and historical circumstances—our languages, educations, religions, and so forth—that we are able to develop perspectives that can *go beyond* these cultural and historical circumstances.[27] Merleau-Ponty writes in "The Philosopher and Sociology":

> Since we are all hemmed in by history, it is up to us to understand that whatever truth we may have is to be gotten not in spite of but through our historical inherence. Superficially considered, our inherence destroys all truth; considered radically, it founds a new idea of truth.[28]

Accessing truth "through our historical inherence" requires that, in a lived phenomenological *epochē*, we be capable of suspending our ordinary naïve absorption in the world of our concerns so as to let unfamiliar kinds of truths show themselves. But to so suspend our ordinary absorption is, in Merleau-Ponty's words again, not "to deny the link which binds us to the physical, social, and cultural world…[but] on the contrary to *see* this link, to become conscious of it."[29] In what follows, I will argue that it is precisely through our encounter with others from the

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[24] "Women and Cultural Universals," 35-37.

[25] *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 40.

[26] See PP 93 on how my situated perspective is "a necessity I can use, but also one that does not imprison me."

[27] I have explored in detail the ways in which agency is always shaped by cultural circumstances in McMahon, "Religion, Multiculturalism, and Phenomenology as a Critical Practice."

[28] Merleau-Ponty, "The Philosopher and Sociology," *Signs*, transl. Richard C. McLeary (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1964), 98-113, 109. Hereafter cited as PS. See also PSM 82.

[29] PSM 49.

place of *their* lived experience that we are able to effect this kind of *epochē*.[30] Encounters with others—others who, as we shall see further, are at once deeply kin to us and insurmountably different from us—expand our understanding of human being-in-the-world beyond what we can learn from our own first-personal or familiar cultural experiences, in a manner that changes how we are able to understand ourselves. As Thomas Busch argues, "[s]elf-understanding and self-criticism depend upon an encounter with alterity."[31] At stake in this stance of self-criticism in dialogue with alterity is a de-centering and de-normalizing of one's own perspective; for the "Westerner," it is the holding open of space a kind of "philosophical hesitation," as Al-Saji says, or "ethnographic reserve," as Abu-Lughod says—a hesitation or reserve that might interrupt dominant discourses and make room for other, non-Western-centric historical experiences to show themselves, other voices to be heard.[32]

3. Phenomenology of intersubjectivity: The revelation of the other and the opacity of the self

What is the nature of our experience of other people? Moderns deeply influenced by the legacy of René Descartes are plagued with the specter of solipsism, in which the self is associated with the interior, thinking mind, and in which other selves in *their* interiority are rendered only dubiously accessible to me in mine. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, and especially in the chapters "The Body as Expression, and Speech" and "Others and the Human World," Merleau-Ponty systematically challenges Cartesian solipsism by describing the manner in which others reveal themselves both in their embodied behaviors and speech, and in the objects of the shared cultural landscape itself. Let us see how this embodied revelation of others takes place in concrete experience.

In his Second Meditation, Descartes analyses what he takes to be going on in the commonplace experience of looking out of his window and observing other human beings walking in the square below. He writes:

> [W]ere I perchance to look out my window and observe men crossing the square, I would ordinarily say I see the men themselves…But what do I see aside from hats and clothes, which could conceal automata? Yet I judge

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[30] Yuichi Sato makes a similar claim in "The Way of the Reduction via Anthropology: Husserl and Lévy-Bruhl, Merleau-Ponty and Lévi-Strauss," *Bulletin d'analyse phénoménologique*, X 1, 2014, 1-18.

[31] Thomas W. Busch, "Merleau-Ponty and the Circulation of Being," *Symposium*, 8.2, 2004, 313-24, 316.

[32] Al-Saji, "SPEP Co-Director's Address," especially 346-48; Abu-Lughod, "Ethnography's Values: An Afterward," *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 294.

them to be men. Thus what I thought I had seen with my eyes, I actually grasped solely with the faculty of judgment, which is in my mind.[33]

This interpretation bears little resemblance to what our perceptual experience of others is typically like in lived experience. Merleau-Ponty argues that to look at others in such an alienated way requires that we "establish an inhuman gaze," observing the actions of the other human being like the "actions of an insect."[34] To argue that the other's body in fact appears to perception no differently than an automaton is to describe a mode of looking we *can* adopt, but a mode of looking that is very strange indeed—Merleau-Ponty calls it "surreal."[35] Typically, our lived experience of other persons is a perceptual encounter with beings who are themselves meaningfully alive to the world in intelligible ways. The other's body is not given as a mere object but rather as a power of perception and movement, her consciousness not simply a private interiority but incarnated in her bodily activity itself. Merleau-Ponty's concept of *behavior* captures the manner in which the body is "a third genre of being between the pure subject and the object."[36] Our experience of others persons is the experience of meaningful behaviors— meaningful ways of being oriented towards the world that incarnate and reveal the subjectivity of the other in her movements, gestures, and speech.[37] There is, however, a central ambiguity at play in our experience of other persons: in Merleau-Ponty's words, we experience others as simultaneously "communications" and "solitudes."[38] On the one hand, the other's behaviors appear in our world as "miraculous extensions" of our own intentions: others' behaviors are legible to us as incarnating bodily possibilities of our own, and often call forth our own embodied participation, as when we follow with our eyes the other's extended finger as she points out something interesting in the landscape.[39] On the other hand, the embodied behavior of others presents a certain *opacity* that cannot be transcended: the other's experience gives itself *as* first-personal, and thus *as* an

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[33] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy,* transl. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 68.

[34] PP 378.

[35] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, transl. Alden Fisher (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1963), 167. Hereafter cited as SB.

[36] PP 366.

[37] I have explored the bodily and gestural basis of language and thought in more detail in McMahon, "Phenomenology as First-Order Perception."

[38] PP 376. I have explored this ambiguity in greater detail in "'Thinking According to Others': Expression, Intimacy, and the Passage of Time in Merleau-Ponty and Woolf," in Peter Costello and Licia Carlson (eds.), *Phenomenology and the Arts* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 193-218.

[39] PP 370. For an illuminating phenomenological study of pointing, see Eva-Maria Simms, "Egocentric Language and the Upheaval of Speech: A Merleau-Ponty Inspired Study of Language Acquisition," *Chiasmi International*, 12 2010, 287-309, 296-99. For a study of Merleau-Ponty's conception of "intercorporeality," see Scott L. Marratto, *The Intercorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on Subjectivity* (Albany: SUNY, 2012).

experience that I definitively cannot live for myself, and that I can interpret incorrectly, incompletely, or in a decontextualized manner.[40]

Consider the following description from Abu-Lughod's ethnography *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (1986). Here, Abu-Lughod describes the behavior of Mabrūka, a middle-aged woman of the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin tribe estranged from her husband, who had recently married a second wife. First, Mabrūka displayed attitudes of anger toward her husband and those associated with his second marriage in a number of ways. Abu-Lughod writes:

> Mabrūka's immediate response was to blame her brother-in-law for the decision, suspecting him of having encouraged his brother to take a second wife so the lineage could have more children. Although she had been close to his wife for fifteen years, she stopped visiting her household… When presented with the customary wedding gifts due the first wife, she threw them on the ground and refused to accept them until her sister-in-law begged her to do so… She justified her anger by the blame she placed on her brother-in-law, some material injustices, and violations of conventions in handling the second marriage. For example, she refused to accept the wedding gifts because they were not identical to those given the bride… She refused to attend the wedding because the new bride was not going to be brought into her household but would be set up in a house with her husband's brother—not customary procedure, as she pointed out to everyone. When I asked how she felt about the wedding, she remarked on these injustices and claimed that she was only angry because things were not being done correctly.[41]

Mabrūka's sentiments were not locked in the privacy of her own mind, but were expressed—were quite literally brought to life for all to see—in her gestures and words; as Merleau-Ponty writes, "I do not perceive the anger…as a psychological fact hidden behind the gesture, I read the anger in the gesture. The gesture does not make me *think* of anger, it is the anger itself."[42] As intended, Mabrūka's vocal criticisms of improper protocols regarding the wedding and living arrangements of the second wife, as well as her conspicuous absence at the wedding, brought her righteous indignation to life as a palpable presence in the community.

However, Mabrūka's indignant behaviors alone did not tell the whole story of her experience *vis-à-vis* her husband and his second marriage. The ongoing presence of contemporary and past others is anonymously embodied in the things of the

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[40] See PP 374 on "a lived truth of solipsism that cannot be transcended."

[41] Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, 190-91.

[42] PP 190.

cultural world itself: the customary wedding gifts signifying due status; the tents housing patrilineal lines according to deep-seated convention; the number of nights men customarily spend with their new brides before returning to the beds of their first wives.[43] Like the behaviors and gestures of others, the familiar things of the world—the sedimentation of the behaviors of innumerable past others into a shared *habitus*—call forth our behaviors in familiar and obvious ways, affording us routes for our activities that are meaningful for both ourselves and those with whom we share our world.[44] Contexts of meaning that are given as simply obvious to the insider can be unapparent to the outsider, rendering the latter's understanding of the meaning of a certain behavior fragmentary or off-base. One area of Awlad 'Ali cultural life that proved to be of central importance to the interpretation of Mabrūka's lived experience proved to be the institution of traditional poetry, and in particular the *ghinnāwas* or "little songs," which Abu-Lughod describes as "like Japanese haiku in form but more like the American blues in content and emotional tone."[45] Though at the beginning of her fieldwork Abu-Lughod did not single these poems out as a special object for ethnographic research—"[a]t first I ignored them, since I had no interest in poetry"—her participation in the Awlad 'Ali women's world itself gradually came to reveal their significance.[46]

Ghinnāwas recited by Mabrūka among close female relatives and friends revealed other dimensions of Mabrūka's emotional situation than anger and than an indignant insistence on her rights as first wife. Abu-Lughod quotes a sample of these poems:

> *Held fast by despair and rage*
> *the vastness of my soul is cramped…*
>
> *I took upon myself your love*
> *kindly make me a place to rest…*
>
> *They left me to suffer,*
> *wise ones, they had but withheld the cure…[47]*

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[43] PP 363; Abu-Lughod, 190-91, 230. On the significance of anonymity in cultural and interpersonal experience, see Whitney Howell, "Necessary but Insufficient: Merleau-Ponty and the Ethics of Anonymity in Interpersonal Life," *Symposium*, 24.2, 2020, 168-90.

[44] On the cultural world as *habitus*, see PP 139. I explore Merleau-Ponty's discussion of habit and *habitus* in dialogue with the work of Pierre Bourdieu in "'The Great Phantom': *Habitus*, Freedom, and Political Transformation in Merleau-Ponty," in Jérôme Melançon (ed.), *Politics and Merleau-Ponty: Thinking Beyond the State* (Rowman & Littlefield, forthcoming).

[45] *Veiled Sentiments,* 27.

[46] *Veiled Sentiments*, 25.

[47] *Veiled Sentiments,* 192-93.

These poems, as Abu-Lughod observes, "expressed not so much the anger and blame…as misery and vulnerability."[48] Furthermore, Mabrūka recited *ghinnāwas* that commented precisely on the discrepancy between the pain she felt in her heart and the anger she expressed publicly, as in the following:

> *Better they had calmed me*
> *but since they opposed me I opposed them…[49]*

As revealed in its different aspects in differing contexts, Mabrūka's emotional experience is not simply transparent in each of her behaviors; indeed, the layered complexity of it might well remain obscure to the hasty outside observer. But it can be "read" by the compassionate interlocutor attentive to different spheres of cultural life, as they reveal themselves in individuals' embodied behaviors, for the ways in which its seemingly discrepant expressions in fact work together within the context of a single personal existence struggling to come to terms with complex and contradictory emotions.

If the experience of the other is not simply transparent to the outside observer but rather demands to be interpreted across its different incarnations in different contexts of meaning, likewise is it the case that, *contra* Descartes, our own experience is in crucial respects constitutively opaque to itself.[50] Our own cultural links to the world are ordinarily taken for granted rather than made visible, structuring what seems obvious to us in ways of which we are typically unaware. And our personal experience is not simply spread out in front of our gaze as so many mental "contents," but is the very "form" in which things in the world appear to us in meaningful ways: when we are angry, things in the world themselves appear hateful; when we are in despair "the vastness of [our] soul is cramped" (in Mabrūka's poetic expression).[51] We do not always—indeed we frequently do not—understand the contributions our own moods, habits, personal and collective histories, and cultural belonging make to the disclosure of reality in our experience. Our own constitutive ignorance of ourselves in conjunction with the constitutive obscurity of the full sense of how others' experience is lived by them, makes it the case that

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[48] *Veiled Sentiments*, 193.

[49] *Veiled Sentiments*, 193.

[50] Cf. PP 368: "Others can be evident because I am not transparent to myself, and because my subjectivity draws my body along behind itself.

[51] See Heidegger's discussion of the "mooded" character of intentional existence in *Being and Time*, transl. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 172-182. See also John Russon, *Human Experience: Philosophy, Neurosis, and the Elements of Everday Life* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 43-46.

we are not simply the arbiters of the meanings of our own behaviors in interpersonal space.

The following anecdote from Abu-Lughod illustrates this point. During a 2015 visit to her Awlad 'Ali "family," Abu-Lughod brought along a copy of the Arab translation of *Veiled Sentiments* at the request of one of her "sisters." On a Skype call following the visit with a woman of the family who had read the book, Abu-Lughod was concerned to learn that members of the family had taken offence to some of her portrayals of them. As well as being concerned to learn that the family was recognizable to others despite standard practices of name changing ("Everyone knows this is our family," the young woman said), Abu-Lughod sought to address another concern that had plagued her in her reflections on the nature and value of ethnography in the decades following her first study of the Awlad 'Ali as a graduate student: "I had always felt uncomfortable about the stories about marital disputes or the recordings of folktales that I had used to analyze gender relations. I quickly tried to defend myself, lamely pointing out that I had shown in the book how much they valued honor and how beautiful their poetry was."[52] Abu-Lughod's concerns drastically missed the mark; it turns out the young woman "was referring only to my complaints about the physical discomfort of living with them":

> She was worried about how the younger generation, who live much more comfortable lives now, in apartments or villas with washing machines, televisions, and carpeting, and who work as teachers, engineers, and pharmacists...would react to what I had described from the 70s. I had embarrassed her family, a family with a reputation.[53]

What to Abu-Lughod were relatively peripheral descriptions of her living conditions during fieldwork, meant only to "bring to life this distant world" for Western readers, was for her Awlad 'Ali "relatives" brought into a different context of family honor, deeply tied to wealth and prestige in the community. What was background for Abu-Lughod as a Palestinian-American anthropologist who had grown up in the United States was a matter of foregrounded significance for the Awlad 'Ali in Egypt; in Abu-Lughod's own analysis, her descriptions of the conditions of fieldwork were "now being taken out of context...[o]r rather, put back into context—the context of this particular family."[54] These divergent meanings were not mutually obvious, but took trust, respect, and careful communication to discover.

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[52] "Ethnography's Values," 296-97.
[53] "Ethnography's Values," 297.
[54] "Ethnography's Values," 297. On the relationship between foreground and background in perceptual experience, see PP *passim,* but especially 4, 103, 113-14, 192 and Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects,* Others (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), Chapter 1, especially 38.

Learning about others' lived experience as it is meaningful to them is not a matter of "reading their minds" or living their first-personal experience for ourselves, the impossibility at the heart of Cartesian solipsism and the anxiety of "the problem of other minds." But this impossibility need not trouble us, for neither is first-personal transparency the manner in which we are able to know ourselves. Rather, this impossibility should inspire in us the commitment of patience, effort, and care in the projects both of understanding the other and of better understanding ourselves—projects that can never be completed once and for all. Furthermore, as we shall discuss in Part Four, these projects of understanding the other and understanding oneself cannot in truth be separated: we learn to understand others in *their* own context, different from our own, by drawing on our own experiential behavioral resources, and we come to better understand ourselves—in manners that do not leave our categories of understanding and by extension our own identities intact—in light of the experiences of others.

4. Phenomenological variation and intercultural understanding

As we have begun to see, discovering the meaning of others' (and our own) behavior is always a matter of interpreting the behavior in question within the larger context(s) in which it is meaningful. Each of an individual's behaviors—sometimes harmonious with one another, other times discordant—demands to be interpreted in terms of its place in her larger unfolding life; in turn, the unfolding of his life takes place nowhere but in the multitude of his behaviors in relation to others within the context of a larger cultural world. As Merleau-Ponty writes in "The Philosopher and Sociology," "we are in a sort of circuit with the socio-historical world."[55]

Mabrūka's seemingly discordant behavioral and poetic expressions in response to her husband's second marriage were simultaneously unique to her singular situation and typical of Awlad ʿAli society. Abu-Lughod's interpretation of these and related behaviors on the part of many other Awlad ʿAli women and men paint a much more human picture of family ties and honor, and a much richer picture of the complex experiences of women, than those at play in stereotypes about Muslim cultures criticized in the Introduction. These more sensitive and full understandings—made possible by careful ethnography rather than polemic, in Abu-Lughod's words—do not preserve the Westerner's superior sense of self but, rather, require its critical transformation.[56]

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[55] PS 123.
[56] Abu-Lughod, "The Active Social Life of 'Muslim Women's Rights': A Plea for Ethnography, Not Polemic, With Cases from Egypt and Palestine," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 6.1, 2010, 1-45.

In her ethnography of the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin society, Abu-Lughod draws on extensive observations of and conversations with members of the family and larger community with whom she lived from fall 1978 until spring 1980, in order to discern the central place of honor [*sharaf*] in the community's norms for the proper behavior [*agl*] of both men and women. Bedouins have long regarded themselves— and long been regarded—as a fiercely tough, proud, and self-reliant people, with many of its leading members still in the early 1980s committed to political self-determination in the face of the modern Egyptian state.[57] For men of the Awlad 'Ali, honor is understood in terms of the virtues of self-control and courage, as well as those of "generosity, honesty, sincerity, loyalty to friends, and keeping one's word."[58] Self-reliant efficacy in the world as well as stoic toughness in the face of physical and emotional pain—such as death of beloved relatives or heartache in love— qualify a man for responsibility and social standing [*gīma*] within the community, as do his material wealth and the respect shown him by his dependents (women, children, and clients).[59]

While women are considered inferior to men with regard to their capacities to embody the Bedouin ideals of self-reliant individuality, their honor and proper behavior are seen to reside in approximating these ideals as much as possible within the "natural" and social limits of their situation; in insisting on their rights and resisting abuses of those upon whom they depend; and in behaving with modesty, shame, or propriety [*hasham*] in the face of the more powerful or the unknown (generally their fathers, husbands, older men in the community, and guests and strangers). It is worth pausing on the point about resistance to abuse: wives can return to their families of origin in anger if their husbands are abusive; divorce is common and divorced women are frequently remarried. Women are by no means seen as the mere property of fathers and husbands—as stated in the Amnesty Fact sheet cited in Part One—but have means to resist arranged marriages that they do not desire and to be protected against abuse and disrespect by their patrilineal line. They are

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[57] *Veiled Sentiments*, Chapter 3. For a classical statement on the independence and toughness of the nomadic Bedouins, see Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddimah*, transl. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1967), 33-44. For a more nuanced discussion of the attitudes of the Awlad 'Ali towards the Egyptian state in the late 1970s and the early 1980s—one that provides another example of potential misunderstanding and unintentional offense given on the part of the ethnographer, and that also provides an example of the internal dissensions at play in any culture discussed below—see Abu-Lughod's discussion of a relative of her Awlad 'Ali's family who worked as a civil servant and took objection to her portrayal in "Writing Against Culture," 159-60.

[58] *Veiled Sentiments,* 87. Though it goes unnoted, the resonances between Abu-Lughod's account of the values of character of the Awlad 'Ali and Aristotle's account of the virtues in *Nicomachean Ethics* is striking.

[59] *Veiled Sentiments*, 90-92, 99.

not isolated in the privacy of nuclear families, but have resources and supports within the larger tribe that cares for their rights and wellbeing.

An important aspect of *hasham* is sexual modesty: women (like men) are expected not to display any evidence of sexuality in general or romantic attachment to specific individuals, including, while in the presence of others, their own husbands.[60] Mabrūka's public gestures of emotional indifference towards her husband must be interpreted in light of these complex social expectations for women's correct behavior or *agl*: she was careful to display no sense of romantic attachment or loss but only anger at the violation of her rights as a dependent.

Crucially, the modesty qua honor and the proper behavior of Awlad 'Ali women is not merely the passive docility of dependents who are owed no interpersonal or social respect. On the contrary: Abu-Lughod observes that "[a]s with other dependents—for instance, young men—women's submission is personally demeaning and worthless to their superiors unless perceived as freely given."[61] From the women's own perspectives, their honor was deeply personally meaningful— intertwined as it was with their deep attachments to family, community, and social reputation—and definitely a site for personal agency. A sign of independence within dependence and initiative within a deeply circumscribed situation—though, it is worth noting, one in important respects as circumscribed for men as it was for women, *albeit* in different ways—a woman's gesture of *hasham* was, in Abu-Lughod's words, "not compliance, but a form of self-control."[62] Requiring understanding, interpretation, and, at times, creativity, *sharaf* by way of *hasham* was a way for a women to distinguish themselves within the shared norms of the community.

It is on the point of self-control that Abu-Lughod finds a central aspect of the significance of the Awlad 'Ali's ritualistic use of poetry on the part of both women and men. *Ghinnāwas* use socially-known and accepted poetic symbols and tropes to express deep emotional vulnerability and romantic attachments—contrary qualities to the norms of honor and propriety publicly valued by Bedouin society— and are often very moving to the friends or lovers who hear them.[63] In Abu-Lughod's analysis, the recitation of these poems in appropriate contexts not only provides an outlet for the expression of feelings that do not have a place in adult public life—feelings of dependency, exposure, and weakness rather than independence, stoical self-reliance, and strength—but also a more complex expression of the reciter's ultimate self-control: she or he is able to manage when and how she or he

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[60] *Veiled Sentiments,* 152-58.

[61] *Veiled Sentiments,* 105.

[62] *Veiled Sentiments*, 117.

[63] *Veiled Sentiments*, 174, 177, 242.

shares these experiences, and—much as in Mabrūka's poem commenting on the discrepancy between her private despair and her public anger—she or he reveals honorable behavior in public *as* an exercise in self-conscious honor that does not simply come automatically but has been earned through effort and habituation over time. As Abu-Lughod writes, *agl* is a phenomenon of maturity.[64] Awlad 'Ali norms of honor and rituals of poetry reveal themselves to be neither isolated nor contradictory affairs, but resonant tensions within the larger structure of the Bedouin society.

"Structure" names the total, but complex and open-ended, organization of all of the interconnected systems at play in a given society. Merleau-Ponty uses the figure of a melody to illustrate the concept of structure: there is no melody without the notes that make it up, but, at the same time, each of the notes are what they are by virtue of belonging to the greater unfolding whole—the "same" note would, quite literally, sound differently in the context of a different melody.[65] The concept of structure in anthropology is, in Merleau-Ponty's account, the idea that

> [s]ociety itself is a structure of structures: how could there be absolutely no relationship between the linguistic system, the economic system, and the kinship system it employs? But this relationship is subtle and variable. Sometimes it is homology. At other times (as in the case of myth and ritual) one structure is the counterpart and antagonist of the other. Society as a structure remains a many-faceted reality amenable to more than one interpretation.[66]

Anthropological interpretation does not work by subsuming particular behaviors or systems under an overarching "essence"—for example, subsuming the culture's linguistic system under some universal form of language accessible to thought in isolation from the facts, or its kinship structure under some universal table of kinship relationships "comparable to Mendeleev's periodic table of elements."[67] As Merleau-Ponty writes, "[a]s a matter of principle, structure is no Platonic idea."[68] Rather, anthropological interpretation of a culture works by "installing ourselves" within the institution in question, seeking to understand the "style" of the linguistic or kinship system *as* it is meaningfully lived by the cultural

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[64] *Veiled Sentiments*, 91.

[65] SB 137 and PP 107, 255, 437, and 469. See also Russon, *Human Experience*, 12.

[66] Merleau-Ponty, "From Mauss to Lévi-Strauss," *Signs*, transl. Richard C. McLeary (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1964), 114-25, 118. Hereafter cited as FMLS.

[67] PMS 79; FMLS 118.

[68] FMLS 117.

subjects in question.[69] As Busch writes, "[c]ategories earn their 'rationality' by their power to explicate, to make sense of, experience."[70] Much like the psychotherapeutic interpretation of an individual, this kind of understanding is not a straightforward perception that occurs in a moment, but rather takes the form of a *Gestalt* shift in which seemingly disparate behaviors are seen to belong to the same largely "unconscious" individual or cultural structure.[71] Merleau-Ponty writes of the kind of knowledge possible through ethnographic research: "the underlying dynamics of the social whole is certainly not *given* within our narrow experience of living among others, yet it is only by throwing this experience in and out of focus that we succeed in representing it to ourselves."[72]

What is this practice of "throwing this experience in and out of focus" like for the ethnographer? Merleau-Ponty argues that this practice is an existential embodiment of Edmund Husserl's method of "eidetic variation," in which the phenomenologist, within the *epochē*, "imaginatively varies" with the manner in which a given phenomenon appears so as to discover what is essential to the phenomenon in question.[73] The phenomenologist achieves an eidetic intuition [*Wesensschau*] when, through her imaginative variations, she hits upon alterations to the phenomenon that cannot be made without the phenomenon ceasing to be the phenomenon that it is. For example, we can imaginatively vary the color red until it ceases to be red— thus getting into clearer view the "redness" of the red—or we can vary with the phenomenon of color itself, changing red into green into yellow, but finding that color ceases to be color when we attempt to change it into sound.[74] Merleau-Ponty argues that towards the end of his career, Husserl came to realize the limits of the method of a purely imaginative variation, thanks to the latter's encounter with the anthropological work of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl.[75]

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[69] PS 100. "Style" in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy can be understood as a dynamization of essence, which can only be encountered in the flesh and through a kind of mimicry or participation; for more on this see PP 342-45 and Linda Singer, "Merleau-Ponty on the Concept of Style," in Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (eds.), *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Evanston: Northwestern UP. 1993), 233-44.

[70] Busch, 316.

[71] FMLS 118.

[72] PS 100.

[73] PSM 53-54, 69-72, 90 and PS 108. Cf. Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, transl. James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), §§86-93; and *Phenomenological Psychology*, transl. John Scanlon (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), 57-65. See also Douglas Low, "Merleau-Ponty on Race, Gender, and Anti-Semitism," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 59.3, 2019, 257-75, 261 on Merleau-Ponty's "existentializing" of Husserl's more rationalist eidetic method.

[74] Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, 115-16, 351.

[75] PSM 90; PS 107-08. Lévy-Bruhl's "masterpiece of armchair ethnography," in Abu-Lughod's words ("Ethnography's Values," 287), has been criticized as racist in a manner that contaminates later

There are variations to human experience that the imaginative work of first-personal experience cannot conjure up on its own. As phenomenologist Shaun Gallagher has more recently argued, empirical encounters with work in psychology enables the phenomenologist to engage in not merely imaginative but also "factual variation"; for example, the experience of synaesthesia reveals to the phenomenologist that in some cases color can, indeed, turn into sound, causing us to expand our understanding of the nature of sensory experience.[76] Merleau-Ponty argues that this kind of factual variation on the part of phenomenologists in engagement with empirical sciences is what is already going on in scientific and social scientific work, even if it is not explicitly thematized as such.[77] The ethnographer achieves her insights through a "reading of the essential structures of a multiplicity of cases," finding meaningful resonances between aspects of her own experience and those observable in the other culture in a manner that enables a genuine understanding of the other while altering her sense of herself and her own culture, perhaps profoundly.[78] Abu-Lughod's description of her experience with Awlad 'Ali mourning customs illustrates the anthropological process of "factual variation." As Abu-Lughod describes these customs, "[a]t the news of a death, Awlad 'Ali women begin a stylized, high-pitched, wordless wailing (*'ayāt*). Then they 'cry.' 'Crying' involves much more than weeping; it is a chanted lament in which the bereaved women and those who have come to console them express their grief."[79] While this stylized cultural expression of grief might at first seem alien to the outsider, it can be understood when we view it not as the meaningless "actions of an insect," as in the Cartesian problem of other minds, but as a meaningful behavior that resonates with our own experience of loss and grief. Abu-Lughod undergoes such an experience when she accompanies the women of her adoptive Bedouin family to the funeral of one of their relatives. She writes:

> I found the whole scene very moving, with the wailing and "crying." When I squatted before the old woman to embrace her and give her my sympathies, I found myself crying…With each new arrival the ritualized

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phenomenological engagements with it; see Robert Bernasconi, "Lévy-Bruhl among the Phenomenologists: Exoticism and the Logic of 'the Primitive,'" *Social Identities*, 11.3, 2005, 229-45. I prefer to find in these phenomenological engagements, along with Merleau-Ponty, their potential for anti-racist engagements with others and for self-criticism—potential I believe we see in fact embodied in the ethnographic work of anthropologists like Abu-Lughod.

[76] Shaun Gallagher, "Taking Stock of Phenomenology Futures," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 50.2, 2012, 304-18, 308.

[77] Cf. PSM 68-73; FMLS 120.

[78] PSM 70.

[79] *Veiled Sentiments,* 198.

> mourning laments would begin again, and I could not hold back my tears.
> This funeral had awakened my own grief over the death of my grandmother
> and a cousin, neither of whom I had mourned properly.[80]

In this participatory experience, Abu-Lughod is able to connect with the grief of her Bedouin "family" through drawing on her own reservoirs of grief, so as to see the former as "variations" on the latter; as Merleau-Ponty writes, "[o]ur situation is for us the source of our curiosity, our investigations, and our interest in…other situations as variants of our own."[81] This empathetic experience is not one of reducing the "other" to the "same," but of discovering an identity—a certain kind of "essence"—across difference. Indeed, Abu-Lughod learns that this kind of empathizing is self-consciously what goes on between individuals and families within the Awlad 'Ali community itself: "Women speak of going to 'cry with' somebody, suggesting that they perceive it as sharing an experience. What they share is grief, not just by sympathizing, but also by actually reexperiencing, in the company of the person currently grieving, their own grief over the death of a loved one."[82]

As well as seeing other situations as variations of her own, Merleau-Ponty argues that the anthropologist in turn comes to see her own life "as a variant of…the lives of others," such that, in a sense, "[w]e also become the ethnologists of our own society if we set ourselves at a distance from it."[83] In Abu-Lughod's recognition that she had never "mourned properly" the deaths of her own grandmother and cousin, she calls into question not only her first-personal experience of grieving (or lack thereof) but Western customs of mourning more generally—many of which, we can well imagine, would from a Bedouin perspective appear stiff, cold, and individualistic. Rather than funeral practices in the Western and largely Christian world appearing as the norm against which non-Western funeral practices appear exotic, Western practices are "thrown out of focus" and newly seen *as* cultural practices, and as cultural practices that might warrant criticism and transformation. As Merleau-Ponty writes, ethnography "consists in learning to see what is ours as alien and what was alien as our own."[84]

Such "factual variations" between our own and the other's cultural experiences allow us to discover certain kinds of "essences"—certain human experiences of

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[80] *Veiled Sentiments,* 21.

[81] PS 110. See also Abu-Lughod's argument (against Bourdieu's claim regarding the imperious perspective of the ethnographer) for the significant personal vulnerability of the invested ethnographer, as well as the "devotion to others that fieldwork entails" ("Ethnography's Values," 275-77).

[82] *Veiled Sentiments,* 69.

[83] PS 110; FMLS 120.

[84] FMLS 120.

honor, of grief, of family—manifesting themselves across difference. These are not the hierarchical universals of the logicist or universalist, which seek to categorize everything they might encounter in advance. Neither is cultural experience simply closed in upon itself, as with sociologism or cultural relativism. Rather, what emerges through this kind of anthropological work is what Merleau-Ponty calls "lateral universals," discoverable in ethnological experience "through an incessant testing of the self through the other person and the other person through the self."[85] As Douglas Low explains, this mutual variation between our own and others' cultural experiences enables us to "see both as a variation of the human being's being-in-the-world."[86] What we discover through such research is what Husserl calls "morphological essences"—essential realities of experience that can in principle never be precisely fixed in the manner of arithmetic or geometry.[87] Rather—in Low's words again—"there are *patterns* and *regularities* in human behavior, but they are not fixed essences, for they are lived through not conceived, and as lived through they open upon a field of imprecise relations that are open to change."[88]

We have seen that cultures are "structures," not in the sense that all of their systems and behaviors can be subsumed under a static framework, but rather in the sense that, as in a melody, their different "notes" are related to one another in some meaningful way or another (be it a relationship of harmony or discord). To understand the experience of individuals in other cultures we must attend to the meaning of their behaviors within their larger, complex cultural context. We must also transpose our own experience into theirs and theirs into our own, in a manner that leaves the meaning of neither unchanged. In the remainder of this paper, we shall see further the manner in which it is the very nature of cultural experience to change with history and in interaction with others, and explore the demands of cross-cultural understanding in the context of an increasingly globalizing world.

5. Intercultural transformation in a globalizing world

If what is "essential" to human experience—if its unique style across innumerable dramatic and subtle variations—is in principle imprecise and open to change, then cultures too are in principle not discrete, bounded, homogeneous "essences but 'structural' sites of interconnection, fluidity, and heterogeneous

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[85] FMLS 120.

[86] Douglas Low, "Merleau-Ponty and the Foundations of Multiculturalism," *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 21, 1996, 377-90, 380.

[87] Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, transl. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), §74; PSM 67.

[88] Low, "Merleau-Ponty on Race, Gender, and Anti-Semitism," 267.

contestation. This has been the case throughout human history. Thanks to their interactions with others through war, economic migration, religious crusades, and colonization, cultures are, in phenomenologist John Russon's words, never "pure" but "always *palimpsests*, always texts written on top of earlier writing."[89] However, as modern economic, technological, and political developments in an increasingly interconnected world inevitably alter the intimate and social lives of individuals everywhere, it is more and more impossible to adequately conceive of cultures as bounded essences.

Abu-Lughod gives as an example of the inextricable influence of contemporary globalization on non-Western cultures an anecdote from her Awlad 'Ali "family" in the mid-1980s, about a young man who had been beaten by his father on account of having been accused of drinking alcohol at a wedding, forbidden to Muslims. The young man

> sells his cassette player to a neighbor to raise cash and then disappears. His grandmother cries over him, his aunts discuss it. His father says nothing. It is days before a distant in-law comes to reassure his grandmother that the young man is fine and to indicate that they know his whereabouts (he is working at a construction site 100 kilometers away). No one knows what the consequences of this event will be. Will he return? What will his father do? Family honor is at stake, reputations for piety, paternal authority. When the young man returns several weeks later, accompanied by a maternal uncle from 50 kilometers west who intervenes to forestall any future punishments, his grandmother weeps in relief. It could easily have turned out differently.[90]

Phenomenologically varying with this story, one can surely find in it generally human experiences that resonate with experiences of one's own—youthful rebellion, the worry of grandmothers, the need or desire for material self-sufficiency, the stoical standoffs of fathers and sons, the complex politics of familial alliances and interventions in problems. At the same time, one should not simply assimilate these experiences to one's own, but be attentive to the specific manners in which these events are meaningful within the context of Bedouin society: "family honor is at stake, reputations for piety, paternal authority." What we see when we do this is not a homogeneous culture, but individuals shirking or insisting upon its norms, relatives who wish to soften the blows of retribution for indiscretions, young people

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[89] John Russon, *Sites of Exposure: Art, Politics, and the Nature of Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2017), 72-73.

[90] Abu-Lughod, "Writing Against Culture," 156.

wanting to make their own way and having to navigate their relationship between home and the larger world in contexts different than those of their parents' youth. Modernization is in each detail of this story, from "growing opportunities for wage labor, the commercialization of Bedouin weddings, and the influx of goods from the cities," in Abu-Lughod's words.[91] What we are witnessing is not simply the autochthonous development of a culture, but complex and uncertain changes in contact with the (post-)colonial victory of the "West."

Interactions between "Western" and "non-Western" cultures have not been simply benign lateral interactions across difference, but hierarchical interactions between the economically- and politically-dominant nations of Western Europe and the United States and non-Western societies in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, the latter of which have to greater or lesser degrees been torn apart by colonialism, imperialism, and wars waged by or between superpowers.[92] It is in light of this contemporary reality that we should seek to understand what is at play in crimes such as Ayhan Sürücü's murder of his sister Aynur in Berlin in 2005. In her ethnography of the construction of Muslim masculinities in contemporary Germany, Ewing analyzes the heterogeneous effects of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment on the population of Turkish "guest workers", predominantly from rural Anatolia rather than cosmopolitan cities—that began to arrive in Germany in the 1960s during the country's post-war economic boom, supposedly on a temporary basis, but then were allowed to stay and bring their families during the economic downturn in the 1970s.[93] By 2005, a whole generation of young people had grown up in Muslim Turkish families in Berlin, facing dual pressures to assimilate (from the German side) and to maintain their Muslim religion and traditions (from the Turkish side). The tension was exacerbated by widespread Islamophobia that vilified the very population marginalized by racist discrimination, casting Muslim men as "backwards" brutes who sought honor through domination and violence. Ewing describes a growth among some Turkish-German youth—especially among the poorer and more socially marginalized—of gang-membership that draws on symbols of Turkish culture and Islam, as well as on inspirations of machismo from Hollywood Mafia movies and boxing, to assert a positive self-identity in the face of anti-Islamic German racism and the United States's "War on Terror"—a war which many Muslims interpreted as a war on Islam.[94] Ironically and tragically, it is these youth gangs that are likely to glorify violence against their Muslim sisters—sisters

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[91] "Writing Against Culture," 156.
[92] See Jaggar, "'Saving Amina,'" 62-75 and Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 31-32.
[93] Ewing, 15.
[94] Ewing, 167, 172-73.

grappling with similar tensions to the gang members themselves—as symbols of Islam and masculinity, and not the elders whom one might imagine to be the representatives of "tradition."[95] Furthermore, many of the larger structures of support and recourse for abused women that have historically been in place in many rural Islamic communities were absent in the nuclear family organizations of cities like Berlin, isolating many girls and women in their fate where they would "traditionally" have had significant social protections.[96]

To call such violent acts as the murder of Aynur Sürücü "traditional" or "Islamic" is very much to miss the point and obscure the lived reality of the situation. For one thing, calling such murders "traditional" or "Islamic" ignores the fact that such acts are in fact quite rare.[97] Despite media claims to an increase in honor killings in Berlin in 2005, Sürücü's murder was the only one that in fact fit the "classic" bill: the others were murders of wives by husbands—hardly, a uniquely Islamic or non-Western phenomenon. For another thing, framing such events as "traditional" or "Islamic" elects for a simplistic, exotifying vision of "death by culture" that defies human comprehension or empathy, rather than for a difficult grappling with the complex, but ultimately mundane and comprehensible impact of postcolonial global politics on individuals' and families' lived experiences of their cultural identities. Once again, it makes unrecognizable Sürücü's experience *as* first-personal, human experience, with all of the subtleties and conflicts of the latter. One powerful route into such complex political grappling is precisely the kind of ethnographic research we have been discussing from a phenomenological perspective, with an eye turned explicitly to the challenges of multiculturalism in a deeply unequal modernizing world. Abu-Lughod does this with a particular Bedouin community in Egypt, in a manner that allows us to see how

> others live as we perceive ourselves as living, not as robots programmed with "cultural" rules, but as people going through life agonizing over decisions, making mistakes, trying to make themselves look good, enduring tragedies and personal losses, enjoying others, and finding moments of happiness.[98]

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[95] Ewing, 172.

[96] Marnia Lazreg discusses this phenomenon of the disintegration of extended kindship structures in the context of modernization and colonial property laws in Algeria, and women's increased vulnerability to abuse (rather than liberation) in *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 99-101

[97] On the rarity of honor killings, and also on the difficulties of obtaining reliable statistics on honor killings thanks to how murders are classified by police and media, see Ewing, *Stolen Honor*, 152-53 and Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 128-30.

[98] Writing Against Culture," 158.

Ewing carries out such ethnographic work not only through her study of Turkish immigrant communities in Germany, but of German majority culture's own complex historical and cultural Othering of their Turkish neighbors. In Merleau-Ponty's words, Ewing is an "ethnologist of [her] own society," opening space, through her "variations" with aspects of the lived experience of the Turkish immigrant community, for critical assessment of "Western" practices as themselves cultural and unequal rather than neutral and emancipated, and as themselves deeply implicated in the oppression of, and crimes committed by, immigrants burdened by a long history of colonialism, loss of rich and dynamic cultural traditions, and compulsory modernization on a "Western" timeline.

Such ethnographies of particular Western and non-Western cultures furthermore enable us to see more clearly the manners in which feminist resistance to oppression and creative approaches to emancipatory change in fact arise in lived experience. Against the standards of universalism that are meant to apply to all women in all historical and cultural circumstances, and against a vicious cultural relativism that regards non-Western cultures as frozen in tradition and history, such an ethnographic eye attends to how feminist change in fact occurs in the lived experience of real women and their communities, in manners that often cannot be predicted in advance and that come about through women's (and men's) creative improvisation within a confluence of material, social, and political intercultural forces. Indeed, dominant. For example, Narayan describes her own feminist awakening in India happening at the conjunction of: the kitchen table, where her mother complained to her friends about the constraints of her traditional marriage and relationship to her mother-in-law; the changing marriage customs that allowed girls of her generation to marry later than their mothers (who had already married later than their grandmothers); and the educational opportunities newly afforded girls of her class and generation that had not been available to her mother and aunts.[99] As another example, Abu-Lughod describes arguments to which she was privy between some of the young women of her Awlad 'Ali "family" and their father about wanting to attend university in Cairo—arguments that were, not without some irony, buttressed by the young women's prideful claims regarding their own honor and trustworthiness as traditional Bedouins and pious Muslims.[100] Feminist transformation does not always follow Western models, and does not come about through external imposition: it arises within the heterogeneous, discordant, and changing cultural situations of non-Western women themselves.

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[99] Narayan, 7, 23.
[100] Abu-Lughod, "Ethnography's Values," 265.

Ayhan Sürücü's murder of his sister Aynur was represented in the news media and popular films as a clash of "Western" and "non-Western" values, of modernity and tradition, of feminist liberation and patriarchal oppression, and of secularism and religion. Ethnographic research into both the German culture in which this tragic event took place, and into the place of honor in particular societies in the Middle East and Northern Africa, make such dichotomous interpretations impossible. The phenomenological variations at their methodological heart lead us, on the contrary, to recognize the richness, value, and always dynamic and interpretive nature of cultural practices—including practices of "honor"—for the women and men who live them in different ways in a diversity of human contexts. Such recognition, in turn, leads us not to confuse, as Abu-Lughod urges, the 'pathological breakdowns' of some of these rich cultural realities in the face of immigration, the pressures of modernization, postcolonial inequality, racism, and violence for the cultural system itself—a point tragically lost in much of the discourse about Islam and the oppression of Muslim women in the past twenty years.[101]

Conclusion: Phenomenological anthropology and anthropological phenomenology

In this paper, I have put Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of anthropology into critical dialogue with Abu-Lughod's ethnographic study of a particular Bedouin community in Egypt, with the hopes of demonstrating that, in distinction from political and academic debates between universalism and relativism, a phenomenologically-grounded ethnography provides a rich route into grasping how human experience is always locally- and culturally-shaped, but also capable of creative self-interpretation and improvisation in dialogue with others. I have argued that such intercultural engagements offer a critical antidote to Western stereotypes of non-Western and especially Muslim cultures, and also offer concrete insights into the particular challenges of such cultures in the face of modernization in an increasingly interconnected, and deeply unequal, world. In conclusion, I would like to emphasize the other direction of this relationship, for phenomenologists in particular. I hope to have shown, at least implicitly, that it is not only phenomenology that has interpretive tools to offer our understanding of other cultures the work of feminist anthropologists like Abu-Lughod has much to offer phenomenologists in return.

Far from being merely the rigorous description of first-personal experience, as common misconceptions often have it, phenomenology can only be accountable to the essential features of human experience if it commits itself to attending to the rich expressions of the latter's variability in dialogue with a diversity of sources. As

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[101] "Ethnography's Values," 281.

Russon writes, the responsible phenomenologist "does not simply rely on the stream of her or his own personal experience but also turns to the vast array of biographical, psychological, and historical research to learn what the terms are in which people in general 'live' their experience."[102] Engaging with the efforts of feminist anthropologists to understand other cultures on their own terms and in all of their 'structural' complexity, with a keen eye to the global power dynamics that make such work challenging, helps to hold phenomenologists accountable to their own claims about the essential nature of human being-in-the-world. Especially for those in the relatively privilege of Western academia, it is crucial to hold in reserve confidence in the centrality and normality of one's own experience. Decentering one's own experience by reading, citing, and learning from that of others, with their own perspectives and alternative histories, enables marginalized voices to come to the fore and challenges Western prejudices concerning the 'normal' and 'enlightened' parameters of human experience. I hope to have made some progress in demonstrating here the importance of such multicultural engagements for the culturally- and politically-critical phenomenological researcher.

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[102] Russon, *Sites of Exposure*, 7.

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