

Anthropological Phenomenology and the Eventive Ground



Christopher Stephan and C. Jason Throop

1 Introduction

This chapter theorizes the phenomenological potential of anthropology through an examination of what we will call the “eventive ground” of ethnographic knowledge. Though anthropologists and phenomenologists have reacted to one another’s work, including the now famous early correspondence between Husserl and Levy Bruhl (see Sato, 2014; Throop, 2018), it has only been over the past few decades that some anthropologists began to distinguish a genre of a distinctively ‘phenomenological anthropology’¹ (Desjarlais & Throop, 2011; Katz & Csordas, 2003; Ram & Houston, 2015). Anthropologists have applied and extended phenomenological theory in several respects. By attending to the cultural and social contexts—the conditions of possibility—within which phenomena variously disclose themselves, anthropologists have significantly contributed to research in intersubjectivity and genetic phenomenology. Likewise, anthropologists have frequently drawn from and contributed to the phenomenology of perception, the senses, self-experience, embodiment, emotion, affect, mood, politics, and ethics.

Yet beyond a mere extension or application of philosophical phenomenology, anthropological phenomenology offers a reconfiguration. As an empirical field, anthropological analyses are grounded by the particulars of singular events. Whether drawn from naturalistic observation, interviews, or direct participation, the

¹We use the terms “phenomenological anthropology” and “anthropological phenomenology” interchangeably.

C. Stephan

Center for Subjectivity Research, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

C. J. Throop (✉)

Department of Anthropology, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA, USA

e-mail: jthroop@ucla.edu

phenomena anthropologists encounter and seek to understand are necessarily distinct not only to the moment of their unfolding, but also in the unique way each event draws together and makes discernible its socio-historical context. In the event—a touch, a turn in conversation, recapitulations of ritual, a silence—something flairs up, and a world (as well as a style of being in it) begins to become discernible (cf. Meacham, 2013; Romano, 2009). Something excessive is also disclosed in such moments, however. Holding both together—variously shared conditions of possibility *and* that which exceeds and potentially transforms such conditions—is a call that the very best of phenomenological anthropological interventions heed. Understanding a conditioned world of potentiality and possibility means proceeding from the event and directing our thinking through it (see Mattingly, 2019; Zigon, 2018). If even in a moment of phenomenological reduction, as Husserl (2002) argued, we never take leave of the phenomenal ground, it is important to consider the contributions of the eventive ground to what anthropological phenomenology is enabled to become.

In this paper, we take up the following questions: What is distinctive about the event as grounds for anthropological understanding and phenomenological reflection? How do the socio-cultural particulars of ethnographic engagements positively contribute to phenomenology? And what might philosophical phenomenologists draw from the anthropological approach to phenomenological research?

In singling out the eventive-ness of anthropological phenomenology we are querying a condition of possibility. Even as an event is disruptive in its excessiveness, it is nonetheless always possible to abstract away from the event or laminate it with concerns that have their origins elsewhere. We are thus self-consciously taking up an aspirational stance. Anthropology is at its best, we maintain, when it holds close to the event in the context of its efforts at description, analysis, and theorization. Our objective is not to argue for what anthropological efforts at phenomenology always accomplish. Rather, by reflecting on the relationship to events that phenomenological anthropology must always entail, we aim to invoke what makes the anthropological approach to phenomenology distinctive as well as how it can be better at being what it aspires to be.

2 Ethnographic Encounters

In “Being There”, the opening essay to his book examining representational tactics in anthropological writing, Clifford Geertz (1988) introduces as his motivating problematic the uniqueness of the events which give rise to any fieldworker’s observations. He writes,

The highly situated nature of ethnographic description—this ethnographer, in this time, in this place, with these informants, these commitments, and these experiences, a representative of a particular culture, a member of a certain class—gives to the bulk of what is said a rather take-it-or-leave-it quality. [5]

Geertz is directing the reader's attention to the problem of ethnographic authority. Why do we believe some anthropologists more than others? All things being equal, Geertz suggests, the difference comes down to rhetoric:

The ability of anthropologists to get us to take what they say seriously has less to do with either a factual look or an air of conceptual elegance than it has with their capacity to convince us that what they say is a result of their having actually penetrated (or, if you prefer, been penetrated by) another form of life, of having, one way or another, truly 'been there.' [4–5]

“And that,” he concludes, “persuading us that this offstage miracle has occurred, is where the writing comes in.” His objective with this *ceteris paribus* supposition is to motivate a serious inquiry into authorial voice in ethnographic writing. To be sure, representations of “the field,” particularly through what Max Gluckman (1961) termed “apt illustrations”, have important rhetorical functions. The most invariable of these is, in fact, an implicit claim to authority through having experienced the events firsthand (see Clifford, 1983).

But it might be worth reevaluating the arc of Geertz' argument, because as certainly as it makes something visible from 30,000 feet up, it also never alights on the ground of “being there” itself. In problematizing the work of representing ethnographic findings, Geertz exposes, while passing over, a more fundamental tenet: that ethnographic understanding is grounded in and saturated by events.

Anthropologists often use “apt illustrations” to initiate crucial shifts in perspective. Consider the phenomenological anthropologist Thomas Csordas' description of a moment of insight whilst studying chanting in traditional Navajo healing practices. Csordas (2008: 117) reports that when he learned from his Navajo research participants that tape recording was an unacceptable substitute for in-person apprenticeship, his initial interpretation was, “in terms of the textuality of the songs and their appropriate treatment. It was a violent taking out of context, an *arrachement*, both tearing the song out of its setting within a moment of performance and wresting it away from its legitimate owner.” “Then”, he says,

the chanter told me something that changed my understanding of his objection. He said that the way it used to be, and the way it should be, was for the person learning the songs to be sitting close enough to the chanter to see his lips move as he sang. With the invocation of moving lips, the song emanating from the bodily portal, power passing by force of breath through the gap of the lips, the apprentice focusing on the action required to bring the chant into intersubjective being, my understanding shifted ground from textuality to embodiment. It careened from context and technological medium to lived spatiality and physical proximity.

In Csordas' narrative, we are given a transformative event: a moment of dialogue between anthropologist and chanter potentiates a shift in thinking which carries on in the production of an ethnographic account. Our concern with the role of events as such in making possible and directing anthropological phenomenology requires that we ask what has happened here.

Looking beyond the matter of representational choices, we want to bring attention to this role of events as a ground for phenomenological reflection. Preceding and undergirding their theorizing and writing, anthropologists are first and foremost

exposed to events and challenged to think with them (Jackson, 1995). If anthropology is capable of making a distinctive contribution to phenomenology, it is only by way of this proneness to events. It is thus, in other words, our attuned responsiveness to worldly happenings that potentiate possibilities for thinking that can be said to define one of the major contributions of phenomenological anthropological research. Drawing from the insights of David Bidney (1973), we can view such efforts as part and parcel of a distinctively ethnographically grounded enactment of the *epoché*; what one of us has termed in previous writings, “the ethnographic *epoché*” (see Throop, 2010, 2012, 2018; see below). The ethnographic *epoché* differs from Husserl’s phenomenological rendering of the *epoché*—even in terms of its later historically oriented articulations—precisely because of its participatory, situational, intersubjective, intercorporeal, and worldly underpinnings. Where the phenomenological *epoché* is an active and willed achievement, the ethnographic *epoché* is a passive and responsive one—one that arises from, and makes discernible, some of our most deeply sedimented and taken-for-granted assumptions, orientations, habits, and dispositions (Throop, 2018: 205).

3 Event as Ground

To begin, we need to distinguish our sense of an event from a mere empirical happening. Not to do so would, on the one hand, risk reversion to the mundane observation that the documentary function of cultural anthropology must always take precedence over the interpretive enterprise. On the other, the reduction of events to their empirical aspects risks depicting the anthropologist as a sovereign subject who impassively surveys and compares data extracted from empirical happenings. What such a view occludes is what makes an anthropologist capable of seeing something *as something* (even of seeing something as data): her involvement in an event.² To counter this misleading sense of the event as something reducible to the empirical givens, we introduce a reconceptualization of events that is developed in the phenomenologist Claude Romano’s *Event and World* (2009 [1998]).

A central contribution of *Event and World* is an ontological and existential critique through which Romano asserts both the irreducibility of events to beings and the primacy of events over structures of meaning. Romano distinguishes between events understood as “innerworldly facts” and events understood in their proper, “evential” sense. Innerworldly facts are events comprehended only in the sense of empirical happenings. There is, necessarily, a subject to whom these events

²Throop (2018) offers the example of the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski’s (1935) realization of the essential role of language in carrying out collective action when once, in the Trobriand Islands, he witnessed his party’s canoes navigate a narrow passage in the darkness relying on instructions shouted from the shore. This experience prompted for Malinowski a theorization of speech as social action that predates and prefigures theories of force in philosophy and linguistics.

manifest, but this subject is essentially substitutable. With respect purely to the empirical givens, it makes no difference from the standpoint of the innerworldly fact who undergoes and who witnesses. When it comes to explicating events as facts there is also a temporal orientation which comes into play. Understanding events only as innerworldly facts means, for Romano (§4–6, *passim*), taking a backward glance that attempts to demonstrate their causal determination from antecedent conditions (cf. Schutz, 1967).

In contrast, for Romano, events in the proper “evential” sense are always revealed as addressed. In their “evential” sense, events must be understood as instigations which are “unsubstitutably” personal, opening horizons of possibility which it is up to me to “appropriate.” The *ur*-event is our birth—an immemorial origin of our possibilities. As with our births, all events affect us prior to any personalness, assignation of meaning, or projection of possibility. As with innerworldly facts, there is—with events in their proper “evential” sense—a temporal dimension. Corresponding to the event’s anteceding all possibility and personalness there is, in Romano’s terms, a “structural delay” in all understanding: we live from events, responding to and formulating our projects and ourselves from them.³ Positioning all experience as an undergoing of that which is always already underway, Romano thus belongs to a lineage of phenomenologists (e.g. Levinas and Waldenfehls) whose theoretical edifices place an ontological and epistemic priority on passivity and responsiveness.⁴

The selfsame happening can be understood as an “innerworldly fact” and as an “event” in the proper sense. (The example of a birth makes this evident.) Yet it is only with respect to the addressed quality of events and a subject’s subsequent transformation of possibilities (including altered understandings) that, for Romano, the true phenomenality of events is manifested. The priority of events, and thus a full appreciation of our relations to them go missing in the explanatory reduction of events to object-like “innerworldly facts.” Romano’s distinction is articulated along with a critique of the social sciences. Anthropology is his prime example. He illustrates his critique by way of a description of the interpersonal encounter. Interpreted from an evential phenomenology, each of us has a singular history and,

³There are clear implications here for what temporal perspective could give us access to the subject as undergoing and appropriating possibilities from events (in Romano’s terms, as “advenant” -- the one who becomes herself by “advening” to what happens to her). While setting its own distinctive course, Romano’s parsing bears a family resemblance to phenomenological critiques of a social scientists’ liability to mischaracterize the meaning-structures operative in lived experience. Alfred Schutz (1967), for instance, famously argued that the temporal vantage of the social scientist observer tended to produce a mischaracterization goal-oriented action as an effect of prior causes (so-called “because motives”) rather than an ever-adjusting directedness to end-states envisaged in the future perfect (“in-order-to motives”).

⁴By “responsiveness” we have in mind an approach to phenomenology that runs through Husserl (passive synthesis) to Merleau-Ponty (2012) to Levinas (1969) to Waldenfehls (2011) to Wentzer (2014). Responsive phenomenology has also recently gained traction within phenomenological anthropology in the work of Leistle (2016), Grøne (Grøne & Mattingly, 2018), and Mattingly et al. (2018).

correspondingly, a singular range of possibilities. The encounter with another opens us to the world in light of the other's singularizing way of meeting with and realizing her possibilities (ibid Sec. 17[b]). This does not mean that we grasp the other fully. Rather, as Romano himself observes, it is only on the condition that another radically exceeds me and my understanding that I can have the experience of coming to know her better. This project is, in principle, infinite. To know her (however well, however long) has altered my course in the world. It is precisely this sort of dynamic which Romano cautions cannot be captured from the standpoint of inner-worldly facts: "For a genuine encounter can never be reduced to its actualization as a fact; it always happens in the secret and suspense of its latency such that we are never contemporary with it and never realize it until later, 'too late' [...] when the event of an encounter has already happened, has already reconfigured our possibilities and the world" (123). In kind, the phenomenality of the event of an interpersonal encounter can never be grasped as the intersection of customary modes of interaction, the participant's social roles, personal biographies and motives, recollected first impressions, *et cetera*.

We draw on Romano's work not because we think it offers a definitive division of phenomenological labor between anthropologists and philosophers, but because it highlights a particular reading of anthropology—one sometimes espoused by anthropologists themselves—that we believe papers over the generative role of the event in anthropological thinking.

A simplified account of anthropological insight, for instance, might suggest that events (extraordinary and mundane, alike) give way to anthropological understanding only once subjected to rigorous methods which precede and configure them; observable gristful happenings are put through the methodological mill, becoming data which have natural patterns the anthropologist may interpret by applications and innovations of theory (e.g. so-called "grounded theory"). To give another take, one might argue that the ethnographer's own subjectivity (including personal and professional motives) intersects with the lives of others at variable angles of determination: any knowledge which results is the product of each actor's positionality and the entanglement of foregoing frames of reference.

Neither view can offer any meaningful place to events in Romano's sense. To different extents, both of the perspectives just depicted (in admittedly simplified form) suggest a mute genericism to events. Yet, we also think it is important to point out that neither view could characterize the phenomenality and compulsion adumbrated by Geertz' suggestion that "being there" involves a "offstage miracle" or Csordas' account of a sudden shift in perspective. Rather, events, both authors imply, transform us.

It seems to us that anthropology is not as limited to "innerworldly facts" as Romano's characterization suggests. Consider, for instance, the resonance between Romano's description of the event of an interpersonal encounter and phenomenological anthropologist Michael Jackson's description of the intersubjective conditions of possibility for ethnography. As Jackson (2009) reminds us, this is quite distinct from a mere abstract comparative view of facts and philosophies from across the world. Rather, Jackson (2009: 241) writes,

As an ethnographer, I question this view on the grounds that this distant ‘axis of world history’ gives us only worldviews to engage with, not lifeworlds in which to sojourn. If one is to actually put oneself in the position of others it is never enough simply to think one’s thoughts by way of theirs; one must, at all costs, access and experience directly the lives that others live in their own place.

Anthropology’s proneness to events is first and foremost a matter of taking up an intersubjective ground. This intersubjectivity/intercorporeality entails a kind of dislocation of interest which is central to ethnography. Particularly in the context of phenomenological anthropology, the objective is not first and foremost to query the event’s meaning for ourselves, or to putatively distill the facts of culture and place, still less to abstract to generalities which conceivably transcend the event. Rather, the objective for a distinctively anthropological phenomenology, at least, when we hold the event close in the way that we should, is to draw each of these threads in a movement toward what’s happening within the world that a singular event initiates and makes evident. The eventive ground of anthropology—those singular happenings into which the ethnographer is incorporated and from and through which they are opened to the possibility of new thinking—is thus generative of an ability to think anew in the context of a dynamic and ever changing in-between.

It is precisely in this intersubjective and worldly in-between that what one of us (Throop, 2012, 2018) has termed the “ethnographic *epoché*” can arise. Unlike Husserl’s method of bracketing, the ethnographic *epoché* is unwilling; it is not a project of the anthropologist. Rather, the modification that arises and the new horizon of understanding which flairs up along with it is a product of an intersubjective encounter in which one’s own mode of existence is at its limit and out of place. At the pith, the ethnographic *epoché* occurs when we are “compelled by another to interrupt our tendency to assimilate experience to the self-sameness of our being, we thus become opened to possibilities for seeing other ways of being that are not, and yet may never be, our own” (Throop, 2012: 282). This ethnographic *epoché* (whether or not it is undergone with a phenomenological attitude) is an essential moment in experiences of ethnographic insight that so often anchor our descriptions of “being there.”

We caution against thinking of the ethnographic *epoché* as a moment of sudden and total comprehension, however. With regard to “totality,” what opens in such moments is instead a glimmer of potentiality that discloses an excessive otherwise that is non-totalizable and indeterminate. In other words, we can always see another aspect or side to what has happened. With regard to the experience of “suddenness,” while such moments may seemingly disclose insight all at once, it is often the case that there has been a gradual gathering attunement to constitutive conditions within which events unfold. Yet, further, in many cases we anthropologists feel ourselves persistently drawn toward something or struggling to understand something through an event. Accordingly, we often return again and again to rethink events and to reconsider what they have disclosed. In such instances, we are saturated by a sense of temporality, of how long it takes to understand and how necessarily incomplete and incremental such forms of understanding are. The temporality opened up by events is a key dimension of the ethnographic *epoché*, and the variable *durée* of

coming to see otherwise points up yet another reason why we should be careful not to enframe events within the limits of our explanations of what happened. Accordingly, even the most epiphanic moments are products of an ongoing passive affection (Husserl, 2001) that is responsive to unfolding events that always in part exceed our efforts to grasp them.

From the start, affection is integral to events becoming a part of the ethnographic record; writing a field note, taking a photograph, or deploying any other methodological tool depends on a salience which is often inexplicable in the moment. Indeed, the passivity through which the ethnographic ground operates is probably most visible not in those moments where everything clicks, but through events that exhibit a lasting pull on our attention (see Throop & Duranti, 2015) despite our failure to form a satisfying or lasting grip on their meaning. It has a pull because it is still open. This event that strikes us can become the ground of our thinking because of the horizon of possibility it makes visible in its excess. As the anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly (2019) has recently argued, ethnographic experiences retain “perplexing particulars.” Mattingly goes on to show that while the function of social theoretical concepts is to present a constant, the act of exemplifying those concepts through phenomenological description reveals destabilizing particulars.

In time, the struggle to think with an event which has strongly affected us may itself give rise to a search for an altered frame of reference. The anthropologist Paul Stoller’s (2013) essay “Religion and the Truth of Being” highlights the place of more opaque events in instigating thinking—even without resolution. Stoller recounts how, years into his apprenticeship in Songhay sorcery, he hubristically undertook a ritual suited only to a much more advanced practicante. Shortly after bungling the entailed sacrifice, Stoller experienced a rapid succession of misfortunes, culminating in intensive illness. In the wake of these calamities, a mentor in sorcery convinced Stoller that the anthropologist must have been ensorcelled by an enemy—an attack made possible by Stoller’s amateur attempt at the sacrificial rite. Unable to explain nor dismiss his bodily ailments, the event outstripped Stoller’s own socialized capacities to produce any answer; it could be only the response of another, his mentor, that sufficed to lend sense to the event. Reflecting on the significance of having his own capacity to provide answers exhausted, Stoller (2013:164) offers that,

It is important to describe ritual practices and beliefs and compare and contrast them to [...] refine our comprehension of the human condition. Anthropologies of religion, however, can also document practices and events that challenge our fundamental being in the world, practices and events that, despite our best efforts, cannot be reduced to a set of logically coherent propositions that explain the here and now. Knowledge of these events can expand our imaginative capacity and enable us to refine our thinking about and representation of social worlds.

These extraordinary events reveal an inherent limitation in undertaking an account of the human by backtracking from events to their putatively determinate structures. Stoller’s suggestion that there is another mode in which anthropology may operate is linked to the eventive nature of anthropological understanding. Happenings that defy rational explanation open us to the possibility that we might “push ourselves

beyond the analytical world... and move into the narrative worlds in which we can explore the sinuous paths of experience that take us toward a truth of being” (166). Here we feel Stoller is nudging us a step closer toward the productivity of that exposure and the inherent excess that events present. Perhaps it’s the extraordinariness of *this* experience that has moved Stoller to advocate for a more open, experiential focus—but as phenomenology carefully maintains, *all* experience has this kind of excessive dimensionality. As Jackson (2009: 236) observes,

To fully recognize the eventfulness of being is to discover that what emerges in the course of any human interaction overflows, confounds and goes beyond the forms that initially frame the interaction as well as the reflections and rationalizations that follow from it.

The indeterminacy of events means that, in thinking with them, we are often confronted with the limitations of our conceptual grasp. Potentiating all ethnographic accounts, singularizing their details, and extending beyond all methodological and epistemological stances and debates, are the events of fieldwork themselves. Once it is made a part of an anthropological account, what counts as a part of an event certainly entails a constitutive recognition of some determinative difference (boundary) between what was part of the event and what was not. But this delimitation is subsequent to (and dependent upon) the sense of some coherence indissoluble from the event itself—what it was that people were ‘wrapped up in’. It is thus fundamental to the ethnographic way into phenomenology that we work from within those contours of involvement.

4 A Handshake (or Staying with Events)

In the sections above we emphasized the way ethnographic events function as a ground in their eventing as otherwise than the anthropologist’s own way of being. From the start, anthropologists are involved in the opening of a world by and with others. Yet, in practice, the ethnographic “all at once” is never all and always. Events are inexhaustible, pulling out attention again and again to consider and reconsider what it is they have to tell us. To appreciate anthropology’s potential as a phenomenology, consideration must extend to the manner in which anthropological thinking doubles back on the contours of that involvement in order to explicate the socio-cultural context the event draws into relation: proceeding to think events from events.

By way of proceeding, we would like to introduce an ethnographic example that will give readers a relatively backstage glimpse. There is not a terminal conclusion to make about the ethnographic context from which we draw this example; we don’t intend to systematically examine a particular aspect of culture, for instance. Instead, as an illustration of the eventive condition of possibility for our thinking, we want to demonstrate how events, even ones which retain a salient opacity, still form the horizon of our inquiry—drawing the anthropologist’s phenomenological investigation beyond the questions she brings to the research.

Several years ago, one of us (Christopher) conducted an ethnographic study of converts to the “charismatic Christian” movement (see Stephan, 2017). A product of the Pentecostal movement that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, charismatic Christianity is named for the *charisms* (loosely, “spiritual gifts”) that form a distinctive rhizome of theologies and bodily practices running throughout otherwise discrete Christian denominations. The titular spiritual gifts include, among a variable range of practices, forms of prophecy, faith healing, and speaking in tongues. It was during this research that Debra was interviewed. Debra had joined a charismatic church about four years prior to the interview discussed here. Willing to share what had initially drawn her to the congregation, she also reflected on how her experience of the sacred had changed in the process of joining the group.

Throughout their interview, Debra spoke slowly and deliberately, choosing her words with care to ensure that they captured as best as possible what she took to be the essence of her practice, her experience, and her faith. What she spoke of was of great importance to her and she seemed concerned throughout to ensure that she was making herself properly understood. And yet, she had, it seemed, reason to think that her experiences would not be readily grasped by others. Indeed, she made it clear that her former self would not have been able to relate to what she was currently recounting. Several times during the early parts of the interview, Debra suggests that despite her Christian upbringing, she had never experienced God so “completely” before joining the charismatic movement. When she was asked what had changed, Debra offered an account of the events leading up to her first charismatic experience. At times, as she narratively probed the contours of these significant life events and searched for the right words, it appeared that the meanings of Debra’s experiences were still unfolding. In the years since the interview, particular moments where the indeterminacy of the encounter have stood out and continued to raise questions and inspire repeated examination. So much so, that an account of what exactly transpired in the unfolding interaction seemed difficult to pin down. It is upon one of these segments, an 11-min stretch of the interview, that we focus our attention below.

Four or five years before she joined her current church Debra had been in and out of psychiatric hospitals for issues related to drug use. Following these episodes, she moved in with her parents to convalesce. Throughout that time, she had recurring nightmares and panic attacks. She recalls being awakened every night by the visceral feeling of being choked. Though she elides any specific details about the “really dark stuff” appearing in her dreams, let alone to the waking horrors to which they may have corresponded, she offered a detailed account of her solace. Waking every night in terror she would retreat to her parents’ bedroom. To comfort her, Debra’s father would eventually walk her back to her own room, sit at the side of her bed, pray with her, and ask her to confess and to accept God’s forgiveness for anything she was feeling guilty about. He would then tell her the story of Jesus until, at last, she fell asleep. Sometimes they would have to do this multiple times a night. This routine carried on for a year.

As Debra tells it, she started a new chapter in her life only with an extraordinary event. Her brother had been drawn to charismatic Christian spirituality and traveled to attend a number of special events at different churches. One weekend, when

Debra was staying with him, he told her he wanted to share a video recording of one of these special services. The video was playing a pastor's prayer when Debra recalls that she "suddenly" began feeling... Her words trail off. Laughing with her face in her hands, she asks "How do you explain? How do you explain experiences? That's what you're asking me to do!"

When she resumes her story, Debra reports having felt waves of something she settles on describing as "heat" coming out of the TV and "filling up the room." She laughs again trying to recap the scene that unfolded: her brother, laying his hand on her in prayer; the pastor in the television continuing her prayer as "stuff" radiated out from the screen; her own reaction: praising God like she never had before. As she felt these waves wash over her, a mental picture, a montage of episodes from her life, like so many jumbled puzzle pieces, merged to form a clear gestalt-like image. She felt in that moment such heights of happiness as she witnessed an emerging coherence, depicting a subtle but pervasive sequence of divine interventions, gradually revealing a purpose behind her suffering. She says she began yelling, laughing and crying all at once, repeatedly calling out "God, you are faithful!"

Since that time, she has repeatedly had experiences where God's guiding hand and His character were revealed in the patterns of her life. While it seemed like she was just about to continue elaborating this point, she stopped her story suddenly to ask, "Are you interested?" The question comes as a surprise to Christopher, who assures her of his genuine curiosity. Following these assurances, however, Debra doesn't continue on this topic. Instead, there's a brief silence.

Given that this was an event she was holding out as a turning point, it felt appropriate to ask whether she "felt like she understood what was happening at the time." Debra was rightfully concerned about her experiences being misconstrued, brushed aside, or explained away. So, when asked about whether she "understood" what was happening at the time, Debra went to remarkable lengths to be precise in her response about the sense in which an experience such as hers could be understood. We offer a transcription of the next few minutes of conversation that followed upon Debra's reflective pause.⁵

Shaking Hands (Transcription)

Chris: Did you? Did you feel like you understood what was happening at the time? Or were you a little bit like, not sure what it is but I'm going to go with it?

Debra: Yeah there's an understanding that I have. But it's an internal, like, experiential understanding? Like. Hhh ((sigh)). Like? (9 sec)

Ok. (2.5 sec)

⁵Loosely following common transcription conventions, we punctuate based on the delivery of utterances rather than grammatical rules. Italics mark emphatic intonation. Double parentheses mark notes on significant extra-linguistic communication. Time in single parentheses denotes significant pauses in speech. If you are unfamiliar with transcripts, try getting a feel for the dialogue by reading a passage out loud, using the punctuation and pauses as a guide to pacing.

When you read a book? Or you um. (1 sec)

How do I do this? Ok. (3.5 sec)

What kind of an understanding is it? (11 sec)

Ok. (6.5 sec)

Like. (2.5 sec)

Let's say, ok. Let's shake hands.

Chris: Ok.

((Shaking hands briefly))

Debra: We have an understanding. We shook hands. You understand the way I understand. It's an experiential understanding because it's an action?

Chris: Right.

Debra: You know. But there's a different kind of understanding that I think that you're asking me. Is like, a knowledge understanding. A book understanding. That's a different type of, like, *understanding* ((gestures and tone mark out word)).

Chris: hmm

Debra: You don't always *understand* your experiences. And being able to explain them. In words that. And that's why this is hard. Is because I'm trying to explain to you so that people can understand. But if you haven't experienced it you don't know what that's like. But once you've experienced it, like the shaking of hands

Chris: mhmm

Debra: you have an understanding of it and you know what that's like. You have an understanding of that. Umm. You may not know what that's going to mean for you? What that's going to look like? How that's going to open up. How it's gonna change your life. You don't know that. You don't know what it's going to be like. Um. You don't always know those kinds of things. Like, wow. How is this experience? You know that it has changed your life. You know that you've experienced something that you can never. You're never gonna forget that.

Chris: mhmm

Debra: But you don't know how it's gonna change the rest of your life. You don't have an understanding of that probably.

Chris: hmmm

Debra's interview, especially the portions recounted here, stood out amongst the stories and observations gathered over the course of the ethnographic project. Emerging from the interview, Debra's juxtaposition of "experiential" and "book" knowledge was notable. Certainly one way to proceed in analyzing what happened would be to examine this distinction as an idiom of charismatic experience. One might, for instance, think of these categories as corresponding to cultural sensibilities loosely parallel to the distinction between "knowing how" and "knowing that"

(Ryle, 1945) or related psychological distinctions (various iterations of which can be traced back at least as far as the Aristotelian dichotomy of *techne* and *episteme*). Articulated as much through the haptics and *hexis* of the handshake as through her words, Debra seemed to offer an idiom through which to exhibit the prioritization of cultural modalities of embodiment over theological categories evidenced throughout much of charismatic Christian practice (see Csordas, 1994). Such a project, demonstrating how epistemic styles complement cultural ontologies, would contribute to a long-running current in anthropology (e.g. Csordas, 1994, 2002; Goulet, 1998; Luhrmann, 2012).

Even in this first impression, we can see a pattern of the anthropologist's affection by events: the emergence of a theme for thinking that at once challenges the ethnographer's assumptions—on display, for instance, in what retroactively appears as an equivocal question—and draws around itself a host of prior experiences which the ethnographer may now see in a different light. Nevertheless, despite exemplifying several of the most distinguishing traits of charismatic Christian ecstasy, the encounter has yet to yield a straightforward explanation. That is, this ethnographic scene has always appeared as much more, even perplexingly more, than an apt illustration of a cultural phenomenon. Debra tells her story as a response to a question about what instigated a shift in the style of her religious experience—she cannot speak to the transformation without recounting the event, even though it is difficult to do so. Rather than merely seeking to abstract from and elaborate the culturally generalizable significance of her distinction, we might also ask how the salient particulars of an ethnographically motivated encounter with Debra impacted her distinction between “book” and “experiential” knowledge to clarify what is going on when she deploys this dichotomy in the course of narrating a transformational process in her life. How does this show forth in the event of the unfolding ethnographic scene, such that the distinction could subsequently appear as a vital theme for further thought? To answer this question, we must return our attention to the eventive ground of the interview.

Even before Christopher's question concerning what she understood at the time of her supernatural encounter, Debra wrestles with the ineffability of her experience. All through the narrative she hesitates in a search for words. When she settles on one, she sometimes marks it with a questioning intonation. (It's not exactly “heat” that comes out of the television in waves but “heat?”) Her laughter, too, draws attention to the exasperation she feels at subjecting this lived experience to language. “How do you explain experiences?” she asks as she laughs, “That's what you're asking me to do!” When she is asked to qualify her understanding of the event at the time of its occurrence, her caesura lengthen dramatically—as long as 9 and 11 s (for those not accustomed to working with interview data we recommend setting a timer for 11 s to experience firsthand how long such a pause can be, especially in the midst of an unfolding turn of talk).

Debra's long silences make this inchoateness intersubjectively felt. Linked together by false starts and moments where she openly expresses her struggle even to begin to describe her “understanding,” the pauses generate suspense. By conversational standards, these lapses are incredibly long. There is nothing to do but await

her words. The search for words speaks to Debra's own grappling with excess and is thus disclosive of the real-time unfolding of her struggle to think through and articulate her experience. The lived duration of such pauses also reveals something of what the anthropologist must undergo with her. The pauses turn listening into waiting—drawing out the tempo of their interactions long enough for the anthropologist to consciously speculate (sometimes multiple times) as to what she might be trying to express. Each utterance, when it arrives, comes as an explicit reminder that such speculative flights are inadequate to the task of understanding her. Every such pause eludes a clear determination and thus calls for a return to focus again upon the excessiveness of another's experience. Returning to the video recording to transcribe and analyze the conversation, we again watch and feel her struggling to put words to her experience. As Debra gropes for language, we witness the inchoateness she finally finds a means (partly non-verbal) to express.

The intercorporeality of the handshake, each reaching out for and taking hold of the other's hand in a reciprocal gesture, instigates a shift from explanation to demonstration, from a telling to a showing. Acting together seeks to anchor a mutuality of experience. "We have an understanding. We shook hands. You understand the way I understand," she says. The necessity of analogizing from bodily experience, however, also underscores the ineffability of Debra's supernatural encounter. The reversion to touch thus works contrapuntally: reinforcing the mutuality of the interlocutors' bodily rootedness in the world while underscoring the distance between Debra's experience and the two interlocutors' rudimentary common ground. The anthropologist would have to start from the primal certainty of the body (such as it is) just like she had. The handshake also entails a palpable alterity, evoking at once the intimacy and otherness of Debra's experience. To stake their mutual understanding on the intercorporeality of touch is, in this sense, to reject equating her experience to whatever might already be familiar.

For Debra, then, the revelatory event she manages to describe so vividly is riddled with opacities. And yet it is she who directs her story through this event, though she struggles to formulate a satisfying description even before she is asked to qualify her understanding. She cannot ignore this event. The silences, exasperation, and handshake each punctuate and make palpable the hold of her spiritual experience, even as they are themselves manifested in a new encounter with the anthropologist. It was from these extraordinary manifestations that the event of the interview kept Christopher's encounter with Debra from ever becoming a simple example, a token of a type of charismatic experience. Her caesura, the handshake, and the notion of "experiential understanding" that emerge from it, are not simply the extension of an idiom that draws attention to an aspect of charismatic embodiment. They are part and parcel of a transformational process; a process that also reveals something of her distinctive way of being in, and responding to, the world.

As we follow Debra's distinctions we should consider that the ultimate significance of the event may be uncovered not through an appeal to explanatory factors or categories of experience but through the new configuration of world and possibility brought into being by her ecstatic experience. Debra doesn't offer a final conclusion. She insists on the evolving meaning of her experiences and her faith. The

distinctions she draws (e.g. between book understanding and experiential understanding) are aimed toward this end—not resisting a determinative understanding so much, perhaps, as trying to evoke the feeling of having undergone an event (or series of events) which has instigated a shift and still exhibits a bearing on her life. The kind of understanding she has isn't like a definition or citable fact; it doesn't exhibit the closure of book knowledge. Instead, she emphasizes these events as an origin. The ritual of the handshake evokes a beginning as much as it demonstrates the bodily conditions of possibility for understanding. "Since that time," she remarks, "God has continued to reveal himself to me in lots of ways." Again, stressing the transformative dimension, she muses that, "You may not know what that's going to mean for you? What that's going to look like? How that's going to open up. How it's gonna change your life." Debra's "experiential understanding" is, in this sense, also an adventure.

Debra's long stretches of silence, false starts, expressions of exasperation, and, finally, inspiration when she seizes upon a modality of experience through which to express the ineffable are all relived in a transposed modality each time the anthropologist returns to transcribe and analyze the interview. Returning from this ethnographic encounter to it (now in the form of videographic images and sounds) the interaction anchors the horizon from within which we as anthropologists must think. It is inevitable, then, that we are re-immersed in the daunting density of sensations, acts, images, and people Debra's story holds in relation. In that respect, Debra's own terms render dissonant any effort to encapsulate her epiphany as a mere exemplar or product of beliefs, practices, and psychological processes at play in charismatic communities. When a new aspect of the unfolding scene catches our eye we are again confronted with the richness of the original encounter and challenged to think again. These alternating ways of thinking from the encounter may unfold along uneven timelines, some meanings appearing suddenly and others disclosed slowly over numerous returns to the video inscribed and now transcribed scene. As these moments sediment, an expanding sense of the eventive ground can simultaneously disclose social conditions or cultural subjectivities, and singularizing biographies, while evincing excesses which elude our present meaning. In Debra's case, we can learn something about what mystical experience entails from a charismatic Christian standpoint and something of her unique style of being a charismatic Christian in light of her history and self-experience, all without ever exhausting the event. This is not simply an argument for anthropologists, at least insofar as they aim to make phenomenological analyses, to consequently aim for multivocality. A surfeit of themes and details are not the event as such. Instead, what we hope to show in this analysis are the ways to stretch to imagine how anthropological phenomenology can conduct its thinking and writing in ways that invoke their eventive grounds. We're *bound to*—caught up in and directed toward—specific events and the horizons those events make visible. The eventive ground of anthropology thus functions in a way that is quite distinct from (while maintaining a family resemblance to) the phenomenological methods at the disposal of our philosophical counterparts.

5 Writing from and Towards the Event

The eventiveness of phenomenological anthropology gives us a different perspective from which to think about the relationship between the anthropological and philosophical traditions. Classical phenomenology was notoriously skeptical of anthropology as a regional science. Partly, this skepticism stemmed from Husserl's rejection of empiricism. Husserl himself seems to have softened his view toward anthropology late in his career—coming to believe that facts about another way of being could help enrich phenomenological probes into issues of generativity and the lifeworld (see Throop, 2018). Merleau-Ponty's relationship with Claude Lévi-Strauss's thinking is the most notable of all such exceptions—suggesting, even, a new model (e.g. Merleau-Ponty's concept of the “Lateral Universal”) (see Sato, 2014). Nevertheless, some skepticism seems to remain.⁶ The most topical example is Claude Romano's claims in *Event and World* that anthropology misses the event as such, and merely probes for explanatory mechanisms that treat the event as if an object, reducible to the empirical givens. Our modest rebuttal has been that the way phenomenologically-inclined anthropologists regard events as a ground for thinking suggests a different, more “evential” sensibility. In concluding, we offer brief remarks on the promise of anthropological philosophy.

We have described a perspective from which to rethink the importance of “being there” in ethnographic research. Even outside phenomenological applications, anthropology is generated through events. It is a lived experience of singularizing events that grounds their meaning even when the eventness of their showing is absent from description. What these instances show is that anthropology—including phenomenological anthropology—does not always succeed in holding those events close. Even these lapses can be useful, but they don't make the most of or hold true to the events that make them possible. The events in which ethnographers are enfolded will always give more than we can speak to. This excess is clearly evident even from the snippet of ethnographic description and transcript we have shared. It is worth noting that this exposure to excess is always operative in the genre of ethnographic writing: we expose, to some extent, the event that we're treating as our “data.” Readers always get something we didn't intend to foreground or had even seen within the data presented. It is entailed in this glimpse of excess, it seems, that everyone has their take. Sometimes these are useful. Sometimes they involve a lot of fantasy. Either way, we are exposed through others' own responses to the eventive horizons of what we have treated as data. We are confronted with the excess. The events that we're mostly likely to write about are those that exhibit and “pull” on our attention. We continue to live from these events, and to think in return

⁶For their own part, anthropologists have often expressed skepticism about the universalizability of philosophy—a reception that stems, in part, from anthropology's natal criticism of armchair theory. In the context of a volume devoted to the place of philosophical theory in anthropology, we have articulated our own rebuttal to reactionary rejections of philosophy and our own way of approaching a partnership (Throop & Stephan, 2023).

to them. Inevitably only a fragment of this eventive ground can find its way into our writing.

In this respect, philosophical phenomenology, historically, has gotten anthropology wrong—at least, it has often been wrong about anthropology’s possibilities (and, in so doing, overlooked its eventive conditions of possibility). The best anthropology holds the event close in its analysis—even while it cannot gather the event up in any totalizing way. The worst makes believe that what has been gathered is captured without remainder. Our point is not just to claim that anthropology is inherently concerned with making events manifest in their eventness, but to inquire into why it is able to do so. It’s not because of anthropological methods and theories; it’s not inherent to anthropology that events show through: it is instead because the events themselves make anthropology possible. As we have articulated elsewhere (Throop and Stephan, 2023): philosophy can help return us to the open horizon of the event.⁷ In doing so, phenomenology can also help anthropology to break out from its recurring impulse to present a totalizing account of events. At the same time, what anthropological method inevitably does is expose phenomenological methods and concepts to the eventive ground of ethnography. And it is owing to this ever-present eventive ground of potentiality that we submit that anthropology’s relationship to phenomenological philosophy should neither simply be that of offering up potentially mind-expanding curiosities about the world outside of Western academia, nor that we should be aiming to replicate the project of phenomenological philosophy (of which Romano’s critique is a part). Rather, anthropology’s genuine responsivity to singular events is one of an in-between-ness, made possible in the first instance by the intersubjective space opened by the events of fieldwork, and further realized by the anthropological phenomenologist’s return and fidelity to the event in analysis and writing: It unfolded at this time, this place, with these fellow beings; here, now, and together we are singularly and asymmetrically situated—and it will never be in the same way again.

The position we stake out here is an admittedly aspirational one. Yet it seeks to show what a phenomenological anthropology is capable of being, based on the eventness that makes it possible in the first place. Anthropology, so long as it holds the event close, cannot just be an accumulation of comparative information about lives elsewhere. It has to tap into something different—a unique ground from which to think. We would have nothing to say (that philosophers could not say and say better) if it were not for this relationship to the events of fieldwork. By the same token, phenomenology could not reach us and inspire if we were not already attuned to events. Phenomenological anthropology offers an in-between which aims to think phenomenologically from an eventive ground that always exceeds and transforms the grasp of the familiar.

⁷There’s a natural partnership here, in our minds: the singular ethnographic event has an open horizon, but so does the phenomenological method.

References

- Bidney, D. (1973). Phenomenological method and the anthropological science of the cultural life-world. In M. Natanson (Ed.), *Phenomenology and the social sciences*. Northwestern University Press.
- Clifford, J. (1983). On ethnographic authority. *Representations*, 2, 118–146.
- Csordas, T. J. (1994). *The sacred self: A cultural phenomenology of charismatic healing*. University of California Press.
- Csordas, T. J. (2002). *Body, Meaning, Healing*. Palgrave.
- Csordas, T. J. (2008). Intercorporeality and intersubjectivity. *Subjectivity*, 22, 110–121.
- Desjarlais, R., & Throop, C. J. (2011). Phenomenological approaches in anthropology. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 87–102.
- Geertz, C. (1988). *Works and lives: The anthropologist as author*. Stanford University Press.
- Gluckman, M. (1961). Ethnographic data in British social anthropology. *The Sociological Review*, 9(1), 5–17.
- Goulet, J-G.A. (1998). *Ways of knowing: Experience, knowledge, and power among the Dene Tha*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Grøne, L., & Mattingly, C. (2018). In search of the good old life: Ontological breakdown and responsive hope at the margins of life. *Death Studies*, 42(5), 306–313.
- Husserl, E. (2001). *Analyses concerning active and passive synthesis: Lectures on transcendental logic* (A. J. Steinbock, Trans.). Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Husserl, E. (2002 [1931]). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology* (W. R. Boyce Gibson, Trans.). Routledge.
- Jackson, M. D. (1995). *At home in the world*. Duke University Press.
- Jackson, M. D. (2009). Where thought belongs: An anthropological critique of the project of philosophy. *Anthropological Theory*, 9(3), 235–251.
- Katz, J., & Csordas, T. J. (2003). Phenomenological ethnography in sociology and anthropology. *Ethnography*, 4(3), 275–288.
- Leistle, B. (2016). Responsivity and (some) other approaches to alterity. *Anthropological Theory*, 16(1), 48–74.
- Levinas, E. (1969). *Totality and infinite: An essay on exteriority* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Duquesne University Press.
- Luhmann, T. M. (2012). *When God talks back: Understanding the American evangelical relationship with God*. Vintage Books.
- Malinowski, B. (1935). *Coral gardens and their magic*. Routledge.
- Mattingly, C., Dyring, R., Louw, M., & Wentzer, T. S. (Eds.). (2018). *Moral engines: Exploring the ethical drives in human life*. Berghan.
- Mattingly, C. (2019). Defrosting concepts, destabilizing doxa: Critical phenomenology and the perplexing particular. *Anthropological Theory*, 19(4), 415–439.
- Meacham, D. (2013). What goes without saying: Husserl's concept of style. *Research in Phenomenology*, 43, 3–26.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012). *The phenomenology of perception* (D. A. Landes, Trans.). Routledge.
- Ram, K., & Houston, C. (2015). *Phenomenology in anthropology: A sense of perspective*. Indiana University Press.
- Romano, C. (2009 [1998]). *Event and world* (S. Mackinlay, Trans.). Fordham University Press.
- Ryle, G. (1945). Knowing how and knowing that: The presidential address. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series*, 46, 1–16.
- Sato, Y. (2014). The way of the reduction via anthropology: Husserl and Lévy-Bruhl, Merleau-Ponty and Lévi-Strauss. *Bulletin d'Analyse Phénoménologique*, 10(1), 1–18.
- Schutz, A. (1967). *The phenomenology of the social world* (G. Walsh & F. Lehnert, Trans.). Northwestern University Press.

- Stephan, C. (2017). Intimate and inaccessible: Charismatic Christian perceptions of God, self and fellow believers. In B. Leistle (Ed.), *Anthropology and alterity: Responding to the other*. Routledge.
- Stoller, P. (2013). Religion and the truth of being. In J. Boddy & M. Lambek (Eds.), *A companion to the anthropology of religion*. Wiley.
- Throop, C. J. (2010). *Suffering and sentiment: Exploring the vicissitudes of experience and pain in Yap*. UC Press.
- Throop, C. J. (2012). On inaccessibility and vulnerability: Some horizons of compatibility between phenomenology and psychoanalysis. *Ethos*, 40(1), 75–96.
- Throop, C. J. (2018). Being open to the world. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 8(1/2), 197–210.
- Throop, C. J., & Duranti, A. (2015). Attention, ritual glitches, and attentional pull: The president and the queen. *Phenomenological Cognitive Science*, 14, 1055–1082.
- Throop, C. J., & Stephan, C. (2023). Husserlian horizons: moods in Yap. In T. S. Wentzer & N. O. Bubandt (Eds.), *Philosophy on Fieldwork: Case Studies in Anthropological Analysis*. Routledge.
- Waldenfehls, B. (2011). *Phenomenology of the alien: Basic concepts* (A. Kozin & T. Stähler, Trans.). Northwestern University Press.
- Wentzer, T. S. (2014). 'I have seen Königsberg burning': Philosophical anthropology and the responsiveness of historical experience. *Anthropological Theory*, 14(1), 27–48.
- Zigon, J. (2018). *Disappointment: Toward a critical hermeneutics of worldbuilding*. Fordham University Press.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

