Abstract: In this interview, Judith Butler remembers her teacher, the phenomenologist Maurice Natanson. Natanson observed that learning how to see is central to both teaching and learning, and Professor Butler reflects on Natanson’s views of the relation between perception, pedagogy, and world-making. She discusses the possibilities and limits of phenomenology, and its engagements with intentionality, reason, and faith. Professor Butler also reflects on the influence of phenomenology on her theory of gender performativity as well as her recent work on bodies in alliance.

Key words: Maurice Natanson, phenomenology, pedagogy, perception

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Gayle Salamon [GS]: In his introduction to *Phenomenology and the Social Sciences*, Maurice Natanson writes: “At issue in any teaching and learning is the ability to see that something is the case; indeed, the primordial demand is the seeing of something.” Can you talk about what, as your teacher, Maurice Natanson helped you learn how to see?

Judith Butler [JB]: Maury died twenty years ago. The Olympics were happening then. I was spending time with him and he had this idea that he wanted to watch television, he wanted to watch the Olympics on TV. So we found a television and hooked it up. He was quite ill at the time, so we had to decide on a comfortable viewing position for him. And he did not generally watch much television—it was a strange world for him. When we turned on the event, the coverage moved quickly from one sport to another, sometimes within a few minutes or a few seconds. He did not understand the quick succession of images, the way that the channels cut from one event to another without quite introducing what was happening or who was playing.

GS: The quick editing.

JB: Yes. Editing for quick transitions, as if we ourselves were on an exhilarating ride. We zoom in on swimming, and at the end of the swim race we cut over to soccer, or we go to track and field for a brief moment, and then cut. Sometimes there are multiple images on the screen at once; he was completely disoriented and upset by that visual experience. He actually had to turn it off, because it was finally just a form of suffering for him.

GS: Too fragmented or fragmenting?

JB: He could not understood what was going on, and was dismayed that the presentation was not interested in enhancing understanding. He was disturbed by the speed and the violence of the cut. Because for him, if you think about it,
phenomenological forms of seeing involve a certain kind of exfoliation of the object, into different kinds of sequences.

GS: What a great phrase.

JB: And that slow exfoliation is what allows one to grasp the object as it is. There was nothing that could be grasped for him through that kind of frantic and disjointed visual editing.

GS: Because such seeing is not the seeing of the human eye. Also because it has been predigested in some way.

JB: Maybe predigested, but maybe indigestible. Someone or something manic is directing one’s vision here and then there and then back. The assumption is that you don’t want to miss anything that might be going on, so multiple perspectives are established so that you can be in many places at the same time. But since you are in no one place for any length of time, nothing can quite be comprehended. Because you can’t even see what the event is or what’s happening, and there’s no time.

GS: Yes, because there’s nothing to unfold. You already have the interpretation of what happened: here’s the thing you need to see.

JB: Right, or perhaps there is something there to unfold, but the conditions of its unfolding are not there. And what you “need to see” is everything, and since you cannot see everything at once, you can barely see anything. The whole phenomenological idea that the object has to be temporally developed or unfolded, or slowly turned around so that it can cast all its shadows, is lost. Approaching the end of his life when he knew there was little time, he was suddenly subjected through that television coverage to a manic temporality that was nothing but a form of suffering for him. And he was very disappointed, because apparently the Olympics was one of the few sports events he really enjoyed watching, and he was very ill, looking to recover that older pleasure. He wasn’t really a sports person, but he understood the agonistic drama of the competition. The good play. The manifestation of excellence under pressure.

Well, I love this sentence that you found in the introduction.

GS: It is intricately connected to what you were just describing. How to see. The conditions under which seeing something is possible. And the suffering that results when we are unable to see.

JB: So the question of how you found this quotation, or why it caught your attention would also be interesting to know.

GS: Well, I taught this piece, this introduction, when I was teaching a graduate seminar on phenomenology. One of the things that leapt out at me when I read it is that I feel like I had a certain line about pedagogy: what are we trying to do with our students? We’re trying to get them to analyze critically, right?

JB: Yes.
GS: To take what’s accepted and call it into question, to teach them to think things otherwise.

JB: Yes.

GS: Which I think is true and correct. But I’ve also been thinking lately about the ways in which my students—and I should not exempt myself from this—perhaps all of us, we have such a hard time seeing what’s right in front of us. Before critique, before analysis.

JB: Right.

GS: Just seeing what’s there.

JB: Yes.

GS: I’m sure that’s both a pedagogical problem and a human problem. We have such trouble just seeing what is here, understanding what is here. And I guess I was really struck by that line of Natanson’s. Both the importance of seeing something, learning how to see, simply seeing the thing that’s right in front of us. And how difficult that is. If that is something that needs to be taught, merely seeing what is right in front of us, it points to how difficult a task it is. That there is nothing “mere” about it.

JB: Yes.

GS: I suppose that is part of what was stirring for me, in that line of his.

JB: Well, that’s great. I wonder if it doesn’t raise the question of the dual meanings of the taken-for-granted within phenomenology. Because on the one hand, phenomenology is a critical enterprise to the degree that we approach the taken-for-granted world as a world that is constituted. It’s not given as, say, we might expect a natural fact to be given, although natural facts are also in some sense constituted. But it does get established in some way through a conscious engagement with the world. So asking questions about the taken-for-granted can be critical to the degree that we see that it is constituted or built over time. But at the same time, the taken-for-granted is also that which discloses these more fundamental structures of consciousness and its intentional relation to the world. So, on the one hand, we look to the ordinary and the taken-for-granted to find openings onto a transcendental field, which means that we do not take the taken-for-granted for granted. On the other hand, whatever there is for us to know is there, in the taken-for-granted, including those openings that we find there. Of course, for someone like Althusser ideology takes the form of the “obvious”—he used to enumerate forms of “obviousness.” The critical task was to make the obvious astonishing (in the Brechtian sense) or irrational.

But Natanson, following phenomenology, had another view. Natanson always would say, the reason he liked Edward Hopper was that there would be the façade of a house, or there’s the tunnel into which the train is moving, and those would be visual fragments from everyday life.²
**JB:** They would open up to something else. These opaque or illuminated moments take place within the everyday, and though they do not disclose a final truth, they are partial and enigmatic pathways. So maybe this is another sense of “what is right there in front of you.” When Natanson claims that at issue in any teaching and learning is the ability to see that something is the case, he’s not just talking about the world of established fact or the world of discrete objects; he’s also talking about those facts or those objects opening up a more fundamental relationship of consciousness to its world, if we know best how to approach them, or to allow for their self-disclosure.

**GS:** Could we call that its principle of organization? Or something like that?

**JB:** Yes, in a way, but it’s important to note that it’s not a kind of subjective idealism, as many people presume. It is not a strictly Kantian position. When phenomenology says that consciousness is always consciousness of the object, the “of” is almost more important than the object. Because there’s no consciousness without a preposition, and the preposition links consciousness to the world. In other words, consciousness is from the outset oriented toward that countervailing world. The “of” is that orientation, the grammatical indicator of intentionality. Consciousness exists only in a relation to that world. It’s not a subjective phenomenon that we can somehow look at apart from its relation to the world. It constitutes the world but only to the extent that the world exfoliates in the direction of consciousness.

**GS:** Although this relation is also articulated in the opposite direction. As Dan Zahavi has put it, phenomenology is only interested in consciousness because that is where the world appears. It seems to me as if there are these two opposed strains in phenomenology (and that both of them can be found in Husserl): phenomenology as an exploration of consciousness, and phenomenology as an exploration of the world.

**JB:** Well, I think that’s probably right. But they’re just two ways of emphasizing a relationship that can’t be sundered. One of the problems with taking the taken-for-granted world as functioning as limit of the horizon for the thinkable is that we never get to ask how that limit is constituted, through forms of backgrounding or exclusion. As in the Hopper paintings, we know something does not appear, and we know that from the sphere of appearance. That can be a past or a future, or another set of modalities for appearance. So when he says that teaching and learning is the ability to see that something is the case, I think he is emphasizing the ability to see, the cultivation of perception that is at least one task of the phenomenological method as he understood it. Also, we might understand as a corollary that when one sees what is right there, one also sees it by virtue of what is not there, not yet there, no longer there, perhaps also by virtue of what appears only indistinctly in the periphery or at some incalculable distance.

**GS:** It is trailing its past behind it, it has its future before it.
Judith Butler and Gayle Salamon

JB: Yes, there is a structure of anticipation that belongs to consciousness, that expects to fill out what it sees, to have the exfoliation of the object take place. And it comes with its shadows and its opacities, as does the building in Hopper’s “Early Sunday Morning.” Those discrete doors are before us, and so too is the question of what is inside. But the inside does not appear (it appears indirectly through the question that asks about it). Indeed, it would seem that within the terms of the picture, those dark doors are impenetrable—and that aspect of impenetrability is part of its phenomenological appearance.

GS: Part of its visibility is its opacity.

JB: Its thereness is bound up with what does not fully appear. So he is not asking us to become positivists. The object that appears is the object that is, but to get the full sense of the object we have to consider it from many angles and perspectives. So learning to see involves apprehending the object in its different temporal or spatial modalities or adumbrations, a series of partial apprehensions. We’re always looking from a perspective and only grasping some of its other dimensions at any given time. But we do posit those other dimensions. Sometimes in modern art, of course, we are given a fully flat face, but even that suggests something about what has happened to perception.

GS: But there’s always an impossibility of a complete disclosure of the thing.

JB: It cannot be given completely at once. The object never fully appears without its opacity. In this way, it is bound up with time and with shadows.

GS: And we can think of that, either as the ways in which it has an opacity, or as Merleau-Ponty loves to say, the ways in which it is inexhaustible.

JB: I think that’s right. I guess what always struck me as odd or interesting is the German word for adumbration, that dimension of the object, that perspective by which it is seen, and the interplay between the two. It’s *Abschattung*, which is the same root for *shade* or *shadow*. So there’s something of the shadows of the object, if we could kind of re-paraphrase psychoanalysis in a phenomenological way. The shadows of the object—its own proper shadows, as it were—are part of what there is to see.

For Natanson, teaching people to see what is the case, the ocularcentrism is to some extent figural, for the kind of seeing that is important to him can involve discernment through other senses. I thought when I first read this there was an admonition at work: the rise of fascism in Europe—how could people not see what was happening? Politically, he was always concerned: what is it that people see and don’t see? He was very upset when Reagan got elected. I found him the next morning on the bus wearing a black armband. And he looked around the bus and said: who are these people? What do these people think they’re doing? What have they done? He was alarmed that people were sleepwalking, politically. Did they not see that we just elected somebody who would destroy our ideals of
democracy? Or what is it that the Germans failed to see when their neighbors were censored and carted away?

**GS:** How did this come to be? What were the conditions of its becoming?

**JB:** Perhaps there is something about being able to see and say that something is the case. That this has come about, and that this is the reality. There might be wonder about an infant coming into the world, but there might also be alarm at forms of destructiveness coming into the world. There is an exclamatory character to the speech that marks that something has come to be. And when he says, “the primordial demand is the seeing of something,” that’s an intense phrase! The primordial demand. Where does that demand come from? It’s not exactly God’s demand. It’s a Levinasian language, right? The primordial demand is the seeing of something.

**GS:** It is the demand of the one who teaches, yes? But also . . .

**JB:** The demand of the one who teaches or the one who is taught. It’s unclear. It almost seems like the primordial demand is for the teacher to see something, for the student to see something, for both to see something. But even in this phraseology, we see the primordial demand is the seeing OF something.

**GS:** And there is that “of,” again.

**JB:** Yes, that preposition. The seeing of something is not simply, “I see what I see—leave me alone!” A smug subjective moment. Nor is it quite the perspectivalism that belongs to relativism: “well, I don’t see the same thing that you see.” Neither one of those positions is worlded.

**GS:** Both of those positions would express the kind of subjective monadism of which phenomenology is often accused.

**JB:** Right. But it’s the seeing OF something, which means there is a demand coming from the world to see something in the world, and I suppose that demand is not made just to one person or another, but to any number of people who are in the position to see. So I actually wonder if the demand belongs to the object, its own form of address, perhaps also its obdurance as object.

**GS:** “Apprehend me.” I wonder whether the object knows if it’s being apprehended well or poorly. If this is not part of its demand: Apprehend me well! Apprehend me accurately, properly!

**JB:** We can personify the object in order to lend it agency, but perhaps the agency of the object is not quite captured by personification. Consciousness is ontologically and ethically tied to its world. Even the most extreme efforts to separate consciousness from its world can only be attenuations of that relationship.

**GS:** That is to say, it’s not possible to separate consciousness from its world in a way that would leave me to conclude that I can see this only thin veneer, and the reality of the world is elsewhere.

**JB:** You asked: can I talk about what, as my teacher, he helped me learn how to see. I wasn’t always sure that I accepted, that I knew, finally, whether phenomenol-
ogy was right or that it would prove to be sufficient as a philosophical position. I didn’t actually have a view on its ultimate truth. One would have to decide which version, at any rate, for such a question to be answerable. I came to understand it as a very rich way of seeing. But I probably remained a little bit agnostic on the final truth. To some extent, I tried to learn to inhabit his way of seeing, and that took some imagination. He gave me another way to live in the everyday and to find flashes of transcendence in a world that seemed rather bleak.

GS: So you were able to imaginatively inhabit his way of seeing. And it helped you. How did it help you?

JB: It helped me, I think, grasp the world in a more complex way. I met him first when he was teaching Kierkegaard, and in that context he was arguing that there is a limit to reason, that we cannot hope to capture all the reasons for why something happens or even for what is demanded of us. At first, I thought phenomenology was the more “rational” side of his existential thought, but perhaps there is also an “inexhaustibility” proper to phenomenology, in that way of encountering the world, the way the world gives itself in its partial and endless way.

Natanson had a conviction that consciousness was endowed with a capacity to know the world and that is because consciousness belonged to the world, or that the world belonged to consciousness. I came to understand that noetic-noematic correspondence, but I’m not sure I came to accept it.

GS: Well, I don’t think you believe that at all.

JB: Really?

GS: I think this is the area where your thinking departs most strongly from his.

JB: Explain how, if you can.

GS: It seems to me that your own thinking, and perhaps in particular the Hegelianism in your own thinking, would not agree with this notion that everything is knowable, or his emphasis on reason. And I am not sure whether or not Natanson’s emphasis, his insistence even, on the primacy of reason is a continuation or a break with the phenomenological tradition.

JB: Yes. Say more.

GS: Natanson says this in the introduction to *Phenomenology and the Social Sciences*: “Taken together, phenomenology and social science are ways of honoring philosophy by reaffirming the privileged station of reason.” It has always been surprising to me, the idea that a shoring up of the “privileged station” of reason is where we land at the end of all of this phenomenology. I would see your work as departing from that conclusion, the fortification of reason, fairly sharply.

JB: It depends on what you mean by reason.

GS: For me it has always been a surprising and counterintuitive move, that his argument ends up landing there.

JB: Of course, he did have a pretty rich idea of the logos and reason. But we have to ask what that means in his work. Reason wasn’t a purely subjective capacity,
although there was a rational structure of consciousness, perhaps to be found in the idea of logical form, that corresponded to the rational structure of the world.

**GS:** So this is then part of the thing that Natanson enjoins us to see? That reason isn’t in the head, isn’t *in here.* It’s in the world as much as it is in us?

**JB:** Yes. It might be found in the structured and constitutive way that we do see. If we can just go back to the Husserlian formulation of intentionality, he claimed that consciousness is consciousness of an object, which means that the object does not elude consciousness. I mean, the very fact that we can be conscious of an object means that that object-world is available to us, and we have what it takes to grasp that object-world. And that object-world is already in its structure potentially available to us to know. And that means that there’s no other world, and there’s no other consciousness, except for this one that is bound to its object or, rather, the horizon within which the object appears, and the broader objective world. I wonder whether this does not carry a theological sense of belonging? Even though Natanson was an existentialist in many ways, and he understood phenomenologically what it means to be estranged from the world, that constituted one modality of being conscious of the world. The world did not break away, nor did consciousness relapse into solipsism. Even though when it seeks that, and sometimes it surely does, it does not mean we are worldless or we are lost to ourselves. There was a *ratio*—a measure, a reason, a form—that one found modulated in different noetic and noematic regions. This is the kind of rationality that one finds in the doctrine of intentionality that is derived from the medieval scholastics. Perhaps that is what is meant by reason. I almost think “rationality” would be a better word . . .

**GS:** I do, too.

**JB:** . . . it is to be found in this strange intentional relation that binds consciousness and world.

**GS:** The meeting of the two, or the reaching of the two toward each other.

**JB:** Right. It’s the idea that consciousness is rationally bound up with its world under ideal conditions. It’s really reassuring and even lovely. I don’t know whether I believe it. I see the theory as supporting our sense of belonging to the world, but I am perhaps more often caught up by modes of dispossession or non-belonging.

**GS:** But if we think about the method that way, and the searching for the ideal conditions under which all of this can happen, and the need—I mean, poor Husserl!—the need to pare everything away in order that the conditions can be made ideal, then reason becomes a structure of ideality rather than a structure of givenness. His vehement conviction that we can arrive at those ideal conditions if we are methodologically strict enough. There is something kind of touching in that, either hopeless or hopeful, I cannot decide which!

**JB:** Yes. I think that the epoché in which we suspend our belief in the taken-for-granted world was an ascetic exercise, right? You had to set aside your
impassioned engagement with the world. It was nearly Cartesian, as the first of
the *Cartesian Meditations* shows. As much as Natanson was engaged by Sartre, he
was also constantly offering the Husserlian corrective to Sartre. It wasn’t going to
be that consciousness was forlorn in its world and there was no connection, even
though it surely *felt like that*. So what was his rejoinder?

**GS:** So the ascetic exercise was also about at the same time being all the way
immersed in the world?

**JB:** It depends on how we understand “immersion.” One could not, for
instance, see this other form of connectedness through political engagement,
through being immersed in the world in the Sartrean way. You had to actually
step back and undergo this suspension of belief in order to see how that world is
constituted and your own consciousness as linked to the world, this rationality
that binds consciousness to its world. One finds again a home in the world, or one
finds that the world is in some sense structured in such a way that you can “get it”
and it can “get you.” And there is that notion in Merleau-Ponty of the intentional
relation as a kind of embrace; that holds true even in the most extreme experiences
of estrangement where one feels let go, abandoned not just by this or that person,
but by the world. Natanson acknowledged that existentialism articulated that form
of estrangement, one that for him belonged to the postwar years, after the Nazi
genocide, when so many Jewish intellectuals understood themselves as abandoned
by God. Phenomenology emerges in the midst of that historical experience for
Natanson. It gave him a method that was not quite the same as Sartre’s notion of
political engagement. It involved the task of a deliberately disengaged reflection
that opened the possibility of regaining the world—not simply a subjective sense
of world, but the world itself.

**GS:** A deliberately disengaged reflection on one’s necessary immersion.

**JB:** If what you mean is that there is a reflection on our immersion in everyday
life, even a kind of second-order consciousness that accompanies that engagement,
then yes. It’s not as if Natanson did not know there would be terrible error and
distortion and estrangement and many ways of feeling massively disconnected
from all sorts of activities and powers. He surely did know that. He taught Dos-
toyevsky. But he was also opposed to modes of immediate immersion that failed
to reflect on that activity. One could see his deep opposition to fascism there.

**GS:** And that this very method, what he is doing, is a way of trying to grapple
with the horrors of the war.

**JB:** Yes. And he was at the New School for Social Research in the 1950s with
many European exiles, and though he was born in Brooklyn, he had a strong sense
of his Eastern European Jewish origins. Like so many others at the time—and
so many others in our time—he was mindful of what it meant to be radically
displaced from one’s taken-for-granted world. And the question was: how does
one establish connection under such circumstances? And he studied with Alfred
Schütz who constantly offered examples from everyday life, even though like many other European exiles, he knew full well what happens when ordinary life is destroyed.

**GS:** I wanted to ask you a bit about Natanson’s relationship to philosophy and his insistence on the importance to philosophy of other companionate disciplines. He was a philosopher with an expansive if not peripatetic relationship to philosophy, and much of his work insisted on the importance of including the social sciences, literature, and poetry within its purview. What sort of influence did he have on your relationship to philosophy as an intellectual enterprise and as a discipline?

**JB:** Well, he did a great deal of work on the methodology of the social sciences, mainly in relationship to the work of Alfred Schütz. He edited those papers, wrote a really important introduction to his work, and referenced his work time and again in his own writing. Although Schütz was not interested in trying to establish the transcendental subject or the transcendental field, those questions concerned Maury. With Schütz he was interested to show the descriptive and explanatory power of the phenomenological method for the social sciences. Description would be important for explanation, and both require an adaptation of Husserl’s method of imaginary variation. Natanson was not a functionalist. He did not believe that social behavior could be explained through recourse to social function alone. He thought there were variations within the most “typical” behavior. In fact, the very variability within a social practice gives you a different way of thinking about social institutions—they are composed of an open-ended series of possible practices. Moreover, those practices are ways of living in the world, inhabiting the world, and they imply a relation between the subject and its world. Of course, we could say, for example, that prisons serve many functions, including making money for states, containing and disciplining minority populations. We may think that once we know the purpose or function, we have the key to understanding the meaning of the prison. But if we actually start looking at how prisons are organized and how they organize themselves, we see that there are variable ways of constituting social reality. In other words, they are world-making operations, which does not mean that the world they create is a good one. So they are not just serving functions, they are also producing a certain idea of the world. There is a kind of claim that the institution produces through its rituals and its practices, a claim such as: this is social reality. The temporal and spatial horizon contracts, and that is part of what it means to be a prison-world.

**GS:** This brings to mind Lisa Guenther’s work about prisons as world-destroying, and the simultaneity of that creation and destruction, the world-making and also world-destroying function of the prison.

**JB:** But those might be the same moment. To be engaged in the making of that world is to undo the world as it should be. Not all worlds are good worlds.
Not all worlds can be affirmed, even though the idea of world-making continues to promise a different world.

GS: Yes.

JB: If the spatial and temporal horizon of thinking becomes restricted in prison, then there is a growing conviction that this is the way the world is. But of course utopian fiction and revolutionary thinking has also come from prisons, radical imaginings about time and space outside the walls.

GS: And this is related to what you were saying before about the positivistic limit of merely seeing what is in front of us. But look, this is the world of the prison, this is the world that is here. Without taking the step of: how did this come to be? What are the conditions of possibility that keep it in place?

JB: An interesting point given how often prisons are sequestered from public view, and how hard it is to get inside to see whether legal and human rights violations are taking place. I accept the historical argument that in the United States, the prison system is geared toward the containment and disenfranchisement of minority populations, mainly populations of color. And we can demonstrate that statistically. So that’s important. For me, personally, politically, and intellectually, that’s an important argument to make. At the same time, if that were all I did, to show that prisons do this, or serve this function, I would never be asking the question of what kind of world is a prison-world. That last seems to me to be a phenomenological question.

If we start asking about the spatial temporal constitution of the prison, its function as enclosure, its way of handling the problem of passage, its way of handling the problem of motility, or expression? All these are fundamental issues. That’s where we actually see the tributaries of power. And we need those kinds of textured descriptions to actually understand the violence, to understand the racism, to understand what containment means. What disenfranchisement means. So we can say: people are contained. People of color are contained. People of color are disenfranchised. And that’s right. But if we want to give meaning to those terms, that’s where the phenomenological analysis comes in. In this way, I also think that description and explanation work together, even though they are not fully the same.

And if we want to say: this is world-destroying, and it is in the business of constituting a sense of world that is falsely limiting the horizon of the possible, unconscionably limiting the horizon of the possible, our critique of the prison-world would have to show how that’s done. Which is why I would be very interested in saying, on the one hand, that this is world-destroying. And on the other hand saying this is world-constituting. Because the world that is constituted within the prison system is a world-destroying world. Perhaps we have to hold onto that paradox to get the point.

GS: Yes. Right.
JB: Even if we think about torture, which is an extension of a penal technology, it is a disciplinary method. On the one hand we could say that it is world-destroying, and there is something right about that. On the other hand, there are whole worlds that are built around the normalization of torture. It has been normalized. It’s even been justified. And there are now protocols that compel the belief and assent of many people.

GS: It has been legalized.

JB: Yes, torture has been legalized, there are practices, there’s consensus that gets built. There are spaces that get built and sequestered for this purpose. We shouldn’t think that all world-building is good. At the same time, sometimes dismantling a world that has been built for pernicious reasons can be good.

I think that the method of imaginary variation in Husserl, which became so important for Sartre’s early books on the imaginary and the imagination, was extremely important for Natanson. One could not think about a practice or an institution without performing a set of imaginary variations on that object. If one took its immediate appearance to be its full reality, one would be collapsing the object into an aspect. In this sense, literature and art give us ways of understanding the world precisely by suspending our belief in the everyday as it currently exists. In this sense, the imagination is essential to knowledge, not a distortion or illusion. Positivism would be the ultimate distortion, according to this view. I see that imaginary variation has become important to your own work; for instance, in the essay you published on “Gender Essentialism and Eidetic Variation,” you find a way to get beyond the old debates between essentialism and construction by showing that “essence” can be construed differently through a phenomenological method. Significantly, you show how “essence” is actually linked with “possibility” and so not at all a matter of positivism, biological determinism, or mysterious forms of inner truth. That argument allows “essence” to become expansive for the first time.

GS: I wrote that piece because I had been revisiting the feminist debates over essence from the 1990s, and kept noticing that the idea of essence that emerged from those debates was much less capacious than the idea of essence that emerged from phenomenology, many decades prior. I had hoped in that piece to show that the phenomenological concept of essence might be used to think about gender in a more expansive way.

When Husserl talks about free eidetic variation, he describes a method by which we subject the things we perceive to a series of imaginary transformations, and it is only through that process that we can come to understand the essence of a thing, in noting what remains invariant through a series of imaginary variations. The centrality of imagination to that process was very striking to me, and it results in this extraordinary claim, that we cannot understand what a thing really
is without the aid of imagination and fantasy. Husserl calls it *Fiktion*, or “feigning,” and says that it is absolutely central to phenomenology. I’ve been very interested in this paradox recently, that the phenomenological method is about seeing what is in front of us, perceiving what is there. But understanding what we see requires us to engage in speculation, in imagining, in fantasy. What Richard Zaner has called “possibilizing.” So the ability to conjure an imaginary thing that is not there, indeed a series of things that are not materially present, turns out to be absolutely necessary if we are to understand the thing that is there.

**JB**: Right.

**GS**: It is an aspect of phenomenology that is not attended to frequently enough, I think.

**JB**: Perhaps. The critique of positivism is there, but so too is the notion that an object can, and must be, expanded in the mind to encompass its various permutations in space and time.

**GS**: One thing I would like to discuss in that regard is that when you talk about bodies, how they are moving, say, inside prisons, world-constitution, meaning-making, and bodies as they are either flowing or blocked in space, publically assembling, or prevented from assembling, your recent work seems to take this question up in a way that seems deeply phenomenological to me. I am also curious about how you think about phenomenology in relation to your more recent work. The collection of your essays *Senses of the Subject*, published in 2015, contains two pieces on Merleau-Ponty, which is an obvious connection. But I am also thinking of the work you have been doing in recent years, in *Precarious Life* (2004) but also in *Dispossession* (2013) about the public and political aspects of social movements, and your emphasis in that work on the importance of how we array ourselves as bodies in the public sphere, how bodies appear. In particular this: that appearing in the world is always an enactment of a certain kind of kind of constitutive vulnerability at the same time that it is the condition of possibility for a certain kind of action.

The insistence that the appearance of bodies in the world always has these two aspects, simultaneously, seems like a fundamentally phenomenological position to me. That we are present in the world and can see and can act, but that because of this we can be seen and can be acted upon. Does that seem true to you as well?

**JB**: Well, perhaps it is true. I am not sure. There are perhaps two remarks I could make about that to try and address your point. If as a social theorist or even as a political critic we decided to look at a set of events, and we decided to ask about the events themselves, enumerating various aspects of the event, we would probably be missing something if we didn’t ask the phenomenological question: what kind of world is it in which such kinds of event could take place? Maybe a different question is, what do public assemblies tell us about bodies not just in
their individual bounded form, but in their lives together. I think that gives us a chance to reflect on broader conditions of social life, including interdependency, vulnerability, and action, asking in what ways each of these possibilities are conditioned by the others. Sometimes the action of assembly contains within it a premonition of a possible new world, a utopian function of flash, even if the assembly is transient, as they invariably are.

**GS:** How can there be the institution of newness? Or disobedience? Or a new form?

**JB:** When I was in Cairo in the fall of 2010, just three months before the Tahrir square uprising, I was sitting at a dinner table with a bunch of mildly depressed academics. And I asked: so what’s the chance there would ever be an uprising against the Mubarak regime? And they laughed at me and scoffed and they said in relative unison it will never happen. It’s not feasible, it’s not plausible, it’s not thinkable.

**GS:** And they may have been right, that it was not thinkable.

**JB:** Well, the Mubarak regime did fall, and then a series of political upheavals did bring some Mubarak supporters back in power. But they could not imagine that initial break. What they were marking was the limit of the thinkable at that time. And then something happened that at least for a brief time allowed for a new field of the thinkable and the politically imaginable—indeed, there are some places where it is still being imagined. And it was of course an enormous exhilaration, because they were released for that period of time, at least partially, from the limits of the epistemic field in which they had been living for a long time. They were functioning within a working presupposition of the world; the constraining horizon of what could happen, the limits of what could happen constituted the limits of what they took the world to be.

**GS:** The horizon did not extend further.

**JB:** At that time, no. And anyone who gestured in the direction of a beyond to that horizon was just a fool. I learned something there. But I also felt, even when I gave a talk there, that there was a rumbling in that crowd. When was the last time I heard rumbling? Like a discontent, a tremor? And it was on very specific political issues that came up in the question and answer period as well. And I thought: this is not some fully pessimistic and resigned crowd, since something in them is angry and wishing to be on the move. Whatever it was that came in my direction did not quite square with the dinner table pessimism.

**GS:** So you’re asking yourself: what are the conditions of possibility for this rumbling that I am hearing? From whence is this coming?

**JB:** Or what can that rumbling become? Of course, I gave you an example that I found optimistic, one moving toward a more open democracy, but we can certainly talk about fascist and racist rumblings as well. It opens up the question of what is imaginable.
GS: And where can it lead?

JB: Right. Pressing the limits of the imaginable, one can come to see and understand as contingent the limit of the horizon of what is imaginable and what is not. And I think poetry and novels were important for Natanson. He loved Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, because it was trying to grasp an act that was nearly a murder that was utterly ungraspable! It was a form of imaginary variation.

GS: [laughs]

JB: Here comes Abraham taking his son, Isaac, up to the top of the mountain to slaughter. The horrified question that propels Kierkegaard’s inquiry is, how could he have done this? How could he even have started up the path? Kierkegaard rehearses the journey many times: maybe it happened this way, maybe it happened that way. Maybe he thought he would kill him, maybe he thought he would never kill him, maybe he thought God would intervene, maybe he had absolutely no idea whether or not God would intervene. The book is nothing but so many variations on the story. And as the reader is asked to fathom that unthinkable act—Abraham taking his son Isaac up to sacrifice on the top of Mount Mariah to be slaughtered—one is actually investigating the structure of the world and the limits of human possibility within it. Abraham abandons the task of knowing the world—his faith is one that emerges precisely when knowledge fails. He does not, Natanson argued, have faith that God will intervene (i.e., God is good and will not let this happen). That would be prediction and probability. Faith is something different, a “leap” that is for the moment without ground. That is a phenomenological investigation in a certain way: an imaginary variation happens that takes us to the limit of the knowable. One could show this with Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* as well. How many sexual triangles show up in that novel? How many variations of sexual triangulation can there be? Apparently the variations are limitless, ending only in death.

GS: I don’t want to steer us too psychoanalytically, but it makes me wonder if anxiety might be nothing other than a psychic variant of free eidetic variation? A orbit transiting around some fixed object in which we are cycling through different variants and positions, each one more psychically uncomfortable than the last. Eidetic variation, undertaken not as a method, but something we compulsively subject ourselves to, or are subjected to? *Unfree* eidetic variation?

JB: Let me think about that. There’s a promise to free eidetic variation for Husserl as for Natanson. And for some of us, on bad days and nights, what runs free in the mind is just a terrible going round and round, going over and over, getting stuck in the same old loop. And I suppose we would have to ask what makes for the knowledge-giving quality of free eidetic variation, and what version of it leads to a kind of dead-end. It would seem that the distinction between re-enactment and reflection is at stake.
GS: I’m wondering too if there is a difference between free eidetic variation as we think it futurally—Abraham up there on the mountain, thinking: what if this happens, well, this could happen, what if this other thing happens?—and imaginative variation when it is pointed backwards. Was it this that happened? Was it that that happened? Or was it this other thing? What if I understand it this way? How am I to understand the thing that has already happened?

JB: I think this takes us back to the question: the primordial demand is the seeing of something. In *Fear and Trembling*, every effort to explain the near-sacrifice of Isaac fails. No explanation can grasp the phenomenon. So something about the phenomenon rebuffs the thought, sets a limit to what can be conceptualized.

GS: But what? What is it? What is not being grasped?

JB: What is it that is not being grasped? The “what will happen” and the “what has happened” or even “what almost happened.” How can the father be prepared to sacrifice the son? In that case it seems to me that there is a relationship between Abraham and the problem of faith that can’t be allegorized through any of those. So we keep . . . we’re in a limited human trajectory when we imagine all the scenarios. We are trying to make sense of it within human terms, but what calls to be thought breaks the human domain apart. But the faith of Abraham in that moment is something that cannot be understood fully within human terms—perhaps I should say “within rational terms.” So we keep wrecking ourselves, we keep wrecking reason against faith. That’s what I think. That’s what I think. I mean, we’re trying to understand a person with faith who is willing to take this son up to the top of that mountain. And it’s not that he predicts that God will intervene. It seems like a pure suffering. And Maury was drawn to this idea of a faith that cannot be fully translated into reason, and perhaps that is why I think his relation to Kierkegaard was a curious supplement to his relation to Husserl—and to rationality.

GS: Abraham doesn’t know.

JB: He doesn’t know whether God will intervene.

GS: Reason cannot help him.

JB: Right. So we come up against the limits of reason. But that says something else about what faith is.

GS: Well it also says something about the impoverishment of reason, its failures as a tool to help us understand what has happened, what will happen, what is happening in this world.

JB: It depends on which version of reason we have in mind. For instance, there may well be reason in storytelling. Maybe story-telling is part of “fathoming.” If our ideas of reason include “fathoming” then there is no reason not to include story-telling as part of reason. There is, though, a place where Kierkegaard’s existentialism departs from Husserl’s phenomenology, since in the end it is not our comprehension that is expanded. It is the limit of what we can comprehend.
Judith Butler and Gayle Salamon

Something remains ineffable or infinite at the limit of any series, something we are never going to fully grasp. We can’t fully grasp. It is what Natanson might call “existence” understood as a cross-roads of suffering and faith.

I do think that Natanson allowed me to read novels and stories philosophically. And I continue to teach a course on philosophical fictions that is probably enabled or supported by the kind of work I did with him. And I appreciated his love of the long German novel, like Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*; we certainly had some great conversations about Mann, Kafka, and Musil. I’ve always been more comfortable in interdisciplinary settings that allowed me to move between social science, political theory, literature, poetry and other domains. It remains important for me to have that interdisciplinary range. I think he saw it all as “proper” to philosophy, but I’m not sure that philosophy departments have grown and developed in such a way, in this country at least, to welcome that kind of interdisciplinarity.

GS: If it was ever proper to philosophy, surely it is less proper to philosophy now.

JB: The difference between proper and improper philosophy is historically variable, as we know.

GS: Since I first sent you these questions about bodies in public, and how bodies appear, you came out with a new book, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*.

JB: Yes. It engaged a broader, revised sense of the sphere of appearance, perhaps implicitly linking Arendt with phenomenology.

GS: You’ve spoken in the past about some of the thinking you were doing and who you were reading when you developed your theory of gender performativity, particularly Derrida and Foucault. So performativity emerges in a decidedly postphenomenological moment. And yet it has always seemed to me that your theory of performativity has strong conceptual underpinnings in phenomenology. I am thinking here about your emphasis on the importance of embodiment and embodied gesture as practices of meaning-making, but also more generally the philosophical importance of everyday life and how we understand and read daily practices. In the forward to Maurice Natanson’s *The Erotic Bird*, you referred to the task of phenomenology as “the illumination of the irreal within the ordinary,” and this strikes me as something we could also say about your work on gender. Do you have any thoughts about the relationship between gender performativity and your early training in phenomenology?

JB: The very earliest essays I wrote on gender were strongly influenced by phenomenology, as you know. You yourself have gone further with the phenomenology of gender than I did. You have considered the phenomenology of gait and expression, making note of the different ways that bodily movements and appearances are negotiated within social space. My own work seemed at least at
first restricted to time: sedimentation and constitution were important to me in the earliest formulations of gender performativity. And that was prior to my fuller engagement with poststructuralism. So that early essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” was more properly (or improperly) phenomenological. I think there’s probably something to be said about how gender reality is constituted, through what kind of acts. I think I was very taken with that notion—something which you actually have taken into more concrete and expansive domains. In my earliest formulations, it seemed to some as if I thought people could therefore create their own reality ex nihilo. In fact, I was more interested in changing the structure of gender reality. Even the most probable and plausible gender appearances had some shadow of irreality.

For me there was hopefulness in the early idea of gender performativity—the stylized repetition of acts. Gender was not exactly self-styled. We were styled before we ever had a chance to self-style. The stylizations of the body precede us, and we work within the terms that are available, even create most radically from within norms and conventions that are historically saturated or sedimented. We can break from one gender legacy or confound them. Phenomenology was able to illuminate the weight of history in the act. I was not sure that I communicated that well early on. But to know the weight of history and the power of anticipation in the present act, an act that is and is not one’s own—I suppose that this was an “activist” moment in my philosophical thinking at the time. And it certainly maintains its debt to phenomenology.

**Notes**

2. See Edward Hopper, “Early Sunday Morning” (1930) and, “Approaching a City” (1946).