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# Heyes's Introduction to *Anaesthetics of Existence: Essays on Experience on the Edge*

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## Heyes's Introduction to *Anaesthetics of Existence: Essays on Experience on the Edge*

Cressida J. Heyes

### Abstract

In this short introduction to my monograph *Anaesthetics of Existence*, I explain the origin of the book in a mishearing of Foucault's phrase "an aesthetics of existence" and outline the book's method (a melding of genealogy and phenomenology) and its subject: the politics of experience, and especially how to think about undergoings that either are excluded from experience or happen at its edges. The book contains a chapter on Foucault and this new method; one on sexual violence against unconscious victims; two chapters on postdisciplinary temporality in twenty-first century work, and what I call "anaesthetic time"; and a closing chapter on the limit-experience of childbirth.

**Keywords:** experience, genealogy, phenomenology, time, feminism

*Anaesthetics of Existence* is a complicated book to introduce. The title itself, as I explain in the first pages, emerged from a mishearing at a conference where I was very tired. Listening to a paper on Foucault's ethical thought, I imagined that a speaker talking about "an aesthetics of existence"—a phrase that captures the view that life should be lived as art, a project of self-creation rather than a quest for authenticity—was in fact saying "anaesthetics of existence." I had no idea what *that* meant, but it sounded good—perhaps a way of checking out of the exhausting demand to be constantly self-making. A couple of years later, when I started working, very slowly, on this book, I was a new parent suffering from mysterious chronic pain and disabling sleep deprivation following the birth of my son in 2009. Already very depleted by the demands of being a feminist scholar in philosophy, I had developed even more reason to be wary of how the avant-garde language of self-fashioning (ironically a theme of my own previous book) seemed to jibe with a neoliberal emphasis on individual resilience and building human capital.

I did my PhD in philosophy in a predominantly analytic department, and my first book (an intervention in feminist metaphysics that applied Wittgenstein's account of family resemblance to the category "women") was marked by that tradition in terms not only of its theme but also the precision (and occasionally

clunkiness) of the writing style I painstakingly developed and the emphasis on working through an argument until it was truly transparent and cohesive (sometimes to the detriment of complexities in the real world). I still think those are the best things I learned from analytic philosophy. As I grew past my first years in academia, however, I realized that whole intellectual traditions in philosophy had been closed off to me, and that the ideas, figures, and styles of the so-called continental traditions might help me with some of the philosophical problems with which I was grappling. My second book, which engaged seriously with Foucault's genealogical and ethical texts, was a big learning experience. Because it was about self-transformation and technologies of the self, it oriented my attention toward lived experience, which I quickly realized I could describe fluently enough using the everyday language of first-personal narrative, even while I lacked a richer philosophical vocabulary to give structure and meaning to those stories. I spent several years after that second book trying to teach myself phenomenology—an arduous and fraught process that was really only possible because of the brilliant contributions of critical phenomenologists such as Alia Al-Saji, Lisa Guenther, and Gayle Salamon, who showed how politics and ethics could be woven through rigorous accounts of lived experience. Thus *Anaesthetics* took a long time to write for intellectual as well as personal reasons, and it was an experience that brought home to me why so many philosophers stick to a narrow terrain that emerges from their early formation, writing closely related articles (or books) that don't stray beyond a particular tradition or even figure. Doing otherwise is massively hard work. I hope, however, that the combination of analytic style, continental themes, a good dose of political theory, first-personal narrative, popular examples, and bits of history and empirical social science that *Anaesthetics of Existence* weaves together might model a way of transgressing some of the intra- and interdisciplinary barriers that we too rarely cross.

In the early 2010s, when I started this work, there was a lot of interest in Foucault's views on experience (as an epistemic category, as well as a political resource). He allegedly eschewed his early adoption of phenomenological method in his work on mental illness in favour of genealogy, which tends to treat experience as artifactual of longer and larger discursive processes; what any individual believes about their undergoing might, to a genealogist, seem irrelevant to its theorization (Heyes 2020, 15–17). I was sceptical about this interpretation of Foucault, who said explicitly that everything he wrote was somehow based on his own personal experience, and who engaged so seriously with memoir (as, for example, in his commentaries on the life stories of Herculine Barbin and Pierre Rivière). I set out to see whether I could articulate a philosophical method that engaged both critical phenomenology—with its emphasis on situating lived experience in its historical and political contexts—and genealogy—with its emphasis on the conditions of possibility for subjectivity.

This rather technical philosophical problem dovetailed with my feminist interest in the politics of experience. The feminist truism “the personal is political” was soon complicated by Joan Scott’s (1991, 797) observation that “what counts as experience is . . . always contested, and therefore always political.” If the category of experience itself is contested, I reasoned, it must have edges and, hence, an outside—events that we undergo that somehow don’t make it over an epistemic bar. While the first chapter of *Anaesthetics* explains these quandaries in more detail, all the subsequent ones are attempts to apply my method to cases that invite what Johanna Oksala (2011, 220–21) has described as the “crosslighting of two irreducible perspectives” (the subjective and the historical). I used the categories of classical phenomenology (most notably, space, time, and embodiment as they are constitutive of lived experience) in a more critical vein to illuminate political phenomena that also have complex histories and intersectional feminist meaning. For example, chapter 2 provides a framework for understanding the distinctive harm of sexual violence against unconscious victims. Looking at how the passive, white, feminine body is objectified and eroticized in Western culture, I show that the circulation of sexualized images of unconscious women via digital communication is continuous with this tradition of exploitation. Such violence creates its own communities of voyeurs, from which victims are excluded, rendering them two-dimensional and also making the intermittent safety of “night” (that distinctive withdrawal from time and space that sleep best exemplifies) impossible. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the emergence of what I call “postdisciplinary time”—a temporality that reflects underlying economic transformations that call upon subjects to accelerate, reduce idle time, multitask, and reject slow activities. In part as a response to postdisciplinary time and its uneven effects, I argue that a countertemporality has emerged. Reviewing what can be learned from phenomenological psychology on depression and addiction, I suggest that more and more people are drawn into what I call “anaesthetic time”—a temporality in which drugs are deployed to make time diffuse, drifting, and unproductive. Anaesthetic time is often represented as harmless fun, as I show through a reading of marketing to “moms who need wine,” but it has a more dangerous aspect, as when whole populations are drugged-toward-death. The last chapter is an attempt to describe the experience of giving birth using the language of phenomenology to capture (at least one version of) “what it’s like,” using the language of limit-experience: a shattering of self and of the edges of subjectivity induced, in this case, by extreme pain. The impossibility of narrating such a birth story comes not only from pain’s unspeakability but also from the history of misogyny in obstetrics that persists in clinical practices that deny the birthing person their own experience.

I completed *Anaesthetics* on December 31, 2018, and spent 2019 ushering it through the production process for Duke University Press. It landed with a little fizzle

in May 2020, just as the full horror of the COVID pandemic was becoming apparent and everyone was in some version of “lockdown.” It turned out to be just about the worst possible moment to publish a book one has spent nearly a decade assembling and polishing, given the shuttering of the academic and publishing worlds that happened that spring and summer. On the other hand, some of the major themes of the book—depletion, withdrawal from cultures of speed, rethinking our relation to time—seemed to have a fresh and important salience, and readers turning to the book now might well find it has more resonance than my manuscript would have had in 2019 (see Heyes 2020 on “pandemic time”). I had long joked that *Anaesthetics* was really a prequel to a project I had started writing alongside it—a feminist philosophy of sleep entitled “Sleep is the New Sex.” That work is starting to be published now (Heyes 2023; Heyes and Haugen, forthcoming), and the commentaries that follow here, on *Anaesthetics*, in many ways echo my own intellectual trajectory by picking up on the politics of temporality and sleep to show new ways of working with the ideas I sketched. Reading a colleague’s monograph carefully and writing a thoughtful commentary is a huge amount of work and, hence, a gift and an honour for its author. Talia Bettcher, Alisa Bierria, and Megan Burke were generous, critical, and expansive in their responses, which have been tremendously valuable to me in finding ways of being in conversation with colleagues across philosophical traditions and political preoccupations.

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CRESSIDA J. HEYES holds a Henry Marshall Tory Chair and is professor of political science and philosophy at the University of Alberta. They are the author of three monographs: *Anaesthetics of Existence: Essays on Experience at the Edge* (Duke University Press, 2020, discussed in this symposium); *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (Oxford University Press, 2007); and *Line Drawings: Defining Women Through Feminist Practice* (Cornell University Press, 2000), as well as a series of articles appearing in journals including *Hypatia*, *Signs*, and *Critical Inquiry*. They are currently working on a book that is a feminist philosophy of sleep. More information and copies of many articles can be found at [www.cressidahey.com](http://www.cressidahey.com).