

**Justice-To-Be-Done,  
Telling-Stories,  
Before-The-Birth-Of-The-Plot**

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## *Foreword*

These papers represent the culmination of my learning in the domains laid out in my Area of Concentration: refugees, narrative, and ethics. They also represent the trajectory of my personal development during my time as an MES candidate.

The themes they deal with are a radical departure from the journey I intended to embark on two years ago. They have been extraordinarily difficult years of sorrow, discovery and growth, and the abandonment of my initial Plan of Study directly reflects what has been... bothering me.

The heartbreak – as an adult this time – of understanding the nature and extent of the current global crisis – environmental, political, cultural, social, spiritual – derailed my intention to study theatre and second language acquisition. Yet I stayed squarely focused on refugee issues.

As people tend to do when they state biographical information, I have already misrepresented myself – even in this foreword! These papers *do not* represent either the depth or the scope of my learning. There is much that is absent from them:

My personal engagement with theory is largely invisible. Feminist thinking around autobiography, which frames how I understand narrative; phenomenological and ecological thinking around the notion of embodiment; as well as antiracist, antioppression epistemology and imaginings of a radically different world, are all only tacitly implied by these papers.

My practical and rigorous study of refugee issues is largely invisible. From the intensive course on displacement and policy at Osgoode Law School to fitting that knowledge into global political economy; *why* I understand the issues as structural is not addressed in this work.

Finally, the fact that I am a flaming pinko commie could only be apprehended by the carefulest of readers. Radical praxis methodologies deeply informed the theatre project I participated in at the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture throughout last year. That, and the fact that I place my heart and body on the line in the struggle for a world without borders, without this neanderthal concept of the nation-state, are all only silent companions to these pieces.

My intimate relationship with Levinas, however, I believe shines in them.

I offer these pieces to the public – I will submit all of them to various journals – in three different voices. The first two, I believe can help make Toronto a better place for refugees to land. The third is my formal admission that I am a writer before any other identity.

I would like also to thank Cate Sandilands, Mora Campbell, and Asher Horowitz, those three teachers who administer to three parts of my consciousness, in three registers, for three reasons. They are each a pedagogic gift to this world, and this lovely and imperfect institution is blessed indeed to count them among its own.

\*All visual artwork and poetry are by myself, unless otherwise noted.

\*This package includes a musical CD, which of course is not submitted for academic consideration, but as an enjoyable supplement.

### *Abstract*

This major paper is divided into three sections, which represent three approaches to one constellation of ideas: settlement services for refugees, narrative, and ethics. They are also three dimensions of one project: the preservation of the alterity of the other.

**Section One** is a more formal academic essay outlining what the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas has to offer this project vis-à-vis settlement services in general. It does so by contrasting his ethics with the two main ethics that presently shape and inform settlement services in Toronto: Christianity and Marxism. Using Levinas' formulation of the 'height and humility' of the other as a motif, the discussion identifies how both these currents of thought over-narrativize and so collapse the alterity of refugees. It analyses how the ethical relation shows itself in stark relief in a hosting dynamic, and describes the uncanny position of the host/hostage which any member of the settlement community is in by virtue of her or his job. Asymmetry of the relation, proximity and incarnation, and politics and responsibility are central themes in a consideration of how behaviour toward refugees might differ starting from this new ethical orientation.

**Section Two** is a discursive meditation on the use of arts practices with refugees, focusing on the notion of storytelling. Thinking around trauma, narrative, testimony, witnessing, autobiography and self-representation is explored and analysed. Here again, taking the preservation of radical alterity as the central project, Levinasian ethics are privileged in a discussion of Saying and the Said, the present/ce of the Same in synchronic time versus the diachronic time of the other, and language itself. The pivotal ideas see Levinas in dialogue with Jacques Derrida (in particular his analysis of hospitality) and Roger Simon. Psychotherapy and nature poetry also make appearances in this consideration of the intersubjective ethical relation.

**Section Three**, performed in a prose/poetic voice, is an enactment of the type of 'de-narrativization' that the other two papers ultimately call for. Out of active commitment to the notion of embodiment, it is my own story of *why* I am devoted to refugee issues (why I am triggered to feel compassion and responsibility toward whom and what I do; the story of my own exile, my own home, my hauntedness and dispossession).

## JUSTICE-TO-BE-DONE:

### LEVINAS AND REFUGEE SETTLEMENT SERVICES

For an individual, her knowledge, in the immediate sense (which we call “experience”), is local and partial. But, nonetheless, it is neither false nor fantastic if recognized as such. It is more than the raw data of physical reflexes and feelings. It is the originating point of knowledge, the door to our social subjectivity.

The tendency has been to dismiss the notions of subjectivity and experience as outgrowths of bourgeois individualism or psychologism. It is mainly Marxist liberationist politics and cultural theories, preoccupied with the problem of representation and its relationship with history, class and culture, that have validated connections between social experience and a critical epistemology.

*The Dark Side of the Nation* pp 11-12

Himani Bannerji

“By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.” ...Abel “obtained witness that he was righteous, god testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks.” Then there was faithful Abraham, who “went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise as in a foreign country...” Among so many others who “died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them from afar off were assured of them,” God has prepared a city for them. While they are rewarded in the end, their worldly state of being is described thus: after they embraced the promises of God, they “confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth...those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland...now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country.”

Hebrews 11

And there is in subjectivity’s relationship with the other... a quasi-hagiographic style that wishes to be neither a sermon nor the confession of a ‘beautiful soul’.

*Otherwise Than Being* p 47

Emmanuel Levinas



### *The Scene*

Things are otherwise than well for the millions and millions of internally and externally displaced people all over the world. The current refugee crisis is neither temporary nor random. It is a predictable consequence of interrelated political, economic and ecological crises brought about by interested parties. What we have come to call economic and cultural globalization is the nexus between neo-imperialism, or, the free-market's unchecked hypercapitalism and nation-states now ensnared in all kinds of oppositions because of it.

The phenomena of guarded borders, immigration controls, and the nation-state itself are relatively new, and already increasingly precarious. The sovereignty of states is in decline. The apprehension of this generates a fierce desperation, bringing more brutal mechanisms of control. What is also new, however, is the fact that every inhabitable inch of the earth is covered in nation-states. There is no choice but to be in one of them, a dangerous state of affairs for persecuted people. And everywhere in rich 'Western' countries, immigration is an election platform built on the paranoid and xenophobic discourse of 'alienness' and 'threat' that refugees represent. Indeed, the West has "a bad conscience after thousands of years of glorious Reason, of the triumphant Reason of knowledge" (*Uniqueness: en, 191*)<sup>1</sup>, and there are perhaps no people who suffer from its evils more than those who have no physical home.

Much to my shame, they are recently being turned away from my nation-state, Canada, in startling numbers. If lucky enough to get in, refugees are facing a whole new kind of racism, one no longer content to construct them as merely parasites, but now as possible terrorists. Hate crimes have increased and refugee rights have deteriorated in the backlash after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Canada's acceptance rate of 58%<sup>2</sup> is plummeting, and in December, Canada implemented the barbaric 'safe third country' agreement with the United States, which states that neither is obligated to accept asylum seekers arriving from the other. The problem is the United States' proclivity for deporting and 'interning' people en masse (yes that is the new vocabulary). In a move sickeningly reminiscent of Australia's 'Pacific Solution' (again vocabulary that seems to alarm no one), Canada is also starting to intercept people at sea before they reach our waters.

The international regime of universal human rights, that noble response to another 'solution' still only a few decades ago, is woefully inadequate and unenforceable. Surely there is no need to 'shock and awe' my gentle readers with any further demonstration of liberalism's abject failure to protect humans and their rights to anything, let alone their rights to asylum.

Yet and still. In Canada, there is a moderate regime of approving requests for asylum and helping refugees to settle in. Our perfunctory observance of some of the laws we agreed to observe in Geneva is, tragically, among the most faithful in the world. And only 0.47% of all asylum-seekers in the world make it here; 70 000 a year is not a large number. But these 70 000 are more than asylum seekers, they are more than citizens. This 'more' is the topic of the present discussion, the surplus that escapes any definition of a 'citizen', however formulated. How to live with these 70 000 people as faces rather than numbers is the project of that discussion. If that is possible, it is going to take place through an ethical reconsideration of our settlement services.

Upon arrival, people face the registration procedure, especially impersonal and threatening. From there, they are pretty much handed over to cities (all settlement money is municipal), handed over to communities who provide settlement services: helping refugees to make a claim, providing translation and assistance in filling out the superlatively complicated Personal Information Form, finding shelter, weather-appropriate clothing, assisting in the search for housing and eventually employment, providing counseling, running matching or befriending programmes and support groups.

Two very schematically identifiable ethics, quite different from one another, tend to more-or-less dominate the scene of settlement services in Toronto. Though 'Christians' are not a homogeneous group, one ethics can basically be associated with the churches in the city, while a very loosely defined neo-Marxism guides several practices.

The current analysis will suggest that despite their strengths, neither of these ethics can sufficiently avoid the tendency to narrativize the lives of refugees and the discourses around how to serve

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<sup>1</sup> abbreviations for titles by Emmanuel Levinas: en = entre nous, T&I = Totality and Infinity, OTB = Otherwise than Being, CPP = Collected Philosophical Papers, DF = Difficult Freedom.

<sup>2</sup> All statistics cited in the following paragraphs are from research taken by the USCR and quoted by Katya Nasim in *The New Internationalist*.

them. Briefly, narrativization should be taken as that which absorbs the particular into the generalized story one has constructed about the world. The role that other people play in it, then, is assigned and determined by the shape of the story before they are on the scene. Such a violation of individual and collective dignity is standard in the field of refugee issues. Witness the following excerpt from a mainstream, upper-year high school textbook currently in use in Ontario:

What refugees appreciate most about Canadian life after their arrival is the experience of individual freedom. Often, in the early period after migration, the refugee has to adjust to this newly gained freedom, but it tends to remain the refugee's main source of satisfaction with life in Canada.<sup>3</sup>

For a comical appreciation of the assumptions, the objectification and old-time- anthropology tone at work in this passage, may I suggest substituting the word 'penguin' for the word 'refugee'? Of course neither Christianity nor Marxism is accountable for the pedagogy of our neo-liberal civil society. But it would be, in this discussion, part of what they are up against.

A sketch of these two ethics will tacitly compare them to the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas, which will be explored in greater detail. Levinas makes use of phenomenological reduction but transcends it as a method, and transcends phenomenology itself, which he shows to be (just another) ontology. What he winds up doing is *description*, description sure to frustrate and disappoint (and, most often, be misunderstood by) anyone seeking an 'application' or seeking a prescriptive or normative ethics. What he describes is the ethical relation, which is not a 'metaphysical' relation, or a relation belonging to formal logic, but one that is absolutely concrete.

This relation and its implications for subjectivity, properly understood, offer much before the challenge of reducing the narrativization of the lives of refugees and the attendant issues facing all of us.

### ***Christianity***

The Christian – in particular the Catholic – churches advocate, organize, provide supportive programmes and generally welcome. Hosting – being representatives of Canada and of God – is an explicit part of a church's mandate in many cases. For example, the Faithful Companions of Jesus started FCJ Hamilton House; Romero House, named after a priest, was started by a former nun, and the wall of The Church of the Holy Trinity (Anglican) behind the Eaton Centre has two massive panels hanging in the chapel itself, the photograph and text of which can be found in appendix I, attached.

Invoking just those three names covers a significant percentage of settlement services provided in Toronto, and certainly the highest-profile, most vocal advocacy groups. In a way they are also the most politically radical, as they receive mainly congregational funding and need not have the fear of offending government funders that their secular counterparts often clearly exhibit. In fact, Holy Trinity was the nucleus of the Sanctuary Coalition of Southern Ontario, a 'meta-legal' project of sheltering deportees. Weekly meetings started being held there twelve years ago.

The church is compensating for an unresponsive and uncompassionate government, and facing the fact that liberalism has reached its limits. (RG, 122)<sup>4</sup> The state's inability to provide a common direction or a 'shared sense of vision' affects the lexicon: "A few significant words are noticeably absent from the liberal vocabulary today, words like sacrifice and commitment." (RG, 123) (Whether or not sacrifice is necessarily predicated on a common meaning for all of society will be one of the themes of this discussion).

Obviously, the ethics that guides them in their work – their frontline, day-to-day being with refugees (in the case of Romero House, living with refugees) comes from Christian traditions. Mary Jo Leddy, the founder of Romero House, says of her community, "As people who have been shaped by the biblical tradition, we are called to welcome the stranger as we would welcome God in our midst." (BCH, 276) It is impossible to miss the injunction to treat the stranger with kindness in the 'old testament', in the Hebrew bible. "No other command (except to recognize the supremacy of God) is repeated as often – more than thirty times!" (Plaut, 17)

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<sup>3</sup> from *Understanding Diversity: Ethnicity and Race in the Canadian Context*. (1999) (!) Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc., Toronto.

<sup>4</sup> abbreviations for titles by Mary Jo Leddy: RG = Radical Gratitude, BCH = At the Border Called Hope

Some examples include Exodus 23:9: “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” In Deuteronomy 10:19, this non-oppression is expanded into the commandment to “Therefore love the stranger...” (for the same reason as above). Love surely involves feeding, clothing, sheltering, protecting from harm.

The Hebrew Bible speaks of the tradition of cities of refuge, of refuge at the sanctuary altar, and later, after Christ, in churches and monasteries. Asylum was offered to criminals or anyone fleeing any group of people, whether from the same land or from abroad. They would not be surrendered without the agreement of the priest.

The (divine) Other appears as the other person in Matthew 25: 35. Telling the blessed why they will inherit the kingdom, Christ says, “for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in...”, and finally the joyful command: “Let brotherly love continue. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels.” Hebrews 13:1-2

These ideas are echoed in a stunning passage from Mary Jo Leddy:  
How blessed we would be if we recognized the arrival of refugees as a time of visitation. In their very otherness, in their very strangeness, they summon us to a deeper awareness of the scene that grips liberal democracies: the imperialism of the ego... When we are visited by someone genuinely other than ourselves, someone who is like God, we are tempted to reduce him or her to the status of an object.

(Plaut, 20)

Hers is the voice of someone living the words and ideas of a glorious Christianity. While never questioning the foundation of the liberal state or the existence of nation-states, Leddy meditates on the decline and overdevelopment of the ‘West’. She is sharply critical of the ‘materialism’ and ‘consumerism’, and the narrative of progress underpinning them. She opposes to them the notion of *gratitude*.

Awareness of the miracle of creation – gratitude that God made the world and its inhabitants, including the self – generates an ‘economy of grace’. Grace breaks the hypnosis generated by capitalism: “in the culture of money, we are held captive by the assumption that all relationships are contractual...” (RG, 56) In such a world, whatever is not, or cannot be bought or sold, is holy.

One who is grateful for creation can live in the mystery of the superabundance of God’s unconditional love, which is never earned nor deserved. Mystery is wholly underrated as a political force. Knowledge as an exclusive way of participating in reality results in all the depravities associated with possessing and controlling information. What is xenophobia if not fear of the unknown? Much more on this later.

God’s love is all the more mysterious from ‘our’ position in ‘the most powerful culture in the world’, conditioned as we are by the ‘fundamental spiritual distortions’ of capitalism. Here, *ingratitude*, the perpetual dissatisfaction that drives our ‘wanting and doing’ (to make use of Gadamer’s expression), is conceived of as *sin*. And *well* conceived, to the extent that Christian thought notices and attempts to respond to the thirsting – the insatiable desire – that is the seed of every dissatisfaction.

Indeed, the need for more *meaning* in people’s lives is a cornerstone of this discourse. Awakening to creation leads naturally to purpose: “Understanding that we are *from* God and *with* God is also to become aware of how we are meant to be *for* God.” (RG, 8, her emphasis) What one must do will one day beckon, and even startle: A middle-class woman walked into the one room which a refugee had called the ‘Ritz’ “and was shaken, indeed summoned, by the sight of another woman intent on creating a home out of almost nothing... Call it an awakening, call it being turned inside out...”, (BCH, 215-16) but the woman began to donate material goods and volunteer her time.

But if our interpellation as a subject is a wound and a blessing, and if this sweet burden is laid upon us thus – “There may be a day when someone crashes through the door of our self-contained world... and we are summoned. There is no one else. This you must do.” (RG, 2) – then, the subject in question is really an individual, with all the enlightenment overtones that make myself and at least some of my gentle readers a bit wary. This individual has something like a teleological dimension; as indebted and grateful souls, we “become freer to live in interdependent ways in which we become more truly who we are.” (RG, 62) What are the implications of this ‘truly’?

Though she remains vigilant against the myth of total autonomy, and warns against a new-agey overcultivation of interiority in a hostile world (RG, 119), she cannot avoid the slightly deterministic,

slightly romantic image of a solitary disciple harkening to their particular calling. Then again, real plurality is predicated on real unicity, accomplished through God's love which loves each person infinitely and uniquely into being (RG, 57), and which "is not simply spread out in a homogeneous sort of way, but rather takes a particular and incalculable form within each person." (RG, 57)

Mary Jo Leddy describes the moment the face of a stranger comes to her door:

I try not to look too closely, to question with my eyes. This will not become a checkpoint, another place of interrogation.

"Please. Come in. You are welcome here."

The face does not move. So, once again I summon up the language of my hands, drawing the face from out of the door frame towards the closest chair in the front room. The face moves forward and lowers itself.

"Tea? Water?" I cup the invisible liquid in my hand and bring it to my lips. The head swings slowly upwards and then bows.

This means yes or I remember tea or if it pleases you or I don't know any more or it doesn't matter or that would be lovely.

...As I place the pot under the tap, I try to stop the flow of questions in my mind. Who are you? Where are you from? Why are you here?

Stop. You must wonder who I am, where I am from and why I am here.

After their faces, come proper names. Leddy is determined to protect these faces and names from becoming files, in a 'justice' system that defaces and erases the person. Part of how she does this is by telling the stories of real refugees to the public, by making "an effort to communicate the blessing and the burden of what I have heard... Some day, when their future feels more secure, some of these refugees will tell their own stories... in their own voices. For now they remain reluctant to speak, prefer to remain invisible." (BCH, 4) I hope she's sure about what they prefer! Still, from my own experience in this field, I know that refugees can be pretty convincing that this is exactly what they want. Where the line is, between narrating and narrativizing someone else's life, remains to be located. Much to her credit, in her books she includes the stories of the volunteers and interns in her house. The cleverest of those I came across articulates this about listening to stories: "I know I can help carry some of their burden without totally understanding it." (BCH, 227) Well, bless you, sister.

And how do refugees experience being the recipients of aid, such as welfare or assistance with food and shelter? What is their reality – how do they perceive existence and operate within it? (Krulfeld, 23) Programmes here are not as systematic and dehumanizing as overseas camps, where they are given unfamiliar food and inappropriate clothing (*although*, food bank food *is* pretty culturally myopic)... where they are truly numbers without faces. In such camps, administrators go to terrifying lengths to maintain control over the distribution of aid in highly structured and regimented environments.

Nevertheless, here as there, general policies are decided upon with no input from the refugees currently affected by them. (Harrell-Bond, 139) Here as there, individuals are made to place themselves within a restrictive and pathologizing discourse.

It is far from uncommon for a newly arrived refugee – in religious communities or otherwise – to encounter verbal and facial expressions of shock and sympathy. Though coming from the best intentions, such compassion can be suffocating, frustrating or simply insulting, especially if attended by an implication that the sympathizer 'understands'. More seriously, there can be an overwhelming dissonance between what is being-felt-sorry-for and the actual experience of the refugee. Many stories are not characterized only by tragedy and loss, but also include heroism and pride. A man from Argentina who had been detained and tortured recounted "how he hated the 'how sorry' statements of helpers... He explained how such statements of sympathy could undermine the very identity of someone who has had the courage to suffer for principles." (Harrell-Bond, 139)

One who feels like a warrior – what's more, a just warrior – has perhaps even less patience for emotional and psychological humiliation than the general population; "Frequently refugees describe the behaviour of the helpers they meet as patronizing and condescending." (Harrell-Bond, 142) What is perhaps the most outrageous and degrading is the position allotted to the refugee in this discourse, "the role which they are forced to assume to get (help)." (H-B, 140) Sadness and longing for what has been lost, helplessness and gratitude for any and all assistance are all expected by a generous civil society that seems



happy to almost write a “charity script of the needy and the grateful.” (H-B, 143) Witness the images of suffering used in the media for many funding drives;

“Pictures depict refugees in postures of submission, despair and utter destitution.” (H-B, 149) This kind of imagery obliterates the fact that each individual seeks asylum for unique causes that are not self-evident in the picture; nor then can ‘salvation’ be standardized.

If faced with a life or death situation (does it bear emphasizing here that most refugees do literally and legitimately fear for their lives?), an individual may wind up ingratiating him or herself to whatever authority, even though it offends the soul. This approval-seeking experience, common with receiving welfare or any kind of social assistance, may be the first in a lifetime of losing status, of accepting anything. Many refugees were wealthy and powerful in their country of origin, a fact, again, that may leave them reading off the wrong script with helpers and benefactors.

Mary Jo Leddy claims that if one is serving refugees for the love of God and not for remuneration, then the notion of reciprocity is a moot point. (BCH, 108) This may well be the case for the helper, but for a refugee it may be that his or her inability to reciprocate is totally traumatizing. The obligation and impotence he or she may feel may not be at all reconcilable with a self or cultural image:

[Sponsorship in Canada is]... grounded in an ideal western concept of charity... practically expressed in highly symbolic forms of asymmetrical social exchange for which refugee individuals... rarely find a personally and culturally acceptable model.

(Harrell-Bond, 137)

Mary Jo Leddy (again beautifully) answers this dilemma by telling those she helps to pay someone else back in the future, that the refugee will find his or her own stranger to help in another situation. (RG, 151) If somehow the caveats of a radically respectful critical theory could be taken together with this last idea, the helpers of refugees would begin the exodus to the territory of justice, and know that to approach it we must move well beyond charity. And that charity and love are due to all people.

But so often charity degenerates into a saccharine philanthropy, where nice folks congratulate themselves on their *sensitivity* to ‘cultural differences’. A befriending programme that shall remain unnamed brags that it “also offers a service to Canadians, that is, the broader cross-cultural awareness and the interpersonal development and personal enrichment.” (Sharma, 175)

This kind of image motivates all sorts of people to offer themselves in a feel-good sacrifice of time and energy: “Refugees attract ‘volunteers’, often people with no specialized training, who often behave as though they ‘need refugees more than refugees need them’.” (Harrell-Bond, 150) And that is an insult to the truth-value of language that we could all take personally.

### **Marxism**

It would be simplifying to the point of meaninglessness to place all these terms, movements or practices I will talk about under the umbrella of a generic ‘Marxism’. Reality is far more complicated: several ‘marxists’ don’t exhibit the problems I will name, lots of the activities are indistinguishably woven together with Christian ethics, and lots of these folks have never heard of Marx. But what they share is a critical and structural understanding of injustice, a concern for self-representation, and the conviction that problems must be solved *with* and not *for* those most harmed by them.

There is no more incisive, coherent attack on the mass hallucinations underwriting the niceties of the liberal state than antiracist, anti-oppression, feminist critical theory. Nor can we underestimate the effects of this interruption that questioned the foundations of the liberal worldview and transformed its academic culture in particular. No one site impacts the lives of newly arrived refugees more than the site of ‘culture’ and refreshingly, marxists are unable to think of culture as divorced from class and ideology.

The smiling face of tolerance and the facile, condescending discourse on ‘cultural differences’ have gained social (and real political/economic) currency in the last thirty years in Canada under the banner of state-sanctioned ‘multiculturalism’. In these years, all the ‘ethnic communities’ of Toronto (and of all major Canadian cities) have been neatly constructed and narrativized, complete with tasty foods, exotic clothes and anecdotes of wacky cultural misunderstandings.

Himani Bannerji offers a lucid analysis of this official, elite multiculturalism as an ideological apparatus of a racist, capitalist state. Through it, all the ‘progressive’, *vive-la-difference* words people utter are revealed as ammunition in the ‘low-intensity warfare’ (Bannerji, 8) being waged on new Canadians. Individuals who never in their lives self-identified as ‘Latina’ are suddenly a member of a ‘community’ in

Toronto. The fact that some-of-your-best-friends-are-Latina notwithstanding, this community is a category of the state.

The labels that contain and organize these communities can more accurately be identified as interpellation devices that accomplish a segmentation of both the labour market and political space. They represent a *reduction* of people's economic demands to 'cultural' ones, rearranging questions of justice into ones of diversity (Bannerji 9, 45), aiming to distract the neurosurgeon stuck driving a taxi with a folkdance festival. 'Multiculturalism' was never a demand from below, but an ideological tool managed from above.

Opposed to this hegemony is a 'popular multicultural politics'. It "must articulate itself through a politicized understanding of cultural representation. Antiracist and feminist class politics must be its articulating basis... which would prevent [it] from falling prey to colonial, racist discourse or to those of ethnic nationalisms. Such a popular framing of culture would not engage in fetishized and essentialized traditions." (Bannerji, 5) Instead of referencing reified and static labels, and their comforting chains of association (is this not the challenge with every human one encounters?), this politics offers a way to actively remember that people do not have fixed agencies, political or otherwise. Everyone, "as subjects of complex and contradictory social relations can be summoned as subjects and agents in diverse ways." (Bannerji, 6) The experiences of real(ized) people are relational and historical junctures that are informed by a multiplicity of traditions and power relations. No one is less complicated than I am. No one.

Everywhere it is communicated to refugees that they are here on public sufferance and are to be grateful. Everywhere it is communicated that they are visibly *other* than the norm. They are "...made to feel that otherness is of an antagonistic variety... and they also know that *this otherness is not in them, but in how they are perceived...*" (Bannerji, 46, my emphasis) Respect would build communities where people could define themselves. Out of respect comes dignity, the basic principle of which is accepting the autonomy of the other, and being honest about the power relations that hinder their autonomy. (Bannerji, 149)

Praxis, as a revolutionary enterprise, puts theoretical abstraction in a dialectic with material conditions and structures, a dialectic animated by the specific pressures and possibilities of the immediate historical moment. Emphasis on the historicity of the moment recognizes that "each individual is the synthesis not only of existing relations, but of the history of these relations." (Boggs, 28) How different the thinking of refugee protection would be if the history of the relations of those involved were more present in the discourse! A reckoning with the structurally bequeathed benefits of, say, colonization, enjoyed by the dominant society would shift the conversation from 'burdensharing' to reparations, and to the duty to compensate the victims of social and economic crimes.

This history has no room for charity; the god who loves the poor is exposed as an ideological tool. In Antonio Gramsci's words, "The philosophy of praxis is absolute 'historicism', the absolute secularization and earthiness of thought, an absolute humanism of history." (Boggs, 29) He recognized that "religious faith... tends to instill an apolitical fatalism among the oppressed and therefore must be combated as an anti-revolutionary ideology." (Boggs, 34)

What (withers and) disappears from this worldly and historical conception of action is exactly a certain charity. The possibility of, and meaning of, a benign figure of authority and power becomes nonsense. Revolutionary transformation will not follow from the expression of an individual saint's piety or hero's will, but from ongoing and collective political action. This action, although voluntary, is "anchored in class analysis and historical understanding [and is distinguished] from non-Marxist approaches like the... exaltation of the 'act', which viewed the self-conscious activity of a few leaders as a powerful causal force that could transcend historical conditions." (Boggs, 31) The power to change the world will never be granted by the dominant social strata whose existence, in any case, will be blown away by this change. After all, the notion of 'granting' things like rights or self-government is oxymoronic; "freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift." (Freire, 31)

Paulo Freire, deeply influenced by Gramsci, in turn influenced and gave shape to various international praxis movements through his work in popular education in Brasil and Chile. The two of them catalyzed the movement for participatory research, the political agenda of which always gives priority to the oppressed. He has inscribed his attitude all over many of our 'best practices' in facilitation, teaching and community arts practices. Many refugees in Toronto (trust me) have been to workshops using his methods.

His is the most accessible elaboration of an explicit epistemological privileging of the oppressed. The struggle for internal and external emancipation and the conscious awakening that conditions it must originate with their localized, particular and experiential knowledges. The task of the oppressed is to

liberate themselves and their oppressors by actions of resistance and love that operate at the structural level. The oppressors are unable, unqualified, to lead this struggle. Nor is it sufficient to usurp their place in the hierarchy. "It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors... (and) wage the struggle to resolve the contradiction in which they are caught... If the goal is to become fully human, they will not achieve their goal by merely reversing the terms of the contradiction." (Freire, 42)

This orientation toward structural and collective emancipation does not eclipse the agency of the subject. The knowledge of the power relations in the world to which one is awakened must catalyze creative and locally determined transformation. Moreover, the process of liberation is conscious: it "...makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle..." (Freire, 33) And so agency is central for Gramsci, who puts forth "...a theory of human activity as shaped or determined by social structures and which is also the subject, creator of new forms that challenges and overturn those same structures." (Boggs, 31) The dialectical relationship of subjectivity and objectivity reinvests the former with purpose while, happily, both psychologism and the 'individual' of the enlightenment are contested. In the more accessible language of Freire, "To deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world and history is naïve and simplistic." (Freire, 35)

Solidarity is not coextensive with generosity. The generosity of the sentimental philanthropist can only be framed by an unjust social order, whereas "true generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes that nourish false charity [which] constrains the fearful and subdued... to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands... need be extended less and less in supplication..." (Freire, 29) Solidarity requires far more effort and implicates the very fabric of the life of the helper: "Rationalizing his guilt through paternalistic treatment of the oppressed, all the while holding them fast in a position of dependence, will not do. Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary." (Freire, 34)

But can I, how meaningfully can I, *enter into* the situation of a refugee? In banishing charity from the discourse, have we also lost grace (that face of charity that carries none of its infantilizing and distasteful elements)? Can we afford to proceed without it? And given that the goal is radical social change, what happens when the people with whom we work are not in a posture of resistance? "...Often these messages of liberation may themselves be instruments of domination, control, pressure, manipulation, ways of setting directions, ordering resistance, or even revolution, against a system that the culture-bearers may not see as totally disadvantageous... What if those who choose to work with us do not wish to challenge the establishment?" (Krulfeld, 30)

Empowerment discourse can exaggerate agency as well. Harrell-Bond typed the word 'victim' in those loaded little brackets every time she used it. But what is important about torture, from the perspective of justice, is its occurrence. Not how it is 'perceived' by anyone, but that it happened. There was a perpetrator, so there was a ...

And how cleanly do refugees embody this rather homogeneous category of 'oppressed' (in the sense intended by Freire, which granted is quite broad but almost always seems to refer to economic injustice)? Refugees are sometimes very wealthy; in fact, many are fleeing regimes that persecute precisely the wealthy! The helper being placed in the category of 'oppressor' (as she is in several circles) is problematic as well. There are ambiguous lines here. She is limited by her (usually hierarchical) structure: her boss, her funders, and the politics among them. She may feel a mighty solidarity but be oppressed by the system she must negotiate.

Neither Christian nor Marxist ethics can provide the panacea to the tendency to fit refugees into generalized models. Both are predicated on the assumption that this population is more -or-less homogeneous. Both have an inexorable – sometimes blatant, sometimes subtle – penchant for narrativization, for providing a coherent image out of which no remainder can be left. Identity does not have the space to be as fluid and multilayered as it actually is in *any* social group, but perhaps least of all in that of refugees.

Partially at fault is the mythological construction that overdetermines civil society's general perception of 'the refugee'. Indeed, the label itself evokes a highly narrativized complex of ideas. "Although it is rarely articulated, there is a commonly shared psychosocial construction attached to the term: refugees are survivors of oppression, plunged into poverty, purified by their suffering, and boundlessly grateful for safe haven... The fact that they are not inevitably poor, nor as pure or grateful as their hosts might wish, can be a source of difficulty." (Beiser, 170)

The stringent expectation of 'purity' is connected to the fetishizing insistence on 'authenticity', which has to do with far more than confirming the accuracy of the facts. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees defines a refugee as a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted... is outside [their] country of nationality and is unable, or, owing to such a fear, unwilling to seek protection from that country. (Article 1, Geneva Convention, 1951) 'Poverty', 'submissiveness', and 'patience' are nowhere to be found in this definition. So when refugees are found to be rich rather than poor, shrewd rather than innocent, petulant rather than resilient, or are just plain obnoxious people, it disrupts the narrative of destitution that lies so deeply in the minds of the charitable who bitterly resent the receptacle for their sympathy being, suddenly, little more than a con artist.

Advocates are justifiably wary of the dangers of reinforcing discourses of vulnerability and pathologization, of reinscribing their dependence on us, and of undermining their resilience and capacities, but at the same time, the basic structural inequity between a refugee and a helper must be acknowledged. A space must be found beyond the relentless narrativization of the refugee in her alterity, a space for the 'remainder', the 'more' that recedes away from the story.

What could answer such a nuanced injunction that demands change at such an elementary level? Perhaps one who conceives of alterity not as a problem to be dealt with and integrated – even mosaic-style! – but who sees it as “the heart... (as) the inspiration or the very psyche of the soul”? (OTB, 109)

### **First Philosophy**

The thinking of Emmanuel Levinas both resists narrativization and provides conceptual tools with which to resist narrativization. His writing is descriptive of fields irreducible to linear exposition; never dogmatic, its rhythm nevertheless repeats the question: What do I have to do with justice? The answer(s) never provide the sense of comfort and closure that accompanies being enfolded back into a totality. They exceed any possible narration.

One or another version of totality has been the panacea offered for violence and war throughout Western history. For a totalizing consciousness, 'rational peace' becomes the subsumption of conflicting terms under a third communitarian or contractual term. This movement is also enacted in the philosophical tradition, in which the “conflicts between the same and the other are resolved by theory whereby the other is reduced to the same.” (T&I, 47) The algorithm that accomplishes the reduction is “a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being.” (T&I, 43) The neutral term is able to bring the separate terms into a relation by grasping them as products of privation from something more inclusive.

Comprehension – taking everything into one's hands – is always the adventure of the same: the knowing being illuminates and so fails to encounter anything that could limit it or even truly surprise it. Everything can be integrated; knowledge – even in absolute distance a grasping – is a modality of possession or consumption. This is the way of the same and the very structure of intentionality. “Thematization and conceptualization are... suppression or possession of the other.” (T&I, 46)

Ontology, concerned with the realization of existence or Being rather than relating to actual existents, suspends the alterity of those beings by shining upon them the anonymous light of intelligibility. This luminosity is always deployed as a neutral radiance, bringing reality to light, dis-covering and revealing Being's objective exposition. Its latent domination and tyranny is palpable, for example, in the impartial voice of the average school textbook. It is disembodied and amazingly, the body that it *does not have* is most certainly not anything other than white and male. Indeed, the kind of ontology that galvanizes this voice is a “philosophy of power, which does not call into question the same, a philosophy of injustice.” (T&I, 46)

Ontology, then, is an imperialist 'egology', which “promotes freedom – the freedom that is the identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the other.” (T&I, 42) Thus even the experience of alienation would be re-integrated as *my* 'sensation' or *my* 'experience' of alienation. Here justice is subordinated to freedom: real – not rational – peace requires a respect and a 'letting be' of difference and plurality, whereas Ontology enacts “its liberation by the suppression of multiplicity.” (T&I, 302) Transcendence also demands plurality – a term radically exterior to the same and not appropriated into its interiority.

What is always already interrupting the totalizing intentionality of the same is the notion of infinity. This infinity is positive insofar that non-knowing does not equal nothingness; the interruption inaugurates a situation other than one of knowing and non-knowing. Infinity is not intrinsic to me but arrives in the concrete form of the face of the other human being, “which *is* by itself and not by reference to

a system.” (T&I, 75) In other words, what breaches totality is not an operation of thought but is thought “faced with an other refractory to categories.” (T&I, 40)

This non-allergic relation with a non-thematizable alterity first submits me to judgment; the presence of the other is all that is capable of putting in question the naïve legitimacy of my freedom and demanding justification for it. The absolute strangeness of the face defies conceptualization yet bears an injunction; from the start, this relation is communicative. “Discourse conditions thought, for the first intelligible is not a concept, but an intelligence whose in violable exteriority the face states in uttering ‘you shall not commit murder.’ The essence of discourse is ethical.” (T&I, 216) The bond with the other that is not a representation of the other, and that does not constitute a totality, is the ethical relation, taken as first philosophy, pre-logical or alogical and absolutely a priori. It is the precondition for all language and the birthplace of subjectivity itself.

Such a relation can only obtain between beings that are radically separate from each other (moreover, they are positively so and not in negation of one another); no type of union can mediate the irreducible distance between my interlocutor and me, as the same and the other do not inhabit the same plane. In the properly ethical relation as opposed to ontology, the other and I ‘do not form a number’; we are not two terms in a system visible from the outside. “Transcendence designates a relation with a reality infinitely distant from my own reality, yet without this distance destroying the relation and without this relation destroying the distance.” (T&I, 41, amended translation)

Across an absolute distance the face arouses in me a ‘metaphysical’ Desire, insatiable because it is neither a need nor a hunger. It does not have the structure of intentionality, or any object as its correlate. It is Desire for the Good, for the Good for the other, and infinitely more and better than that.

This is possible because the ethical relation is characterized first of all by asymmetry. The other is possessed of hyperbolic height and humility, and in Desire are conjoined the movements unto both. (T&I, 200) Metaphysical Desire opens the dimension of height in its aiming for the invisible, for the inaccessible and inordinate, that which overflows all impressions of it. But the manifestation of such a non-object is in the defenseless eyes of the human face before me, which is the “source from which all meaning appears, the face in its absolute nudity, in its destitution as a head that does not find a place to lay itself...” (T&I, 299) It is the humility that arouses the basic human shame that seeks justification for my freedom, and apologizes, all the way to dying for the other.

All this, however, is not an injunction to self-negation or disappearance into passion: the ethical relation is not self-sacrifice but discourse. I cannot meet the other without simultaneously expressing the encounter, without (failing to greet or) greeting. To name is to invoke or call: “Desire for exteriority has appeared to us to move not in objective cognition but in Discourse, which in turn has presented itself as justice, in the uprightness of the welcome made to the face.” (T&I, 82) Hospitality issues from a finite being who has an idea of the infinite. The subject *as host* does not first ‘perceive’ or represent the other, but greets the other in the very contact.

*The uprightness of the welcome made.* To welcome you is to do justice by you, for you, with you, on your behalf. Because you do not appear alone. How clandestine and absurd (and easy!) it would be if you did. For Levinas, the other is at no point abstracted from sociality. The face always already harbours a third person – the other of the other, and all the other others.

Intimate, closed society – a dual society – of the other and me is love of the neighbour and as such depends on chance proximity. (*The Ego and the Totality*: CPP, 31) Here fault can be pardoned because the one wronged received all the evil of the wrong, and can dispose of the right to pardon. (T, 30) The recovery of my ego’s sovereignty is possible in a society where the meaning of my act is exhausted by my intention (where its repercussions cannot escape my awareness), or by repentance and absolution. For example, in Christianity, the forgiveness of sins generates a supremely non-public situation. But magic has no place in duty; “No one, not even God, can substitute himself for the victim.” (*A Religion for Adults*: DF, 16)

All this is outside the question of justice and injustice. True violence can only happen in true society where “I act in a sense that escapes me... (where)... I am the bearer of a fault which is not reflected in my intentions. I am objectively guilty” (T, 31) of deeds that do not belong to the order of pardon. In a true society, love cannot redeem me; “Love makes blind the respect which is impossible without blindness toward the third person and is only a pious intention oblivious of the real evil.” (T, 31)

The innocence of love, then, is always disrupted. I cannot rest complacently, knowing I do right by you, as it is impossible to isolate ourselves “forgetting all who remain outside of the amorous dialogue.” (T, 32) Now we must make our conversation public, and be as straightforward there as we were privately only a few pages ago. Though “the social wrong is something committed without my knowledge, against a

multitude of third parties whom I will never face” (T, 33), it is a wrong the ego knows it alone is responsible for in a preoriginal way. They can be corrected only by “the difficult detour that leads to third parties that have remained outside of love.” (T, 33) Justice, then, is generalized; “the law has priority over charity.” (T, 33)

The law that controls states, protects their interests, and regulates their inter-national relations certainly does seem to trump charity in the effect it has on human populations. In order to explore the ethical dimensions this opens, let us suppose that the third parties under discussion are refugees. Can we entertain the literal notion that, besides defenseless eyes and absolute nudity, each face has a demographic and is contextualized by socio-economic realities? After all, no “interhuman relationship can be enacted outside of economy; no face can be approached with empty hands and closed home.” (T&I, 172) Could the freedom and privilege of the hosts in rich Western nations be ‘called into question’ by newcomers?

In a cogent and moving indictment of his government’s abuse and detention of asylum-seekers, Australian professor Joseph Pugliese agrees that refugees, the most “disenfranchised of human subjects, exercise a power... to put into question this ‘my -for-me’: this is *our* land, *our* home, *our* wealth, *our* relaxed and comfortable place in the sun – and yet you stand there, in your indecent state of utter destitution, and proceed to call into question our mode of existence.” (Pugliese, 9, my emphasis)

The situation – the socioeconomic position – of a refugee brings into sharp focus exactly what is at stake in taking the ethical relation seriously. It is also a good point at which to begin exploring the relation between the ethical and the political. Professor Pugliese suggests that the ethical duty to provide assistance to refugees must be articulated “not as a chore or as a service that has to be begrudgingly rendered, but as an embrace... a corporeal act of refuge in the face of hostility and suffering. The embrace is the ultimate incarnation of generosity... transcendent as it conjoins two subjects in an act of affirmation without obliterating difference.” (Pugliese, 9)

Duty conceived not as a chore but as transcendence is coherent only beginning from a certain conception of subjectivity. It cannot be emphasized enough that for Levinas, ethics is first philosophy. Ethics is not derivative from any natural or religious laws or principles, or from reason. Levinas neither gives an empirical description of what actually obtains, nor offers a moral code or any normative prescription. Rather than convincing us to be good, he gives a phenomenological description of the ethical relation as precondition of all such argumentation, and “refers the activity of convincing back to the appeal inherent in the ethical relation...” (Horowitz, 4) This relation is no more a ‘moment’ of experience than each person is an ‘instantiation’ of the human being. Before an ‘individual’, the subject is an orientation to, by, and for the other, without which there will have been no subject. (Horowitz, 5)

Only ontology – wherein “ideality leads to coinciding with oneself” (OTB, 99) – would require justification for such a privileging of the other, and the duty and concern it introduces. “Am I my brother’s keeper? [This question has] meaning only if one has already supposed that the ego is concerned only with itself, is only a concern for itself.” (OTB, 117) But *how* is it that I do not coincide with myself, and how is the other found even before the beginning of subjectivity?

Levinas found it necessary to adjust the language used in *Totality and Infinity* (first published in French in 1961) which had a more ‘external’ emphasis, in order to describe the ethical relation beginning more from ‘within’ subjectivity. This move also goes more rigorously into what is meant by the ‘beginning’ – the genesis – of subjectivity and the ethical relation. In *Otherwise Than Being* (from 1981), he describes subjectivity as irreducible to consciousness by “starting with sensibility interpreted not as a knowing but as proximity, (and) seeking in language contact and sensibility, behind the circulation of information it becomes.” (OTB, 100)

The relation between contact and information is phenomenologically reduced in his analysis of *saying* and the *said*. What is not Being or essence, and not nothingness, is an ‘otherwise than being’ which, filling a similar place in the discourse as infinity did in *Totality and Infinity*, cannot be thematized and is not a ‘modality’ of anything else. Such a pre-originary and anarchical goodness belongs to a past not of the order of any possible memory. It could not have ever been present to the subject as it is that which made the subject possible. This non-present time is the time of the ethical relation, the time, in a sense, of saying.

‘At’ or ‘from’ this time, the one who is approached “belongs to the concreteness of the meeting without being able to take the distance necessary for the objectifying gaze” (*Uniqueness*: en, 193), and it is this sheer involvement that does “justice to the difference of the other person.” (T, 193) Saying is the greeting in this proximity, the “iteration of exposure... expression, sincerity...(it) differs from an act commencing in a conquering and voluntary ego.” (OTB, 153) As such, it cannot be encompassed: it cannot be stated.

*Yet justice demands that it be stated*, and language is indispensable. The otherwise than being must almost be translated into being, or talked about as though it were an event of being; always saying must be betrayed in the said (in both senses of that word). The “subordination of the saying to the said, to the linguistic system and to ontology, is the price that manifestation demands.” (OTB, 6) Levinas’ question is whether this betrayal can be *reduced*, both phenomenologically and empirically.

The said cannot but convey being and essence. But the said is not evil, nor does it necessarily ‘falsify’ the saying. There is no such thing as an unadulterated saying unmediated by the said. “Thematization... theory and thought... do not attest to some fall of the saying. They are motivated by responsibility itself.” (OTB, 6) Hence we are called to assemble and represent what cannot be assembled or represented. But this is not a ‘paradox’. This, precisely, is the structure of the ethical and political vis-à-vis one another. The parallel process therein is the advent of judgment, and all the conceptual tools needed to elaborate and implement it. The introduction of justice is “the birth of the theoretical.” (*Philosophy, Justice, and Love*: en, 104)

Recall that the law has priority over charity, and that real justice and injustice can only relate to society and not the intimate neighbour. The other, in the face-to-face relation, is absolutely singular and unique, “exterior to and transcending all genus.” (*Uniqueness*: en, 194) To this other goes the saying, the expression of the meeting, and language is not labour. (Labour can be alienated from the will, it can be reified and perverted, beyond recognition by the intention that performed it... work works in the territory of Being.) The singularity of the unique one signifies in *love*. “Farther than with the known individual, there is, with the absolutely other, human peace and proximity...” (T, 194) ‘Love as a logical operation’ is love of the incomparable, immeasurable, but the responsibility germane to this love announces the ‘moment of justice’.

Now a need for decision is felt, and an appeal is made to a “reason capable of comparing the incomparable, a wisdom of love. A measure superimposes itself on the ‘extravagant’ generosity of the ‘for the other’, on its infinity.” (T, 195) Judgment and objectivity are demanded insofar as “it takes institutions to arbitrate and a political authority to support (justice, which) requires and establishes the state.” (T, 196) (!) Note that above no claim was made that the relation wasn’t problematic, only that it wasn’t a paradox! Just as it with labour, institutions established to bring and guard justice are far more often than not perverted and alienated, and Levinas is certainly critical of the state per se. Nevertheless, just as saying requires the said, ethics requires that we seek public, social and generalized mechanisms of justice.

And that these mechanisms be much better than they are. Perhaps so much better than they are that they are no longer the same mechanisms, even perhaps no longer mechanisms at all. It is in trying to articulate the reconciliation of hyperbolic, unconditional love and a politics inevitably rife with compromises, that Levinas’ earlier assertion fully resonates: “Justice summons me to go beyond the straight line of justice (or the law), and henceforth nothing can mark the end of this march.” (T&I, 245)

Lest the poetry of his formulations be confused with rhetoric and the intensity of his language allow one to consider his ethics as some mere ‘regulating ideal’, it bears mentioning that the theme of economic justice appears repeatedly in his work. He even speaks of money itself, asking, “Can one conceive of a justice without quantity and without reparation?” (*The Ego and the Totality*: CPP, 45) It also needs to be said that Levinas leaves much of the work of imagining the specifics of a better future justice to his students, leaves the work of elaborating a politics to other thinkers (say, to political philosophers). But he does give excellent clues:

Labour, institutions, and religions are products of human will, and “the will, by virtue of its essence exposed to violence, can be emancipated only by building a world in which it suppresses the occasions for betrayal.” (T, 39) This rejoins the sentiment expressed earlier in a more literal register by Gramsci and Freire. Working against the structural injustice of society is better than acts of charity, which, at least with refugees, have been shown to invite the possibility of “interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves...” (T&I, 21)

But Levinas is only in harmony with Marxian thought up to a point: though the latter recognizes the other, its relation to the same is overly symmetrical. “Marxism... consists in saying: We can save the other if he himself demands his due.<sup>5</sup> Marxism invites humanity to demand what is my duty to give it.

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<sup>5</sup> The author has thus far sneakily avoided using quotations involving the unfortunate, ubiquitous masculine pronouns. That Levinas is still enchained to sexist language, however, is related to his failure to sufficiently disengage from ontological language, which is the very preoccupation driving the discourse of saying & the said, a preoccupation he admits to and expresses with superlative self-reflexivity.

That's a bit different from my radical distinction between me and others..." (*Philosophy, Justice, and Love: en*, 119) It is precisely out of this distinction that one cannot dispense entirely with charity. Love, mercy, and charity: justice is only the rigorous and social dimension of these. Both sides are required; "charity is impossible without justice, and justice is warped without charity," (T, 121) or, "responsibility is all the gravity of love..."

How are these feelings of tenderness possible? Why does Levinas claim [as he does in "Useless Suffering" (1982)] that suffering can be meaningful in me but in the other is always absurd, outrageous and unjustifiable? How can he say that "love is originary"? (T, 108)

The conception of subjectivity elaborated in both *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being* can be traced back to sensibility, an incarnated mortal dwelling in enjoyment. But this rest and peace is in fact never to be; the ego "does not find any rest in itself... unquiet, not coinciding with itself." (OTB, 8) What has *already happened* to de-phase it, tear it up from its synthesis? What needs to be described is not an event nor an essence, but rather how the human being signifies in the first place, or signification itself, which precedes any essence.

The possibility of signifyingness is exactly what has already happened, and this possibility is understood as *substitution*. We signify out of, and in, proximity to the other. "This breakup of identity, this changing of being into signification, that is, into substitution, is the subject's subjectivity, or its subjection to everything... its vulnerability, that is, its sensibility." (OTB, 14) Disinterestedness, gratitude and expiation all name this substitution, a being-for-the-other in a responsibility that goes all the way to substituting me for the other.

Responsibility for the other is a passivity more passive than mere receptivity, "more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, implicating the identity of a hostage who substitutes himself for all the others." (OTB, 15) Accusative, prior to any wrongdoing: accused even "of what the others do or suffer..." (OTB, 112) This infinite, unassumable responsibility rises from exposure to proximity, which is not a way of 'knowing' or understanding a relation between two simultaneous or equal terms that 'appear' to one another; it is necessary to "emphasize the breakup of this synchrony, of this whole by the difference between the same and the other in the non-indifference of the obsession exercised by the other over the same." (OTB, 85) The idea of admitting a fundamental difference between oneself and the others arouses suspicion in many, but the suspicion is framed by and tied to all the old philosophical concepts that we are trying here to displace. The project is to articulate a more original connection among us, a kinship other than that which ties us to Being, "one that will perhaps enable us to conceive of... this inequality in a sense absolutely opposed to oppression." (OTB, 177)

Obsession with responsibility for the other is not a function of rational judgment or cognition and, due to the asymmetry of the relation, is non-reciprocatable. Thus the difference between the same and the other is that the obsession is mine. The ethical relation begins only with me; responsibility goes further than being and so further than identity, "identity not of a soul in general, but for me, for in me alone innocence can be accused without absurdity. To accuse the innocence of the other, to ask of the other more than he owes, is criminal." (OTB, 195)

The accusation of my innocence can proceed only from the glorious mystery of *election*. Responsibility that does not issue from any decision taken on my part, that "rests on no free commitment... effected without any choice... (and) precedes the freedom/ nonfreedom couple" (OTB, 116) is the unconditionality of the subject. Unconditional and so non-transferable – and though, as we will see, it is possible to evade – it is impossible to decline responsibility, as if I "found myself... the one who, summoned, heard the imperative as an exclusive recipient; as if, henceforth chosen and unique, I had to answer for the death and, consequently, the life, of the other." (*Uniqueness: en*, 193) Election indicates me as a non-interchangeable, irreplaceable unicity, not equal to the other, but always more responsible. Thus is the state of a hostage, "always to have one degree of responsibility more."

To avoid being transported by hyperbolic description (but is it, or is it just shocking to hear it stated aloud?), we must return to the situation of arriving refugees and their hosts. Always the human multiplicity pulls me away from proximity, away from responsibility prior to judgment (T, 195), and demands a social justice.

Professor Pugliese agrees that my 'non-transferable' obligation to refugees is to offer unconditional hospitality. Unconditionality demands no due: not gratitude, not solidarity, nor to fit a prescribed image or narrative. The struggle in Professor Pugliese's country, however, is to institute a far more basic hospitality, that of simple refuge or asylum. It's an obligation that Prime Minister John Howard is having no problems at all evading. Sadly, the direction currently being taken by Canada will soon see us



not far ahead of Australia, even though, as he notes, both countries have encoded their non-transferable responsibilities in their signatures on the United Nations 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. (Pugliese, 8)

Professor Pugliese's essay stands out in that he presents himself as an academic and also as an ego, unable to decline a summons and shelterless, grappling with personal dismay and rage over his nation's failure to represent him as a host(age): "In the face of the pain and persecution of the refugee, I become hostage to their plea for refuge: the locus of my self becomes subject to the subjection of the asylum seeker. Inscribed in the Prime Minister's fear and a anxiety... is the intolerable knowledge that he is already hostage, ipso facto, to an ethical relation that he may disavow and disown but that he cannot overcome or sever." (Pugliese, 9)

There is much divergence in the directions Levinasian scholars choose to take his thinking, and what they choose to emphasize in his work varies widely. (Even the notion of elaborating a politics *at all* is of interest only in certain readings.) Exactly how the ethical relation can inform refugee policies and settlement services is justice-to-be-done, and first imagined. My chosen part in this project is to suggest that perhaps students of Levinas could teach their governments to reflect the following 'wisdom of love': divest oneself (the nation or the ego) of illusory and desperate sovereignty and give more and more the gift of "the openness... of the doors of one's home." (OTB, 74) The welcome is the commencement of sociality; no nation, just like no person, be said to live in real peace without it.

**All this is not even to mention that the ego – both unable to ever coincide with itself and to ever abandon itself – is in a state strikingly akin to exile, and so clearly invites a more mature empathy with those who are exiled more literally.**

The effort to reconcile Levinas to the literal and the political – and vice versa – is perhaps the most pressing exigency for his students. Would he sanction the leap I am making from the other qua other to the other as a foreigner, a refugee with a body in time and space? Is it justified to say that every face has a demographic, and if it is, what are the implications of this? Levinas never directly approaches the constellation of ideas around 'the other' as culturally other, nor speaks directly to the critical analyses thereof that attend it in, for example, the field of cultural studies. But the ethics that he develops does leave an ample and loving space for others to do that work, work that has been excellently undertaken, especially by some feminist thinkers.

So far, the definition of the human being – of the other – has not hinged on membership in any particular community. In seeking a concrete politics and a public gesture toward refugees in particular, one is confronted by a very simple question that has not been negotiated by Levinas: If, as he says, uniqueness has no genus, are all others just as other as all the other others? It seems that every other with whom I have proximity obsesses me, oppressor and oppressed alike: signification "bears even responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor." (OTB, 75)

Yet this line does not and cannot lead to conceiving of the other as blank or generic, without a body. For Levinas, the ethical relation explicitly begins in the materiality of the body, that is to say, "the possibility of ethical responsibility is located not in consciousness or free will, but specifically in incarnation." (Chanter, 79) Embodiment is the precondition for ethics!

The original interdependence of incarnation and responsibility is in harmony with a radical and critical understanding of power, and denies any legitimacy to that hideous bodiless head who utters the law and narrates the school textbook: "Like much of contemporary feminist theory, Levinas' ethics contests the disembodied subject of enunciation and the corresponding reduction of language to formalism." (Chanter, 83) His description of subjectivity starting from sensibility, then, "enables the elaboration of the ethical significance of flesh" (Chanter, 85), where each priceless body is of the highest value. No value is 'associated' with the body, nor even is the 'external' world ever fully separate from it: what I experience in the world "somehow belongs to the flesh of the I think." (*The Philosophical Determination of the Idea of Culture*: en, 182) Please note the absence, in all his descriptions of corporality, of the word "metaphor". *The flesh of the I think*.

This last idea indicates the most difficult to express, and also the most decisive point in Levinas' thinking: the preoriginary nature of the ethical relation. As precondition for every thing, it is also the precondition for intentional violence. Separate wills and bodies encountering one another, inventing consciousness in each other's name, are also able to rise to dominate and exploit and torture one another, as other animals are not.

The whole of 'civilization' has always prepared structures and contracts to protect us. (In fact, it forms the 'us' which is thus 'protected', as the subjects of contract!) These systems apparently repress our

primal, ghastly nature, taking as a given that without them we would be nasty and brutish and eat each other. But is it my original evil or goodness being repressed by them? It seems well worth asking which – selfishness or being-for-the-other – is limited by society. (Horowitz, 6) But we know which was prior. Violence would not ‘succeed’ if the ego were not a hostage. At any rate, “it is not certain that at the beginning there was war. Before war there were altars.” (*Language and Proximity*: CPP, 124) Suddenly, the fact that those are giant faces in the ancient breezes of Easter Island gains a richer signification.

And before there were citizens, or ‘individuals’, there was the ethical relation, the root of every other subsequent imperative. Extending rights to citizens is a secondary movement, and derivative of ethics, as Levinas is careful to point out: “As citizens we are reciprocal, but it is a more complex structure than the face-to-face.” (*Philosophy, Justice, and Love*: en, 107) And so reciprocity, too, is a secondary phenomenon. Any ethics predicated on a principle of ‘mutual aid’ is inadequate. We cannot do real justice to the multiplicity out of some elaborate and derivative notion of ‘the common good’, for mutuality announces conditionality. Precisely because “‘we’ is not the plural of ‘I’” (*The Ego and the Totality*: CPP, 43), the other’s response to me cannot concern me; the ethical relation proceeds from me to the other, who is always privileged over me.

Nor can I offer aid to the other in need because ‘it could have been me’. (Horowitz, 19) Forced migration involves structural injustice and political economy so that, so far and for now (in my era, my particular geopolitical location, my privileged demographic, none of which are immune to changes) a refugee is not ‘someone like me’.

It (so far and for now) *could not have been* ‘someone like me’. At any rate, duty arising from an idea of universality belongs to the order of knowledge, and we are no longer speaking of ethics. Knowledge does not remember this: I do not love justice because I am a person; I am a person because I love justice. “The ethical, beyond vision and certitude, delineates the structure of exteriority as such. Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy.” (T&I, 304)

### ***In Other Words***

Levinas devoted his life to the phenomenological description of God. Peppering his texts with caveats like ‘one cannot prove God thus’ (T&I, 304), and ‘God can only be named by an abuse of language’ (*Humanism and An-archy*: CPP, 136), he nevertheless proves and names God *to me*. Moreover, this God can be reconciled to the one of my childhood; the omnipresent, loving and just creator. He does this by describing the miracle of a created being, possessed of a created freedom and capable of atheism.

He proves the created-ness of this being by an astoundingly rigorous description of time, of the diachronic, immemorial time in which the ethical relation happens/ed. The trace of God in the face of the other is what triggers every movement that, in a phenomenological description, Levinas shows to be subjectivity. The “surplus of truth over being and over its idea, which we suggest by the metaphor of the curvature of intersubjective space, signifies the divine intention of all truth. This curvature of space is, perhaps, the very presence of God.” (T&I, 291)

Is this kind of writing properly philosophy or theology? Yes. Levinas, despite his protestations that he keeps them separate, the face and the trace will not co-operate with him. In one academic interview he is firm with his interlocutor, saying, ‘Now hold on now we’re getting into theology!’ Just *before* this point in the dialogue, however, in speaking of the ‘real presence of God’, he has said: “It is not a metaphor; it not only extremely important, it is literally true. I’m not saying that the other is God, but that in his or her face I hear the Word of God... (the face) is not mediation – it is the way the word of God reverberates.” (*Philosophy, Justice, and Love*: en, 110)

Ethics must now describe a hospitality so hyperbolic and so necessary that it outshines the borders and strictures of disciplines. The limits of philosophy, theology, and quite frankly, poetry are destabilized by the force of this imperative and by the mystery of the fleeting yet incontestable presence of the trace of God.

That this trace creates me out of the height and the humility of the other person’s face convinces me that it is important to attend to and do justice to both, to both the height and humility.

Christianity, on the model of charity, seems to overly administer to the humility and destitution of refugees. The most-high, the one not available to consumption or narrativization, seems transgressed. Only the height of the other can teach me, add to me what was not previously there (if I am quiet enough to learn). In still other words, many manifestations of Christianity do not honour the irreducible distance between the same and the other:

So many styles of Christianity offer a kind of transport that is rapturous and melty. Jesus, whom to know we must surrender and be like little children, envelops worshippers, taking them beyond their own power and liberty. Distance is blown away by fusion. This destruction of separation “annuls links between persons by making beings participate, albeit ecstatically, in a drama not brought about willingly by them.” (*A Religion for Adults*: DF, 14) Ultimately, the Christian conception of God is radically different than in Levinas, in that for the former, *God is conceived of as a being. As Being*. And so this religion “makes of itself the entry into the kingdom of the absolute.” (T, 16) For Levinas, God is and is only in the ethical relation. We inaugurate the kingdom in our proximity. It is perilously easy to lose track of the distinction. Confusion is further invited by how the ethical relation does indeed occupy the whole psyche, how it extends to structure all relations, and so yes, is omnipresent. But though the ethical relation can be reconciled to the God of my childhood, they cannot be conflated. (At any rate, matters of faith are individual and private and are not addressed whatsoever by Levinas, thus falling far outside the bounds of this paper.) Suffice to say, Christianity tends to compromise the height of the other, and to mediate the radical distance between beings; it tends quite simply to make too much noise.

### **Whereas**

Marxian-inspired ways of seeing and acting seem to neglect the humility or need of refugees. The height of the other – not manifested as awe-before-the-mystery, but as respect for the other’s autonomy – seems to have inspired a relation overly based in symmetry and as such transgresses the unconditionality of responsibility. It has forgotten that the obsession of the hostage is “the condition for all solidarity” (OTB, 117), and jumps straight to the solidarity. As a hostage specifically incarnated as privileged in this era and geopolitical location, I am of a demographic that permits me, that commands me, to give charity and administer to destitution.

Happily, reality is not a binary opposition. Both ethics do very well on many counts, and both far surpass a perverted and degraded liberalism that obviously has no serious interest in assisting refugees. From Christianity refugees gain charity, and helpers who take it so seriously that they perform acts of real, gratuitous love. From Marx, refugees gain helpers who intervene less, who honour their capacities more, and before whom there is room for the self-respect that can result from seeing the structural nature of the injustice that has degraded your life.

Both ethics understand well that the primary responsibility is “for the oppressed who is other than myself” (OTB, 55), because upon judgment, upon analysis, they both unequivocally state in their ‘saids’ that justice must be done toward those most tormented and broken by injustice. There is a necessary privileging of the destitute one in both, albeit with Christianity it can be patronizing and emotional, and with Marxism, strident and epistemological. But refugees arriving in our shattered culture would find it immeasurably more hostile in the absence of either.

And from Levinas refugees could gain helpers who have an intelligence and a type of attention whose goal is not to narrativize or thematize. But how do we reflect the wisdom of love in action? How to make manifest the understanding, for example, that Desire has no correlate, or that the subject-object structure will never produce more humane results than it did in the twentieth century? We must guard a silent space – like the eye of a hurricane of conflicting discourses, passions and necessities – a space that we admit once and for all can only be named by an abuse of language and by a betrayal of alterity. We must build a world that in which the possibility for occasions of betrayal is diminished.

All this being more responsible than the others is not a matter of feelings, even less so is it to be confused with being the ‘wretch’ tortured by the guilt of original sin associated with a certain unfortunate Christianity. It is a matter of transforming the structure of one’s life. Mary Jo Leddy admits that moments of spiritual revelation are not that rare, but that what *is* is the choice to found one’s life on such insights. (RG, 143) The same can be said for philosophical insights, and the challenge of rooting behaviour in understanding. Especially if the insight is *not* an ‘understanding’: “To understand a tool is not to see it, but to know how to use it; to understand our situation in reality is not to define it, but to be in an affective state.” (*Is Ontology Fundamental?*: en, 3) And just as Mary Jo Leddy sees gratitude as a force to heal our society, Levinas tries to describe the uncanny situation whereby human beings are “able to be thankful for the very fact of finding themselves able to thank; the present gratitude is grafted onto itself as onto an already antecedent gratitude.” (OTB, 10) A strange and basic affective state.

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In my case, this affective state causes me to help create ambits where refugees can re-create their lives, rediscover their strength, and access a sense of having a story to tell that cannot be hijacked by anyone. It also means working to build a community that invites them to tell it on their own terms.

Part of that work is developing ways to articulate what we are: wholly created in a glorious and rigorously demanding structure that defies formal logic, created by a God infinite in mercy but increasingly impatient with our lazy and cowardly predilection for encapsulating one another in narrative. This affective state calls me to devote myself to a “world which no longer represses my desire continually to give the world to you” (Horowitz, 26), and to invoke it now, in this patient present.

*Appendix I – or, the Heart*

*A Call To Conscience*

**A Statement on Refugees from Faith Communities of Canada  
June 27, 1995**

Memories serve us well when they present us with the possibility of making choices and commitments that will make a difference now and in the future. This spring we marked the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. We continue to remember how many lives were destroyed or diminished by a conflagration fueled by hatred and racism. This is a time to recommit ourselves as a nation to the values of freedom, tolerance and justice.

It was only after the war that we as Canadians slowly realized that while we were engaged in fighting a racist nationalism in Europe and the far east, we were engaging in our own forms of racism here at home. We became more aware we had treated certain grounds with callous injustice.

In the book [None Is Too Many](#), historians Irving Abella and Harold Troper documented how Canada had the worst record in the western world in accepting Jewish refugees. Many Canadians were shocked to hear this as we hold an image of ourselves as a tolerant and generous people. Nevertheless, it is true that a senior civil servant when asked by a reporter about the number of Jewish refugees Canada would accept, replied saying “none is too many”. That policy was effectively implemented because politicians pandered to racist groups in the country, because the vast majority of the population did not know and did not seek to find out the truth of the refugee situation and because many official church bodies did not make a vigorous effort to speak out.

We will not let this happen again. We believe it is now our moral duty to speak about the reality of Canada’s treatment of refugees. We know this reality because of the people in our respective communities who are working closely with refugees. Like them, we are worried that “none is too many” could become the operative policy within Immigration Canada today. We will not let this happen.

We are profoundly concerned about the situation of refugees who have come to our country because their lives are at risk. Most of these people are decent, often courageous human beings who were forced to leave everything that they had, everything that they were, because of their political convictions, their religious beliefs or their membership in a certain social group. Under the “Geneva Convention” and other international covenants, we as Canadians have bound ourselves to offering protection to these people. This commitment is a measure of our decency as a country.

Unfortunately, these people are being scapegoated for many of the profound social and economic problems in our country. In the media, refugees are often portrayed as criminals or potential criminals, as welfare frauds, as gate crashers etc. No doubt there are some people who have no right to claim refugees status but the vast majority of them are people who ask only for a second chance at life.

As people who have been shaped by the biblical tradition, we are called to welcome the stranger as we would welcome God in our midst. We reject attempts to portray refugees as problems rather than as people who bring great promise to our country. It is morally wrong to make scapegoats of these people. As a nation we have begun to feel very insecure about our national boundaries. However, it is wrong to think that those boundaries are threatened by the relatively small number of people who enter our country seeking refuge. Our boundaries have been and are being erased by vast transnational economic forces, by freer trade, by global communications.

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It is tragic that while we are opening our borders for business, we are closing them to desperate people. We are profoundly disturbed by rumours of our government's plan to shut out refugees who arrive at our border via the United States. Our estimation is that any such policy would drastically reduce the number of refugees who could find safety in Canada.

We are often told, and then we think, that we have a generous and accepting refugee policy. In fact, ours is a rather modest effort. Compared with most countries in the world we accept a pitifully small number of people (less than half of one per cent of the world refugee population). The vast majority of refugees are welcomed and sustained by countries in the "two thirds world". It is almost impossible for refugees who are in danger of their lives to get a visa from a Canadian immigration officer overseas.

We also have in our communities people who work for Immigration Canada. We know most of them are decent people. We also know they are overworked and are often frustrated by conflicting and changing directives. However, our concern is that the financial resources of Immigration are increasingly directed to keeping certain people out instead of offering protection to genuine refugees.

We are particularly concerned about the "head tax" which was recently placed on refugees. Most refugees had to spend all their resources just to get to Canada. The cost of attaining landed immigrant status is virtually impossible for most of them. This makes it impossible for them to sponsor spouses and/or children who may be in situations of great danger. It also makes it very difficult for them to begin any serious job training program.

Let us reach out in mercy. Let us help these people stand on their own two feet. Let us not stand by and watch while they stoop and bend under the burden of the head tax.

We believe that we as Canadians have been, can be, much better than this. Even in difficult economic times, most Canadians know there is a difference between being out of a job and out of a life.

### **Never again.**

We now commit ourselves to engaging in an extensive process of education within our communities regarding the real situation of refugees. We believe that most of our people will be shocked and moved by information regarding the distress of refugees in Canada.

We commit ourselves to supporting and working with other faith communities whose members can feel extremely vulnerable at such a time.

The Second World War happened, in part, because not enough ordinary people spoke out against the racism and intolerance which was developing in the 1930's. Never again.

We will speak and act on behalf of those whose lives and human rights are threatened at this time. We owe this to those who lost their lives. We owe it to ourselves and to future generations – to become a nation we can hope in.

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*Appendix II – or, the Lung*

THE GUEST HOUSE

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

RUMI

THE OMNIPOTENCE OF GOD

We have called You names.  
We have cut you down  
to our smaller size.  
We cannot bear not knowing  
who You are.  
We cannot stand not knowing  
what you will do next.  
We, the managers of grace  
in the administration of life.  
How blessed we are  
that You are more  
than what we make of You  
that You do not fit  
that You are so inconvenient  
so lacking in good form  
so impertinent to call.  
O Fire in the ice  
O Stillness in the stream  
O Flowers filling out the sky  
O Love beneath the ground  
O Life within the tomb.

MARY JO LEDDY



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## TELLING STORIES:

### NARRATIVE AND ARTS PRACTICES WITH REFUGEES

CHORUS: It is dreadful, stranger,  
to reawaken a bad thing long laid to  
rest. All the same I am longing to  
know...

OEDIPUS: What is this?

CHORUS: ...about that awful pain,  
irresistibly appearing, that you  
became embroiled in.

OEDIPUS: In the name of your  
hospitality, don't ruthlessly open  
up what I suffered.

CHORUS: There is a widespread  
and constant rumour, and I ask,  
stranger, to hear it truly told...

OEDIPUS: I suffered the worst  
things, strangers, I endured them  
even willingly, let the gods be  
witness. But none of these things  
were my own choice...

*Oedipus at Colonus*  
Sophocles



The very first thing required of refugees upon arrival in Canada is a narrative explanation of what brought them here. They must (remember! and) drag themselves through the very detailed story demanded by the Personal Information Form, which is the cornerstone of the application process; if it's unconvincing, there really is no chance of staying here. There are lawyers, and psychologists, assessments from whom are required by the lawyers, and of course doctors and counselors... Then there are the optional tellings, for example to the volunteer with whom they've been matched in any of the multitude of befriending programmes, or to the curious face of a sympathetic civil society hungry for models of resilience and for evidence that *Life is, in fact, Beautiful*.

Already on the scene are arts practitioners of several different bents. Performance art therapists, folks preparing testamentary film and video presentations, and facilitators of performance collectives that create popular theatre for public education have 'infiltrated' refugee settlement services as either programmatic or supplementary elements, all over the world! And certainly in Toronto. The author of the present discussion is counted among them. All such activities are built on one foundation: the autobiographical accounts given by refugees.

A taxonomy of the variables that influence, limit and sometimes distort these accounts is impossible. Any demographic is heterogeneous, thus no one refugee is representative of, or has situations or characteristics in common with, all the others. Among the factors that complicate self-representation is the risk associated with disclosure: many active cases involve information that can endanger people. Identity, whereabouts, route of escape and political affiliations are all volatile details that may expose the claimant or others to terrible consequences, in the countries of origin or of settlement. Exacerbating this risk is the obvious fact that for PIF preparations and trials, the translators provided are from the refugees' own 'ethnic communities' here in Canada. Relatedly, with artistic enterprises, participants know that whatever they create will be seen by a public or semi-public, by people they do not know or know very well.

Another factor is the probability that the arts practitioner will be regarded as a member of the dominant society. The repercussions of this are manifold: many refugees distrust authorities, state or otherwise. Alternatively, this perception can result in a desire to impress or an exaggerated sense of the practitioner's power to facilitate their refugee claim, in any case modifying the story.

All people who hear the personal account of a refugee must learn to listen to someone whom they know to be telling them what they want to hear, or who doesn't want to distress them, or who has assumptions about what is expected or appropriate for inclusion in a biographical story. (Simon, WPP, 4)<sup>6</sup> At any rate, what the listener gets to hear is entirely up to the individual.

Most importantly, the stories shared by refugees can come out haltingly, partially or not at all because of the sheer pain of confession and the likelihood of some form of retraumatization triggered by disclosure. All the anthropologists and academics of the world cannot complicate the number one symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, the most commonly reported feeling in any study of traumatized refugees: sadness. *Of course most people feel better when they share this feeling with another person*. Yet this basic generalization so readily lends itself to paternalism, so often is placed at the service of maintaining hegemony, so easily is used to exploit the sad.

The interpersonal dynamics that obtain in arts practices are vulnerable to all of the above perversions. The very notion of what constitutes 'art', and the entire field predicated on the belief that the production thereof could be 'healing', are inherently ethnocentric. There *are* ways of mediating and adjusting this optic through new forms and protocols based on self-reflexive vigilance and critical awareness. But a more fundamental ethical re-orientation needs to occur for the field to deal with its problems, for they ultimately stem from one root.

When the methods and/or productions of artistic work with refugees 'feel wrong', over and over the liability can be located in narrative. Most artistic customs as framed by 'our' heritage demand (or at least lend themselves to) over-narrativization of biographical stories. Representations of life events and how they were experienced by people are over-determined by conceptual structures that tend to overemphasize their coherence and linearity. This movement amounts to a collapsing of alterity.

The re-orientation needed is primarily played out at the level of attention: how practitioners and 'audiences' of all kinds attend to the testimonial accounts of refugees will either leave room for the

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<sup>6</sup> Abbreviations for essays by Roger Simon: WPP= "What Happens When We Press Play?: Future Research on the Substance and Use of Holocaust Audiovisual Testimony", RaP= "Remembrance as Praxis and the Ethics of the Inter-Human". Texts from Section One that reappear here do so with the same abbreviations.

unknown, or enact a grasping movement of comprehension. I am not alone in asking questions that address this issue explicitly. The ethics of narrative and of witnessing, new thinking around testimony, public memory and self-representation: all this is a growing (almost fashionable) field, developing in particular out of the work of those thinkers and practitioners who take seriously a constellation of ideas around phenomenology, ethics, and deconstruction. In my research, the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida have been especially fecund. What follows is a small discussion of what they offer to those of us who have experienced the value and worth in telling life stories, we who are not *quite* willing to dismiss arts practices as helpful to refugees.

This unwillingness, and the ethical reconsideration it demands, will here be discussed in two related ambits. The first is that of the creative process: the rehearsal floors, classrooms, and church basements where people prepare work to show to other people. The second, which will be explored in greater depth, deals with the presence of an audience.

The process of creating a piece of theatre or a video within and/or for the settlement community, or for public education, tends to be collective to a greater or lesser extent. Often, and certainly in all my experience, collective methods draw on and implicate first-person biographical experience of the participants (and, ideally, of the director/facilitator; this idea must be put aside for a later discussion). Inevitably, this process involves anecdotal or more protracted disclosure, clarification, and figuring out how to present or represent the stories; whether and how much to fictionalize them or juxtapose them, among countless others, are decisions made collectively. This risky process can be immensely healing or profoundly damaging and re-traumatizing.

To increase the likelihood of the former happening, participants must mutually understand and address as transparently as possible how these processes differ from psychotherapy or any formal therapy or counseling. Obviously, the artists and volunteers facilitating such projects are untrained as therapists, and as such have a responsibility not to engage in dynamics beyond their capacity. Just as obviously, however, the understanding of what constitutes such a dynamic is subjective and not at all regulated.

The informality of these processes means that in general, moments of healing, discovery and integration will be spontaneous and incidental. Perhaps the most salient difference from formal therapy is that no outcome around healing per se is envisioned or articulated; outcomes are stated only in terms of the piece of art at hand. But the work works on the participants beyond the stated goal of the project. For example, one might have a revelation while quietly painting a puppet; one might learn how to trust others more as a byproduct of a healthy collective ambit.

Movements of healing are the most observable in contexts of giving and receiving biographical stories. These are exactly the contexts, moreover, where commonly held beliefs about therapy tend to influence and guide attitudes and behaviours the most. Far from wishing to eradicate them, an ethical reorientation of arts practices would call for a thoughtful and careful consideration of these beliefs.

Judith Herman M.D. wrote *Trauma and Recovery*, subtitled *The aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror*, in 1992. This far-reaching classic has much to offer anyone working with traumatized individuals. She rigorously explores the notions underwriting the value of disclosure, treating as a given that “the fundamental premise of the psychotherapeutic work is a belief in the restorative power of truth-telling.” (Herman, 181)

The most critical quality that must be restored to a consciousness fragmented by trauma is that of integrity. The parts of a psyche and the facets of a life, in a therapeutic process, will go in the direction of being integrated together, free of the schisms of denial and forgetting. Integrity, as a reconciliation with finitude, has also to do with restoring temporal integrity. Both memory and imagination can be severely compromised by a trauma that arrests the flow of history: if the past and the future are too hard to bear thinking about, people can be reduced to living in an endless present. (T, 89)

Remembering and disclosing can also help to re-build a foundation for trust. “The interlocking of integrity and trust in caretaking relationships... regenerates the sense of human community which trauma destroys.” (T, 154) In the interest of both integrity and trust, the text explores methods that “use the structure of the narrative to foster an intense reliving experience within the context of a safe relationship.” (T, 183)

Of all the beliefs about therapy, none is more salient than the fantasy of the relation between trauma and catharsis. Uncritically accepted by most, and generalized in multifarious ways throughout ‘western’ culture, the belief is that simply telling is always healing, almost like a magical exorcism. Though it most certainly is not, much of the spirit of all these beliefs about therapy will obtain within artistic enterprises.

Art can mediate and avoid many of the problems associated with disclosure. Art operates in a direction other than ‘simply telling’ and especially other than ‘reliving’ (an extremely contestable notion when considered anywhere outside formal therapy – even perhaps within it). Artistic expression can shock us with deeper levels of awareness than we knew we possessed. It has the capacity to embody simultaneous polarities, paradox, and the “ability to hold mixed feelings” (Fox, 78) not often found in ordinary language. Dealing with several levels of experience at the same time might enable one to draw novel and useful connections among them.

Making art is a way to meditate on issues without striving for closure or answers. John Fox – author of *Poetic Medicine*, a book representative of a certain ‘new-agey’ manifestation of this discourse – says of poetry that it is a vehicle for questioning, repeated questioning that does not attain or even reach for solutions. The insight it offers is like that of a koan: the conceptual or emotional movement or progress is found in the way you circle around it to see many angles. And, like a koan, poetry “enfolds us in meaning but do(es) not insist on logic.” (T, 205) It surprises with unexpected flashes of peace or delight, with phrasings that arrest and reorient the heart, and opens the possibility of uttering monumental things, when straight description “seems to crack under the pressure of deep feeling.” (T, 195)

Thus making art invites a certain unblocking of the consciousness; a catharsis abstracted can still give an individual a way in to memories. One individual reflected on writing a poem in a workshop by Fox: “There is much *I can’t feel* about those years and this gives me a *place to start*.” (T, 187, my emphasis) Finally, creative processes can clarify perceptions and galvanize agency, by distilling experience into images, sounds or movements that express what something is or was *like*, for *you*. This simple affirmation of unicity can have a radical impact on the self-confidence of some.

The political economy and cultural landscape underwriting Fox’s feel-good book, however, betray a brutal (one longs to be able to use the word bourgeois) myopia. He continuously insists that we ‘reclaim’ voices, feelings, and ‘truths’, by ‘capturing’ moments in art. But this mantra calling us to reclaim renders invisible the moment of loss and wounding; it never addresses the theft of what now must be reclaimed in any political way. The trauma and abuse to which people have ‘lost’ parts of the self are not forces of nature, unfortunate and inevitable, like a hurricane. They are the results of actions, which have authors, and which – especially in the case of refugees – can only be named and understood as part of a political structure.

Fox’s text makes much of the ‘interior place’ that all possess, coextensive with an “essential character and original nature of who we are”... and unchanging core that must be “reclaimed... returned to” (T, 11) Everywhere in this kind of discourse we hear that our ‘essential nature’ is to be ‘whole’. This essentializing attitude presupposes a stable interiority, as though it were possible to ‘remember and recount’ the ‘facts’ of one’s life. Thus in the preface we are told that poetry is “simply speaking truth”. Which truth, whose truth, and how and why this speaking is being performed is absent from the discourse. This absence obliterates creative agency; the poem or the story is not who someone *is*, any more than any creation *is* its author.

Not only is there no such stable interiority, but I am not ‘whole’. I am not whole without the other and all the other’s others; *I am* in community, neither self-identical nor self-contained. To posit people as whole was only ever to speak to the individual of the enlightenment living in a capitalist society. Though Fox says some lovely things about poetry, to responsibly inherit the wisdom of the genre he represents is to be critical of it.

I was working last month at the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture, where I have been a volunteer for about five years. I was putting together a display for a big event at Metro Hall, a good opportunity for public education. On the floor of a tiny office, I was arranging several harrowing images of torture. I was being extremely critical; I couldn’t make a spectacle out of them, no, and they definitely had to be tactful and understated, had to make the viewer do most of the work... My daydreaming, here, is not. The noise in my head is more like sustained interrogation, thinking of the paper I’m writing vis-à-vis this display, and exactly what is this Metro Hall thing for anyway? An opportunity to righteously spread the word that *Life is not Beautiful*. Had I checked my body I would have found it contracted, my forehead harsh and grooved. My vigilance, here, is not. It’s more like anger, as if all the settlement services in this city were ethical debacles, abusive and totalizing...

I am interrupted by the sound coming from the ESL classroom next door, by the voices of people who have *lived* the experiences I am so wary of representing in my little display; displaced Kurds, Somalis, Afghans and Rwandans, whose shattered and wobbly bodies drag them here on weekday afternoons, to

learn this alphabet together, sometimes in the same class as enemies from home. They are singing *You Are my Sunshine*. Practicing-English-Singing. One of the voices – an old man’s – slightly out of tune and the most confident, rises above the others. The English is hilarious. They swell with enthusiasm near the end, imperfect and giggling, imploring you please not to take their sunshine away.

What a fool I am. I sit, gluestick in hand, wondering who in hell I think I am to take feel-good Hollywood movies away from those who clearly appreciate them, suddenly weeping fat and unacademic tears. I feel not like a ‘witness’ (in all the complexity that introduces) to this, but rather like a rabbit, caught in the headlights, frozen and quaking before possible responses, made still by a rib-cracking love.

Not all settlement services are misguided, and none are totally misguided. This happy fact is the logical result of people working together, living together, doing things together every day. We do all these things imperfectly, but over long periods of time; we build ambits where people get used to each other, and inevitably encounter one another as real individuals. In the encounter, “you learn each other’s names and begin to hear each other’s stories. This is the reach of mercy and within it the desire for justice is borne.” (BcH, 5) The last word in that quotation can be taken with or without the ‘e’. A further resonance: we can only ever begin to hear one another’s stories.

Perhaps the best ethics had the chance to breathe as we learned each other’s names. Derrida asks, “If the proper name does not belong to language, to the ordinary functioning of language<sup>7</sup>... what consequences can we draw from this about hospitality?” (OH, 137)<sup>8</sup> In harmony with Levinas, we can describe an address to the other as an invocation: I cannot name the other without it being a greeting; I cannot meet the other without simultaneously somehow expressing this meeting. A proper name has already sidestepped the reification and objectification that can only *be* in language. So has a liability been identified in language itself? What are we doing with language?

The stories refugees tell are made of language, which has both a narrow and broad sense. (OH, 133) The narrow sense (as in English or Shona) brings its own problematics, which must be negotiated in all these largely English-language artistic productions made with refugees to Canada.<sup>9</sup>

But in the broad sense, how it has been disenchanted and drained of sincerity and straightforwardness! After desiccating millennia in the light of ontology, and all that time deployed in the service of domination, deceit, and cynicism, of the more general cultural climate of contempt that hijacks meaningful language (note the recent monstrous perversion of the signifier ‘freedom’) and scrambles our lexicon...

After all that, language itself has become suspect in a process related and parallel to the last century’s degradation and dubious scrutiny of the ‘subject’. As though a contamination needed to be overcome in the utterances of a subject liable to have been tricked by hallucination, opinion and ideology. As though the only true vocation of the subject were the articulation of Being, the calling forth of Being into objectified and thematized consciousness.

It’s true that a subject’s knowledge is partial, discursive and contingent on shifting grounds. It is true that our very alphabet is poisoned by violence, a violence so inhumane and systematic that we can no longer deny the existence of a “radical lie at the very beginning of speech.” (OH, 122) To say ‘language is limited’ is also true, but the meaning and significance of this statement has been ill conceived by almost everyone.

Carolyn Forché, in her contribution to *The Poet’s Notebook*, affirms language’s vast capacities, stating that representations of any story demand “thick descriptions” (PN, 38) of their dynamics and implications. This may be hard work, but it is “primitive” to say that language does not express anything that can manifest to consciousness. Conscious thought IS linguistically structured. Language can capture everything that can be captured; it is the very essence of capturing. Levinas agrees, admitting the inability either to avoid using language, or to shelter it from ontological abuse. Rather, an ever-present risk of abuse is the price that manifestation exacts. Thought does not first ‘perceive’ data and then make sense of them linguistically; rhetoric “seems part of the intellectual act, and to be the very intrigue in which a *this-as-that* is assembled.” (Levinas, *Everyday Language and Rhetoric without Eloquence: Outside the Subject*, 136)

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<sup>7</sup> For example, it cannot be translated. ‘Jacques’ is not ‘Jack’ in the same way un anchois is an anchovy.

<sup>8</sup> Abbreviations for texts by Jacques Derrida: OH= Of Hospitality, HJR= Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility, EW= Eating Well, or the Calculation of the Subject

<sup>9</sup> What I had intended to spend all of graduate school studying has been reduced, as it were, to a footnote.

And rhetoric, eloquence, and artistic language – to a greater or lesser extent – narrativizes. Is it possible, either through ‘everyday language’ or otherwise, to lessen the extent? “Narrative– and, consequently, verbal, linguistic – intentionality is essential to thought, inasmuch as thought is thematization and identification.” (Levinas, *Language and Proximity*: CPP, 110) But only inasmuch. All that sticks out of thematization is, indeed, the singular theme of my meditation.

Forché discusses the ethical dimensions of a witnessing situation, and the impossibility of ‘knowing’ the other’s pain, due to the inadequacy not of language but of the concept of ‘knowing’. Stories that involve trauma, as they almost always do in the case of refugees, are very difficult for the teller and the listener. Out of avoidance of this pain comes the notion of the ‘ineffable’, or the ‘unspeakable’, words people use as if language were far less potent than it is. “We have made unspeakable mean indescribable. It really means ‘nasty’” (PN, 41) Though nastiness can be ambiguous, highly specific, and contradictory, it can be named. Some things are hard to express but really, very little is beyond language.

What very little that escapes the story, that which is non-thematizable, has tremendous consequences for our reconsideration of storytelling. It is only by the meta-linguistic remainder that we understand the inadequacy of the concept of ‘knowing’ another’s pain.

Emmanuel Levinas broke with all of western philosophy by an unparalleled deployment of the phenomenological reduction. His initial interruption questioned the notion of absolute adequation in intuition and intention. That is to say, the consciousness of the Same had been able to find outside, a seamlessly complete and perfect mirror of what was inside. Levinas disrupted this egoistic recuperation, this collapse of alterity, by making phenomenology able to (and so forcing it to) think the Other.

“Consciousness does not consist in equaling being with representation... but rather in overflowing this play of lights – this phenomenology – and in accomplishing *events* whose ultimate signification (contrary to the Heideggerian conception) does not lie in *disclosing*.” (T&I, 27, his emphasis) If subjectivity is conceived beginning with the ethical relation, intelligibility (the illumination of the ‘play of lights’) is not the ultimate event of being. The discovery of being’s ‘truth’ is not the destination of what goes/went on in the ethical relation. “The welcoming of the face and the work of justice – which condition the birth of truth itself – are not interpretable in terms of disclosure.” (T&I, 28)

Ontology can no longer ignore the face that disrupts the totality. As the very origin of language, the approach of the other and the communication thereof is not a work but a greeting... “The essential condition for prepositional truth is not in the disclosure of a being... but the expression of an interlocutor to whom I tell both the being he is and the being of his being.” (Levinas, *The Ego and the Totality*: CPP, 43)

The following section makes me wish this essay were a painting, for a need to overlay and sometimes conflate two understandings of the word ‘testimony’. They need to be held together – like an egg in each palm – and whenever it’s clear that a passage intends it in the one sense, the palimpsest of the other will be there. Levinas says that the truth of testimony is certainly irreplaceable insofar as the subject is its “‘experiences’, the enclosed and private domain that opens itself to universality and inspection only through the story that the subject makes of these.” (*Truth of Disclosure and Truth of Testimony*: Basic Philosophical Writings, 100) But he goes on to explore how it is much more and far more fundamental even than this.

The concept ‘testimony’ is enjoying a very popular moment; it is ‘given’ as a fruitful method in therapeutic work with refugees all over the world. “In the telling, the trauma story becomes a testimony. Inger Agger and Soren Jensen, in their work with refugee survivors of political persecution, note the universality of testimony as a ritual of healing. Testimony has both a private dimension, which is confessional and spiritual, and a public aspect, which is political and judicial...” (Herman, 181) In the expanding into the larger public dimension, the trauma story becomes a “ ‘new story,’ which is ‘no longer about shame and humiliation’, but rather ‘about dignity and virtue’. Through their storytelling, his refugee patients ‘regain the world they have lost.’” (Herman, 181)

Of all this, Levinas asks if we could not propose “a role for testimony – and for the Saying itself – that would be more directly ‘veritative’ than that which they play when transmitting or communicating ontological experiences?” (T, 101) He is suggesting that testimony is the origin of a kind of meaning that signifies other than to signify being, and that sensibility can be thought outside the limits of being.

Of course, in the above quotation, he is talking about speech in general. But could his question not apply to testimony as understood in the field of refugee issues, privileging the telling over the content? Could the ‘world’ one has ‘lost’ be restored in the event of communication – in the ethical relation? Yes, but... not so fast.

Levinas describes the psychism “as a relation with the unrepresentable, as a relation with a past on the hither side of every present and every representation, not belonging to the order of presence... The freedom of the other will never have been able to originate in my own, that is to say, will never have been able to fit into the same present... (or) contemporary with my freedom, or be representable to me.” (T, 101) Since we do not inhabit the same plane, or the same present, we must not rush to ‘restore’, for we must not believe that we have grasped what was lost. We must not think that we have crossed the distance that holds the other away from and above me in inviolable alterity. Awareness of unrepresentability is precisely the corrective needed by those who would consume or exploit the testimonies of refugees. But how far can or must this be taken?

Jacques Derrida provides conceptual tools with which to negotiate my inheritance of Levinas’ ideas. Deconstruction’s cornerstone idea of ‘undecidability’ does not indicate postponement or paralysis, but rather the gravity of responsibility, and the depth of our interdependence. “For a decision to be a decision, it must be made by the other in myself, which doesn’t exonerate me from responsibility.” (HJR, 67) This responsibility drives me to make decisions in radical passivity (and learning how to explain that this is not a paradox is my singular goal). It also instructs me to “filter the heritage... This means that to inherit, or to keep memory for a finite being implies some selection, some choice, some decision.” (HJR, 67) And what could be more an *inheritance* than the testimony of survivors of trauma?

Speaking as an inheritor of Levinas himself, Derrida places the logic of testimony at the centre of the project of deconstruction: “Testimony, which implies faith or promise, governs the entire social space. I would say that theoretical knowledge is circumscribed within this testimonial space. It is only by reference to the possibility of testimony that deconstruction can begin to ask questions concerning knowledge and meaning.” (HJR, 82) The very possibility of iteration and of language begins in consciousness thus conceived, as an irreducible relation to the other. Artistic expression proceeds from the same place; Derrida casually flings “metaphoricity supposes exappropriation” (EW, 270) in to his discussion of subjectivity. It’s true; our ability to make art testifies to what we are, and how that began.

Language, then, is hospitality, by the grace of its birthplace in the ethical relation. It is also – even in the narrow sense – where the *aporia* begins. “Must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to speak our language, in all the senses of this term... before being able and so as to be able to welcome him into our country?” (OH, 15) Thought in terms of the ethical relation – unconditional expiation for and duty to the absolute other – the answer to this question is NO.

Yet we inhabit a world full of third parties, a world where justice must be social and political, and decisions must be made; a world where hospitality is inscribed in a right. As such, it “presupposes the social... status of the contracting parties, that it is possible for them to be called by their names, to have names, to be subjects in law, to be questioned and liable...” (OH, 23) By bringing in contractual and therefore reciprocal arrangements, we have already departed from the ethical relation.

A difficult puzzle: on the one hand, there is “unconditional hospitality that dispenses with the law, duty, or even politics, and, on the other, hospitality circumscribed by law and duty.” (OH, 135) The two realms must be constantly negotiated, as if there were two (undecidable!) regimes of hospitality. In the movement between them, as usual, the difference between a refugee-other and the absolutely-other becomes extremely slippery. The latter commands me to absolute or *just* hospitality, which “breaks with hospitality by right; not that it condemns or is opposed to it... but it is as strangely heterogeneous to the law to which it is yet so close, from which in truth it is indissociable.” (OH, 27) And so the Law requires laws, which always threaten to dissimulate and contaminate it from the inside out.

Derrida wonders whether “hyperbolic, unconditional hospitality doesn’t consist in suspending language... and even address to the other.” (OH, 135) Though this is a bit counterintuitive when considered alongside what we have said about invocation and the ethical relation, it is also clear that asking who one is and where one comes from speaks only in the name of the juridical, of the state. “Shouldn’t we abstain from asking another these questions, which herald so many required conditions, and thus limits” (OH, 135) to absolute hospitality? At least this attitude of restraint must be carried through into the political realm.

Contrast all this with inquisitive listeners, hungry for disclosure, who feed on details and fetishize injury. Such people listen in pedagogical contexts, in settlement services recording PIFs; they are volunteers running conversation groups, and actual audiences. The aggression undertaken to dis-cover, the impulse to illuminate, and the craving to get full confession manifests all manner of pathologies on the part of arts practitioners or audience members. Everything from a pornographic style of voyeurism to projections and assumptions that overdetermine the narrative compromise the real-ness of the person and inhibit their spontaneity and complexity. If no person is reducible to a representation of his or her



biography, however detailed, then still less can someone be reduced to the sum of only her tragic parts. What exiled and terrorized them is one story among many refugees might tell about their lives; they were not always, nor will they always be, refugees.

But remembering and memorializing, rescuing memories from the oblivion of forgetting, is essential; it is part of what makes imagination possible. As we have seen, art can facilitate this remembering. Memory, imagination and art are in a symbiotic relation.

Art is predicated on imagination, which involves a certain orientation toward a truly open future, beyond the binary opposition of the impossible and the possible. Jacques Derrida speaks of *l'avenir* – the future, in French – but it is *a venir*, it is what is *to come*. Unlike simply *le futur*, the *a venir* cannot be anticipated; it is neither extension of nor extrapolation from what exists in this present. It is not just ‘more of the same’ at a later time. It will be absolutely surprising. Without this cipher, imagination could never be, would have no reason to be, born. Without both memory and imagination, there is no exit from the harsh light of the present that subsumes all other moments into a totality. The absolute present is not the time of the ethical relation.

Happily – and by an amazing grace – the luminous synchrony of the present (whereby this moment is identical to itself, is contained in itself) bears a trace of the time of creation. It is not stable. The time of the other is a diachrony. The possibility opened by diachrony is the possibility for something to *arrive*. To teach, to shock, to add to my consciousness what was not there before. Not to confirm my intuitions but to bring radically strange elements. And to correct my longing for unity, for fusion, for the ecstasy that destroys distance:

Not everything melts and surrenders to my gaze; the other resists and recedes from the light. She is not for me to “get” in any sense of the word. The other is NOT ME, not even very much LIKE me, nor a player in my endless drama of assimilation. There is an alterity so radical and separate that it cannot join me in communion, no matter how cleverly I expand. So we are not one; we are not one...

In the rabbit field I am haunted by Andrej’s worms. Tonight again they are mocking me, their genius putting my own into question. Do you know about them? There were these researchers, Andrej told me, who found that if you administer triggers followed by electric shocks to one group of worms, and if you then grind them up and feed them another group of worms who digest them, well, with the same trigger the second group still feel the shock! They vibrate with atomic memory.

But a worm is not the Other. I cannot be the Other to a worm. A worm is not beside itself, both worm and not-worm; it does not refuse synchronization. A worm leaves no “trace of an original disaster which was not experienced in the first person precisely because it ruined this first person.” (Forché: PN, 37)

Yes, people are different from worms. But rabbits? I cannot say: out of curiosity I take a wriggling mouthful. Chew and swallow, and as I exhale, I begin to vibrate. Almost imperceptibly at first, then, needing to sit, then, needing to lie down on my back. I stare at the night sky, convulsing as if a freight train were thundering around and around my body.

A rabbit must be a pagan.

In leaning on poetic language this way, it is not my intention to dissimulate my primary questions: what does all this have to do with narrative? Am I struggling with ethics vis-à-vis the stories of others or my own? Exactly that ambiguity is the heart of learning to do this work out of an ethical orientation. The undecidability is coextensive with, or is, the birth of responsibility.

By now you are familiar with Levinas’ discussion of Saying and the Said. A transitive Saying, a telling, subjects the listener to an intersubjective relation which overflows or exceeds the meaning of what is told, in the same way infinity overflows what can be comprehended in the face-to-face relation. Saying is betrayed – in every sense of that word – in the Said. Always: ‘Truth’ only appears, radiant and intelligible, in the Said. Being cannot be disclosed to consciousness otherwise. There is the gravity and potency of language: All truth is in it. In privileging Saying, Levinas is not seeking a world without nouns; the Said is not evil! It is necessary for sociality, the only way we can do things like make institutions and artworks and plans, it is the throne of truth itself. But are Truth, Being, and Consciousness really all there is to the human being?

What Levinas *is* seeking is to do is to reduce the relation between Saying and the Said, to ask totally afresh what the relation teaches us about signification. Relating is not a 'moment of Being'; proximity is not one example among many of 'stuff people can get into'. Saying – relating in proximity – shocks and surprises me, puts me in question, elects *me and not someone else* to respond, concretely, to be infinitely responsible to the other. This election, prior to choice and the freedom/non-freedom binary, is more like a seizure than a caress. The elected is not a nice person, but a person per se; the subject, as host, is a hostage.

What is meant by the words 'Saying shocks, and puts me in question'? Adam Zachary Newton, in his work *Narrative Ethics*, compares it to the Said: "'Saying' ... tends to exact the profounder price... from speaker, from hearer, and from text." (Newton, 4) The price, I think, is twofold: In one sense, it is the price that manifestation always exacts; when Saying is betrayed in the Said, when anything passes into the realm of being, there is the ever-present risk of alienation, of perversion, and of reification. The passing of events into a story translates a life into a noun. Narrative can be coercive, reductive, and historically recuperative (T, 7); barring the signification of Saying, closing down the dynamism of diachronic time, and making it synchronic and comprehensible.

In another sense, the price of communication is infinite obligation, duty, and responsibility for the other in proximity. This calling into account, calling into question, is all the more accusative when the other is relating a biographical story, and yet more still when it is a story of trauma, destitution, or persecution. The ethical relation implicates narrative "as claim, as risk, as responsibility, as gift, as price." (T, 7)

Newton's work, dealing with written texts, is literary criticism that makes its inheritance of Levinas explicit. It is fascinating how much of it can be applied to live storytelling events. Most importantly, his analysis conceives of a way to take some of the pressure of liability off narrative. So far, my discussion has made much of narrative's tendency to objectify, reify and overdetermine a life. But as the site where the entire analysis is actually played out, surely, it is not devoid of merit. Newton imagines how the ethical relation might not preclude narrative; the title *Narrative Ethics* indicates "a logic which binds its two parts intrinsically and necessarily." (T, 8) The relation between the two terms is neither contrived nor incidental; rather, he is striving to elaborate "narrative *as* ethics: the ethical consequences of narrating story and fictionalizing person, and the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness and reader in the process." (T, 11)

Newton explores the undecidable tension between Saying and the Said. He acknowledges how the Said freezes or crystallizes the dynamic event of telling into stasis; how "both life and story are... hostages to reiteration, the eternal return of chill, thaw, and chill again." (T, 4) But the betrayal can be reduced by developing a different kind of attention, by attending differently in the approach.

Newton proposes a more phenomenological approach to written texts, describing the difference "between a reading that attempts to evaluate or even solve a text's problems and one which engages them in their concrete, formal, narrative particularity. One faces a text as one might face a person, having to confront the claims raised by that very immediacy, an immediacy of contact, not of meaning." (T, 11) Here the relation is privileged over content. This can only be good, as the content of the story must not be understood as what or who a person *is*. People must collapse their lives in order to tell them, and the telling is, in a sense, the first breath identity takes. The fact that the teller is directing the construction thereof, is absolutely a creative agent, can now take focus. "Above all, as an ethics, narrative is performance or act." (T, 7)

Newton takes seriously the grave risks, "both discursive and existential, of telling one's 'life-story'." (T, 15) The hunger to be recognized and understood, and *caught*, as in 'do you catch my meaning?' ... also leaves one caught as in a cage; the inseparable nature of the two senses brings a profound ambivalence for most tellers. How can language be truthful about a self without 'capturing', without reducing it to a few summary incidents? And without consumption: no one wishes to be 'gotten' as a reporter 'gets' a story.

An ethical reconsideration of narrative encounters involves further meditation on these themes of attention, of immediacy, and of the performative nature of disclosure. The risks associated with telling can be mediated when listeners engage in "learning the paradoxical lesson that "getting" someone else's story is also a way of losing them as real; it is a way of appropriating or allegorizing that endangers both intimacy and ethical duty. At the same time, however, one's responsibility consists of responding to just this paradox." (T, 19)

The most pressing responsibility facing practitioners in the field of testimonial and witnessing practices is that of keeping testimony alive. It must somehow retain its quality of *saying*, of addressing, in

order to make remembrance an active response. This is not a work of representation, but one of something happening, now, between the giver(s) and receiver(s). Meanwhile, the demented neo-liberal conception of “responsibility”, and the inherent imperialism of the helper ego both encourage a more ‘culturally aware’ and ‘sensitive’ society through artistic presentations of true stories of bad things that happened to people(s).

Fortunately, the Other plays not on my sensitivities but puts me in question; I am suddenly ruptured, subject to change, accused. The Other interrupts my self-sufficiency, my identity, my being identical to myself. Suddenly, I am not one, I am (at least) two, as the other in me, the Other before me, calls me exactly to “the end of safety” as Adrienne Rich puts it. It is only from this place of instability that I can receive testimony not as knowledge but as *counsel*.

Roger Simon, in his excellent work on testimony, deals principally with remembered accounts of the Shoah. He suggests that such a testimonial encounter is diachronic in two ways: in the sense of the ethical relation we have been discussing, and in the fact that the speaker is remembering something in her actual past. (WPP, 1)

That survivors of the Shoah are reaching into the very distant past (the few living subjects left to him, fast disappearing, are of course recounting childhood memories) brings its own problematics. Its emergency echoes a searing line from a poem by R. M. Rilke; ‘We are perhaps the last to have known such things.’ From the point of view of this analysis, however, the differences between Simon’s elderly subjects and newly arrived refugees are of negligible importance; the ethical relation can structure listening to refugee testimony, even in the case of helping a claimant with a PIF who speaks of an event that happened as recently as ‘Wednesday’.

Remembering, in both the long and the short term, is difficult and sad (and for someone with post traumatic stress disorder, still scary). In listening, *especially* in an ambit of presenting or preparing an artistic work, it is of vital necessity to be clear about the role of the receivers: Why should there be an audience? For the reception to be more than voyeuristic, we must ask how/why this work is valuable and to whom. The answers will seldom be simple or comforting. Simon explores them in *Remembrance as Praxis and the Ethics of the Inter-Human*, a work that elaborates the connection between the ethics described above and arts-based practices. Simon devotes appropriate attention to the theme of attention, to how to attend to a testamentary act. The attention called for is not ‘passive’ rather than ‘active’; rather, to use Levinasian terms, it is a passivity beyond any passivity, apriori, pre-reflective, more passive than mere ‘receptivity’. It is a passivity, again, of being called into question.

Contrast this with the kind of attention engendered by the media of globalization that generates internal fragmentation experienced as ‘too much information’ “with no continuity between perceptions or actions.” (RaP, 3) Stories of others’ suffering are presented as just more information. This state of affairs can be compared to a nineteenth century form of entertainment called a *phantasmagoria*, a show created with moveable lanterns and painted slides. It conjured what is described in turn as a parade of ghosts, a procession of images, and shadows divested of their materiality, which “drew on a variety of gothic narratives, literary spectres and mythic images.” (RaP, 5)

Like the spectacle of official multiculturalism and its ‘visible minorities’, the phantasmagoric series of apparitions seeks to create and inscribe collective and cultural memory. Fascinating or frightening, yet always somehow disconnected from any lived reality, it is a presentation that outstrips its own content; of its audience it asks only for consumption. The presentation of pain and suffering as sheer spectacle reduces the experience of ‘being touched’ by a story to one of pure affectivity.

‘Being touched’ is not rightly a matter of mere affect, but a matter of *contiguity*, of *proximity*; touch “is in fact a metaphor for the impingement of the world as a whole upon subjectivity.” (RaP, 3) Impingement: unexpected, confronting me with my originary culpability, guilt before I have done anything. It is difficult to name this haunting to which everyone is subject, this ghost who asks me first to swear that I have witnessed her. Indeed, the specter, spectrality, is the (only) corrective to the spectacle. Upon analytic inspection, I suspect that the specter invoked by Jacques Derrida, the same specter central to Roger Simon’s argument, is an aspect of the ‘trace’ discussed by Levinas. Meditations on the ghost and on the trace, at any rate, tend to generate a common result: spectacular respect for radical alterity.

Consider Derrida’s treatment of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in *Specters of Marx*. The ghost of Hamlet’s father, before appearing, brings first an injunction: *SWEAR*. Here is the “possibility of developing a covenant with a non-present instance.” (RaP, 4) We swear to witness, but what we see can never become fully present or manifest. Shakespeare, Derrida and Simon all know how important it is to maintain this distance, this non-phenomenality: the ghost in *Hamlet* wears armour. So as not to be rendered a phantom in

the phantasmagoria (where all are manifestly manifest), the ghost also wears a visor in order to see without being seen. The ghost is an agent.

It is so important to maintain this distance because the relation between me and the other is characterized first of all by asymmetry. The stories of others are “stories that seek our attention while needing to maintain their distance (that is, a distance that protects the non-phenomenal phenomenon of its address from too easily settling into our present/identificatory knowledges).” (RaP, 16) This separation enables the other to truly teach me. All this puts the traditional understanding of ‘solidarity’ into question; the testamentary/witnessing relation is asymmetrical and thus *non-reciprocal*.

The Marxian notion of solidarity says that ‘my liberation is bound up with yours; none are free until all are free, and so I am not driven by compassion but by our shared struggle...’ It’s not that these words are not ‘true’. They are true and also inadequate as an ethical orientation. How could I think that I could ever give back to God what God gives to me? It is the trace (of God) that brings me counsel.

And counsel is what initiates the de-phasing of my ego and also of *time* itself. The exposition in Hamlet begins, “The time is out of joint...” The schism, the rupture, of this non-coincidence is both an opening (in immediacy) to the other, and the announcement of what is not immediate, of diachrony. As such it is always an experience of non-indifference, as the hyperbolic language needed to describe it attests to. The drama is in the way the trace confronts you with what you are not: it comes “from beyond my time... (it is in) ghosts that disjoin the exchange-order of presents.” (RaP, 4)

Such de-stabilization is always unexpected, and not even recognizable: the Other in his/her alterity refuses to be integrated and remains radically exterior. When speaking of such an arrival, it is a tremendous leap to suggest that there could be, should be, a *welcome*. Because it is not yet or still intelligible, how to welcome? Derrida instructs us to be unconditionally hospitable *before* we open the door and see who is on the other side: “Let us say YES to *who or what turns up...* before any identification, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female.” (OH, 77) A true welcome demands that we throw off all defenses before knowing – before integrating (in every register of that word, up to and especially that used in discourses of refugee issues) – who or what arrives. It requires devotion to a shadow of a hint of a trace of what we have never seen: learning, finally, to live with ghosts.

But we have not yet done the work to get there. Let us return to the phantasmagoria, that negative infinity where every past or future moment can be integrated into the present in an endless movement of recuperation. Nothing can resist the comprehension (to grasp everything with one’s hands) of an audience thus assembled; nothing is too foreign to be made a part of their experience. The magic lantern show, in failing to deal with alterity, fails to deal with justice:

First, most (multi-) media manifestations fail to deal with the *production* of the tragedies they represent. Political economy is absent from the tearjerkers created in a Hollywood enslaved to the very forces that generated the wounds. Oh, *Life is Beautiful*, we sniff, while using our IBM computers that – the company that – invented the system of numbering that regulated the concentration camps. Who answers for that? As was asked in the criticism of a poetry that simply “reclaims”: Can healing activities that ignore the structural dimension of the wounds ever be effective or even not damaging?

If injustice remains unnamed, our privilege goes unacknowledged. People prefer to be moved by the Shoah, saying, that’s someone just like me ‘dying in his own excrement (RaP, 7), isn’t that powerful!’ But it was not *someone like me* in the least. I have never known anything other than the safety of being a white North American.

But one does not have to ‘identify’ with a refugee to be, in obsession, a term in the ethical relation. The ethical relation – communication – is an openness of the self. It does not seek resonance. As metaphysical desire, it seeks the good in the form of service, of obligation. This openness is “not complete if it is on the watch for recognition. It is complete not in opening to the spectacle of or the recognition of the other, but in becoming a responsibility for him.” (OTB, 119)

Second, the phantasmagoria structures attention in a *non-public* way. The “parade of identical phantoms (make a claim to presence.” (RaP, 4) If something claims to have fully manifested in a synchronic present, with no remainder (no trace, no specter to haunt), then it claims that the representation is identical to the represented. Thus, the other (the dead one or the testimony of the living one before me) does not await my invitation, acceptance or welcome, in order to be complete. The event asks nothing of me. My relation with the story is intimate, closed to society and to justice.

An example: One relatively recent night, I watched *The Joy Luck Club* in French on late-night TV. It always makes me cry. There we were: me, and it. And I cried, of course. The film and I formed a number; we were two terms in a system. But I and the Other do not form a number; we do not form a totality visible from the outside. Now, the totality formed by the film and me is *spectacle*, which “opens the object of my gaze to my individual involvement with it. Not at all pure passivity, the basis of spectacle lies in eliciting ... a strictly individuated response.” (RaP, 8)

Justice is absent from such an encounter in that the film “pretends that there is no need to have the substance of my attendance re-inscribed in a relational, publicly accountable manner.” (RaP, 8) In other words, community is impossible here because there is nothing for me to *do* but enjoy my weeping that feels so private. Indeed there is nothing to do at all before this lightshow that leaves you in ‘fear and trembling’: “Before the phantasmagoric scene we fall in awe – feeling deeply, but with nothing to say.” (RaP, 8) The Shoah, for example, made aesthetically beautiful or reduced to the sublime confronts us with enormity, “making it alien to thought, leaving memory in ruins and reducing us to a stammer.” (RaP, 13) Thus ‘experienced’, the Shoah cannot be public. The public is the inter-human; justice is the arrival of all the third parties, of all the other’s others. Spectacle doesn’t even need *me* to be there!

A testamentary address, on the other hand, is unfinished. It requires my response to call it into being, and still then it will not be completed: the work of remembrance in the ethical relation is infinitely ongoing. Because it is active and transitive, such an address is “situated anew at each testamentary instance of public time.” (RaP, 10) Diachronous time is a dynamic of waiting for, of hearing and responding to, an imminent trace that always escapes. It is a “non-linear temporality, a momentary complex of the has-been, the making-present, and the coming-toward.” (RaP, 10) As with Derrida’s *avenir*, such surprise is possible only in proximity, and its ongoing or infinite nature means that the testamentary act “*becomes what it is* only in being offered to others.” (RaP, 10)

To hear is to speak: to tell it to someone else. Fundamental to the method of *juxtaposition* (a concrete method used to privilege Saying over the Said) described by Simon is the commentary and response of all participants. They must write back, speak back, to one another. To an other. Responsibility without limit in endless saying: I was exposed to a story and must testify *to my own exposure*, to how it affected me, how it entered and put into question my own narratives. In slightly different circles this is called *embodiment*: after all, even if we exit the theatre of spectacle, we do not have the option of retreating to some ‘neutral’ site. So we must “seek some form of activity using (our) immersion in the very objects of study.” (RaP, 9). Perhaps the lesson of the worms is not so odd after all.

Being present in increasing exposure and transparency, and giving our own response to stories, may lead to greater realization of our roles as inheritors. Inheritance can only have meaning through being received. A *gift* needs enactment; its originary demand is that one at least accept it. So “the inheritance of testament is the reception of the gift of the ghost.” (RaP,14) Of course these gifts are non-reciprocal. The “only way to return the gift is by giving it to someone else.” (RaP,14) By teaching. There is the pedagogical dimension: there is always only more work, and limitless obligation.

A responsible teacher will hold the political together with the ethical. In watching a testamentary video, for example, she might ask, with Donna Haraway, *with whose blood were my eyes crafted?* She might encourage her students to ask themselves the same question. She will always sober back to awareness of her privilege, to the structural dimension and justice. But true hospitality is unconditional, prior to any politics, which returns us to the aporia at hand. So it is very fortunate indeed that arts practices – by sidestepping rationality – invite simultaneously existing polarities into the discourse. Finally, when such a teacher tells you of another’s telling, out of a commitment to the preservation of true alterity, she must negotiate her own astonishment and heartbreak. And she must be vigilant against making a spectacle of it, which is very difficult. Because there is that moment of astonishment. Being alive inside and exposed to a story will always make certain of it.

Oh, I go crazy with all this flickering! I come here to describe but I can describe only in part, and only part of me can describe it, what a rabbit has to do with justice. Part of me tears at my own tongue in weeping silence knowing that these words are so much vanity in the face of this emergency. Then the ghosts that haunt interrupt my self-pity and their injunction backs me up against a wall that reads (and its graffiti is done by the only people I have ever trusted) that reads *Art is The Only Shelter you have ever known, could ever know.*

So I re-commit to art in Good Faith – ethically, politically – and I let fly, let my pen fly, let my lips move, reaching for the words that speak love, that speak responsibility, that speak despite the hard-won understanding that I could also say

*Fuck Shelter.*

Speechless again, my ego inhales into its endless, insatiable desire to be, silently I breathe out and am, my sister's keeper.

And right away she forces me to speak; a welcome cannot be silent. True hospitality, as we have seen, consists in responding to the story a refugee has just told me. Justice always speaks, even if in the form of a koan: I must offer hospitality by opening the home I DO have to the humility of the other, and opening the home I do NOT have to the height of the other. Part of hospitality is this "difficult, ambivalent relation to place. As though the place in question in hospitality were a place originally belonging to neither host nor guest, but to the gesture by which one of them welcomes the other – even and above all if he is himself without a dwelling from which this welcome could be conceived." (OH, 62)<sup>10</sup>

And yet – because my privilege has afforded me at least an empirical home – I dwell and then I welcome. "To make a home is to establish identity with a primordial grasp, yes; but it is also, in some measure, to give it away with an extended palm." (McKay, 23) Again, not a paradox but a flicker between two realities; the remainder not expressible by either vocabulary cannot be named. But the remainder endures.

Don McKay, quoted above, takes Levinas with him into the wilderness to help him write nature poetry. The undecidability at the centre of hospitality is enacted precisely in the wilderness, where the artificial and provisional nature of nomination and what escapes reference is just as palpable as with biographical narrative.

As anyone who wishes to avoid fetishizing trauma and injury must be, McKay is careful to distinguish poetic attention from romantic inspiration (T, 27) By the latter, attention is structured much as it is in the phantasmagoria; perception is translated into language with no break, no lapse, no doubt. Our familiar aporia operates in the wilderness in a way shockingly resonant with the theme of hospitality. McKay describes the situation of nature poetry as "analogous to home-making. Being language, it cannot avoid the primordial grasp, but this occurs simultaneously with the extended palm, the openness in knowing that I've been calling poetic attention." (T, 29)

Nature poetry offers further echoes of and parallels with concepts central to an ethical reconsideration of arts practices with refugees. Recall that artistic activities can invite cognitive and affective unblocking through mechanisms that sidestep reason, and admit paradox (and any wild abstraction imaginable) into expression. McKay puts it thus: "Poets are supremely interested in what language can't do; in order to gesture outside, they use language in a way that flirts with its destruction." (T, 32)

This is good, insofar as language translates and transforms the invisible into the visible; said destruction limits the capacity of language to generate system and totalizing intelligibility. This happy truth about poetry is a gift given to all who work with it.

But all this is not a case against speaking, it is a call to develop more just ways of using language. More than it can't, it must be the place of exchange of biographical stories, the site of contiguity between our memories. Clearly, the current meditation is concerned with the ethical orientation of the listener in proximity. Characteristically in harmony with Heidegger, McKay describes poetic listening as enacted both with and beyond language. "And when poetry does become speech, it returns to the business of naming with this listening folded inside it." (T, 66)

There is a certain aching joy in holding the understanding that the words *sea otter* indicate but fail to contain the same unnamable creature (and, in a sense, have contributed to its destruction). Yet if the love poem to a sea otter is an invocation as well, then it transcends all we have said about language, and justice flows from the ethical relation to the page or the lips. "The 'o' which sometimes precedes apostrophe, and is always implicit in the gesture, might be described as the gawk of unknowing... It says 'this is for you, not just about you'." (T, 66)

Yet and still, it is silence that precedes and surrounds these feelings of tenderness, if silence is the duration of undecidability. McKay relates the following myth:

"Among the Haida, the canoe people are spirit beings who travel perpetually among the islands, appearing ashore whenever a shaman opens the way. Before this first occurred they did not realize they were spirits or who they were." (T, 77) In his love poem, he celebrates these people who are

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<sup>10</sup> This passage, written by Anne Dufourmantelle, is found in her commentary on *Of Hospitality*.

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“maundering their wayless way/ among the islands, and now even/ into English with its one-thing-then/ another-traffic-signalled syntax: out there, never/ having heard their keel’s bone-crunch on the beach, the terrible/ birth cry of the plot.” (T, 78)

And so to refugees, honouring me with every syllable with which they share some of the truth about who they are, could I learn to send... smoke signals? Something to show I am hearing their song echoing across the lake, that they are my sunshine, my only sunshine, and everything besides. That they recede in darkness too, before they land, before the story has breath to begin. Do you remember that Lord Krishna is blue because he is holding his breath? And now you know why.

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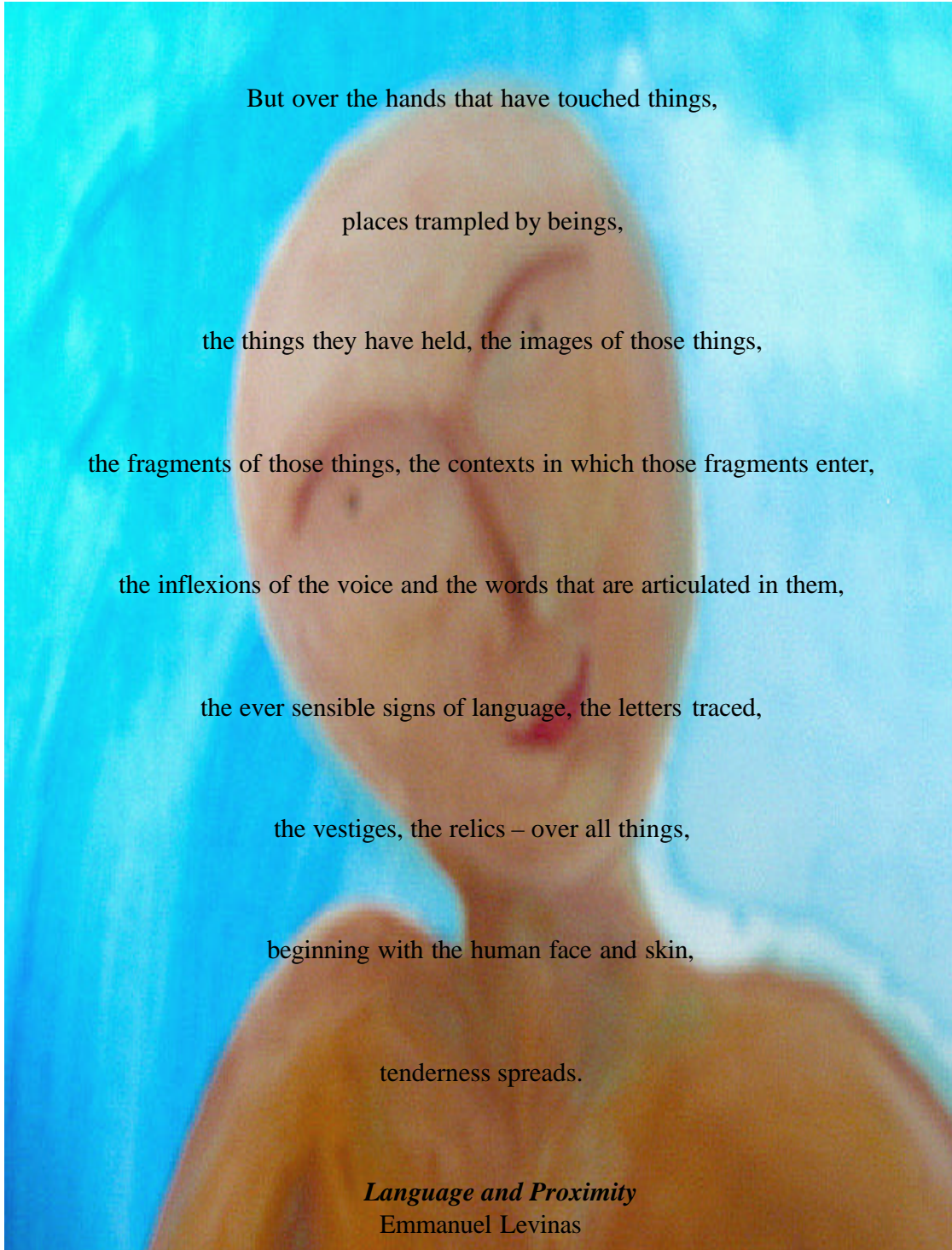
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**BEFORE THE BIRTH OF THE PLOT:**

**HERE I WAS BEFORE YOU NOW**



But over the hands that have touched things,

places trampled by beings,

the things they have held, the images of those things,

the fragments of those things, the contexts in which those fragments enter,

the inflexions of the voice and the words that are articulated in them,

the ever sensible signs of language, the letters traced,

the vestiges, the relics – over all things,

beginning with the human face and skin,

tenderness spreads.

*Language and Proximity*  
Emmanuel Levinas

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*The relations which I perceive between things – and these often include causal and historical relations – tend to form in my mind a complex synchronic pattern. I see fields where others see chapters. And so I am forced to use another method to try to place and define events. A method which searches for co-ordinates extensively in space, rather than consequentially in time. I write in the spirit of a geometrician. One of the ways in which I establish co-ordinates extensively is by likening aspect with aspect, by way of metaphor. I do not wish to become a prisoner of the nominal, believing that things are what I name them.*

John Berger

Before I am stunned into silence, I draw in one more breath. Breath to tell you what has shocked me. A field of words that is not a story; a stunning landscape. I will die from holding my breath, figuring out the exact words worthy of your ears. I love you so much. Can you feel my rabbit-breath on your face? Closer, now. Concentrate.

Come in. It was at its peak when I was about twelve. I would love to re-arrange my bedroom and do it just so and set up little objects d’art and strategically draw the eye’s attention to the spines of certain books and not others. At this time my three George Orwell novels were positively fanned out by my bed. My mother had given me one whole wall of my room to graffiti with marker and spraypaint, which my rapt friends always had a go at, hesitant at first and then god, that feeling I got when I said, *No, go for it, it’s cool.*

Not much has changed. Ever the host. I want you to come in. I want to serve you. No, I want to show off. No, I just do not want to be alone in here. And I cannot leave. You’re always late. Hurry. (It is in the very same strange voice that I have been courting my own life all this time. And I’m far, far later even than you are.)



I want to tell you about how I spend most of my time. Here in my own city, I work with refugees from all over the place. Mainly, I do things with them that have to do with art, with dramatic or literary activities that draw on life stories. Because of that, I am very interested in research and thinking around autobiography, testimony and witnessing. But ethics... I *love* ethics. This little story is an attempt to tell the truth about why I do what I do, and why I love what I love. It is also a warning: Watch out! The day your life feels a bit wooden, it may catch fire just then...

My relationships with refugees, both individual ones and the conceptual category, are complex. They lack the consistency and coherence people tend to attribute to them in discussions of ‘assistance’ or ‘power’. These relationships also change through time, as I and the refugees in my life all take turns being grouchy, needy, busy and everything else. It is safe to say, however, that I do not ‘identify’ with refugees due to any kind of ‘common experience’. Such a claim would make a mockery of the gravity of their experiences and mine, which is exactly the gravity that gives weight to language. That attracts it to the earth, and holds it there.

It would, however, be an equally serious travesty to suggest that my biography and my choices, my body and my luck, did not lead to my interest in the theme of exile. My devotion to refugees could not be an accident, randomly drawn from a hat labeled: *well you have to do something*. Could it. It had to have started a very long time ago.



I am walking behind my mother, slow and bored, at the Kitchener Farmer’s Market. I don’t know how old I am, but I had not yet passed through the door that marks the moment when little girls start to listen – or at least, to posture as such, with focused eyes and still faces – to listen unsquirming to the

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conversations of grownup women rather than fidgeting away the dragging moments until their mothers are done.

I am walking and daydreaming, short before the round stained glass window high up at the top of the escalator. We are going up and I smell sausages. And I am dreaming of golden light and the Prince of Peace. But it's not Jesus, it's earthly, either in the faraway past or future of this world; he's a Good King at the pinnacle of a simple hierarchy. He is a he, and he's wise and kind; I fit into his world perfectly, his mercy a perfectly round bubble.

Irritation arrests me. I feel a strange and nagging... transparent... barrier? As if this golden world with its white castle were in one of those glass balls and would shatter if... I am losing words to describe this feeling, like cringing. Inside the ball it's too static, like it's dead. I don't know. I want an Oktoberfest sausage before we go, I also want a cinnamon bun. I am so hungry.



My hunger and all the hunger surrounding me. It sucked and pulled my life in a great many, sometimes worrying directions. A source of sorrow in my life is how unable I was (and remain) to explain these paths to my mother. The principal difficulty is in overcoming the sensation of not being trusted or believed by her, she who hates a liar more than anything. Don't get me wrong; of course I *would* sometimes lie to her, emphatically, indignantly. But the truth is often much harder to explain, more neurotic, more shadowy, and at times can uncannily *feel* like a lie.

What could I say, for example, when my mother asked where the hundred-dollar down duvet had gotten to? It was somewhere out there in Kitchener, in a basement, in this bitterly cold January, and it was wrapping up an old man named Mohammed. He had told me he didn't have a blanket, that he was using a towel, and, instead of killing myself, I had taken him to my apartment and given him the duvet that my mother really could not afford but had bought for me anyhow, for special. Yes I did appreciate it but some people leave me with no choices, in a state where *nothing* can override what I know I must do.

On the other hand, those moments I am able to do nothing whatsoever become burnt more severely into my mind, as haunting images, as convictions that sentence me to doing something more extreme next time I am able. Before I became accustomed to this set of feelings, when I was young, I would be driven mad. Hearing through the ceiling or across the field parents screaming at children, and their cries, and the dreaded thumping or crashing of someone being beat would literally have me writhing around on my bed, clutching my chest, like a little piece of bacon, popping, screaming into my pillow. It was unbearable. There is not one syllable of exaggeration in this paragraph.

On the other hand, perhaps I am not yet quite accustomed to this set of feelings. Because the ladies still kill me. The legless lady pushing herself through the sand on a Frisbee in Vietnam. The lady in a market in Morocco, shuffling along blankly in the blaring sunshine with the word *lucky* printed on each plastic sandal. The shy and eager old Japanese ladies, the hopeful housewives in my classes when I taught there, coming to class with brand new pencil cases with dogs or bunnies printed on them, the earnest way these ladies lay their cases and notebooks out, neatly and symmetrically in front of them, and looked at me. I had to leave a classroom at the top of the hour once, from welling up.

And the lady who made such warm, non-crazy eye contact with me on the St. George subway platform and moved towards me. I think she is coming to tell me the Ancestral Secret of the Wise Old Ladies. She stops just in front of me, and reaches down... Into a trashcan right there I hadn't noticed... Pulls up a crumpled McDonald's bag. Opens it, and out comes a Big Mac box, opens it. Eats the nine greasy, shiny little fries rattling around in it. Hungry Granny, I swear before God, for you I almost jumped in front of the westbound train as it arrived, a moment later.

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Their galactic well of pain is deeper than any thought, and I am the rabbit and the stupid sitting duck. Forever hypnotized by my vertigo, by my impotence to make things right for them, by the absurdity of the useless sacrifice I offer and offer. A parody of Oskar Schindler at the end, realizing what more he could have done, and, rending his clothes (as it were), choking on tears; he is delirious with shame. He beholds the possessions he still has and could have given, and shaking, sputtering, *This watch, this suit...* I must somehow divest myself of the glory of *this body, this life...* before the end, and there *is* such a thing as too late.



Come in. Now, as an adult: different books on exhibit! And now in my home I am free to let you stay, to help you and feed you. And we will make this place my home together. You will make this place my home by coming? Could it be that simple?

I enter my house, lock the door, and go into the bathroom. And if I position the two mirrors above my sink just so, I cannot see myself at all, though I'm standing right in front of them. And it's good. Lean a bit to peek out an ear, jump back to the invisible middle, grinning. A ghost host!



*Exile is never the state of being satisfied, placid, or secure. Exile, in the words of Wallace Stevens, is "a mind of winter" in which the pathos of summer and autumn as much as the potential of spring are nearby but unobtainable... Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew.*

*Edward Said*

I am so little and I'm standing in Victoria Park in Kitchener. My father is behind me. I behold – the first time I had the feeling, “behold”, rather than “see” – the swans on the wee lake, the group of trees, shimmering, switching in the soft breeze.

My father is low, perhaps crouching, and I will never forget – in his English accent ground up by cigarettes – he said:

“There are two worlds. The phenomenal and the noumenal. Can you see them?”

I nodded.

I could.

Throughout the intervening twenty-five years, since that day in the park, I have struggled to find a way of life – though I'd be overjoyed to find a single action – that is valid in both of these worlds. Most of what I believe politically can safely be called ‘Marxist’, which does leave room for the invisible world. But most of what I believe about that invisible world has to do with God.

Yet the impulse to classify seems to indicate an inferior way of thinking, as a one-second flirt with the label ‘Christian Marxist’ just taught me. Hold still: inferior? What is doing this judging? This relentless drawing of an ever-widening Big Picture? I love the sensations that attend certainty to the point where I cram reality into themes to experience confirmation. Of all my theories, pet and thunderous.

Here is one instruction given to me by God: Find ways of speaking that indicate one is ready to let go of the labels – ways of signaling to one another that one is trying to put words aside, or at least, put them

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in brackets. For purely political reasons (see: *Sad History of Rationality*, Vols. 1 – 2003), it is a good idea to name all that is at work underneath nomination, but in such a way that brings to mind what has forever escaped it and will forever continue to do so. This project requires one to use and refer to words. What is this, a joke?

Punchline: my father was a philosophy teacher. Logic, actually. But he limited his domain to everything that happened *before* Heidegger told him that being beings and nothing nothings, whereupon he said *Bah humbug*, and retreated to ancient Greece, where he retired. Plato had the last word; no one else need speak.

So he is not my interlocutor  
He is not my interlocutor

*That would be a pathologization, or at least a psychoanalytic turn, in the answer to the question who are you?*

YOU: This one who sounds infantile and petulant, insisting like a shifty-eyed criminal, that childhood is resolved, and over. Yes and no, dear, yes and no: the truth lies somewhere in between, in a gray zone. If John Berger sees fields where others see chapters, I see filigree rather than links in a causal chain; I stand under the mistletoe and God plants a yes and a no: one upon each cheek, flushed and wet with tears, re-telling the nicest memory I have of my dad, over and over, to whoever will listen. Whomever.



My dreams are made of trains and elevators, and phrases, the meaning of which often escape me, but their significance is felt as so weighty that they startle me awake. Just before dawn, spoken loudly in my own voice: *You are SO MUCH MORE than the nexus between what the world throws and you, and what it demands of you.* Whoa! Okay! I'm awake! But the phrases are not always so pithy and sweet, and this much is true: in dreams begin responsibilities.

In a recent dream I carried a delicious sandwich, carefully wrapped, in my right hand. There was a hungry woman on a high unicycle approaching, passing... Yes, it was more certain that she was hungry than anything else in the dream, and I wanted to help, to feed her, to offer her, of course, the triple-decker work of art in my hand. I stretched, extending my arm skyward with all my energy. Obviously grateful, she reaches down and grasps the food, reaches down and I let go of it, reaches down just enough to destabilize her centre of gravity. Over-compensating, losing her balance, top-heavy and in slow motion, falling away from me. Sandwich clutched, she fell to her death. The thud of her body on the ground triggered in me a nausea so strong that it woke me.



Back to sunshine, walking in peace. Most definitely awake now, but I do not 'get it'. God made the world and I do not understand any more than I can imagine 'claiming' this or any land. I'm truly in the middle of nowhere, on an island in the St. Lawrence waterway. The only sign of animal life here is a group of cows, sleeping small in the distance. What kind of lunatic claims a piece of land as their own, and names it?

A car passes and I and the driver both wave so automatically, with such soft wrists and elbows, exchange a smiling glance. As if to say *I walk here*, answered softly with, *And I drive*. It's so mundane and beautiful, it's the *After you, sir* at the elevator door. So I pause, and think, unblinking.

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I stand still for a while, looking down... Inviting a little bug (of a kind I've never seen before!) to walk on my ankle. He accepts. And I imagine that he smiles. And I think that if death is a state of no memory, and if I am only flesh, only incarnated for one lifetime after all, then that too, surely that is part of God's dream for this world.

*Intersubjectivity is not a relation of mastery*, we hear. But it's still more: all relations of mastery are hallucinations, distortions of the original relation which every other relation presupposes. Such delusions are only possible derivatively, like the way certain drugs visually distort what is manifest. The original relation – the ethical relation – is way behind and within the structure of me/now/bug and sunshine. Having created me, having crafted the eyes that see the bug, it is patiently breathing under all that is. Call it whatever you like, explain it as exhaustively as you might, nothing mediates it. Nothing.

Somehow that thought causes me to walk on.

As I walk I recall a game that *all* North American children play (oh, the research is out there...). I remember playing it, how everyone knew it. One child holds up a (straw, grass, wheat) and asks the other, *Is this a tree or a bush?* It's a one word answer, *Tree* or *Bush*, as the case may be. *After* receiving the answer, the smarty-pants interlocutor decides: she either leaves the straw in its current state and says *That's right, it's a tree!* or, as the case may be, she pushes the fluffy little seeds up to the top of the straw to form a bunch held tight between her thumb and fingertip, smiling, *Yep, it's a bush*. She can also say *No I'm sorry, it's a tree/bush*, leaving it be or pushing the seeds up as the case may be. The only point of the game is the script.

After a few rounds of this, inevitably the guesser wants a turn, *Let me now, it's my go*. Because of that sweet taste: to be the one who decides, who confirms or denies, to say what the case is and to make it match that full, round intention, complete adequacy to intuition, inside fulfilled outside, mirroring my decision, no surprises. And I stop in my tracks: surely all the little girls of North America are not evil. Drawing themes and designating names is simply part of what we do, part of human life on earth, and the brains of even little girls love it.

It is not an error to call this light 'sunshine'. Error begins when I think I have fully succeeded in naming it. Error begins when I claim my place in it, when I name that place 'mine'.



*Exile... is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.*

*Edward Said*

It is said that people's names do not properly belong to language. And it's true that I often feel as though I am conjuring him away, erasing him, inviting the reader to miss the point, when I write the name: Ed Halbach. My guide, my mentor, my teacher; he instructed me on everything: space aliens, American foreign policy, sinister conspiracies, Buckminster Fuller, Gurdjieff... When I was lost in my mind he made me look at a pinecone, and told me its secret, which I can't tell you. His steaming kitchen, wooden table, smelling of coffee with his wild wild garden outside, with turtles and compost heap. His running for mayor and his loving of insects: he called me Junebug.

Ed and I argued often and he was relentless, insisting on my responsibility to transform my life, to disappear, to wake up, and to awaken the guides inside me. He made me meditate outside all night to figure out what is meant by 'disappear'. Okay, he never once *made* me do anything. He and his wife and sons went to a real pow-wow, and they took me with. I fell asleep by the fire, transported by love.

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In one way or another, he helped me with every problem I ever had from the age of fourteen (retrospectively, I am awed by his patience and wonder what on earth kept him interested). Now, this – his death – was the most serious problem I had ever had. And he was no help at all. I was twenty-three years old, but my perceptions and attitudes were so bound up in him that I was anchorless imagining life without him.

I went to see him all the time while he was sick. Mesothelioma sounded like a dinosaur's name. He was a very tall man. Now, he looked so small, shrinking, with his knees under a blanket in his living room. He had moved out of the house with the turtles in the backyard, and I always imagined them trying to follow him to the new house. I would picture them waiting patiently to cross King Street, with their houses packed up and loaded on to their backs.

He and I talked at length about why he was not doing the work to make himself better. He did not believe in death's inevitability; he considered it a choice. *So why are you dying asshole*. He said it was work he wasn't prepared to do. The story there is absolutely literal, and I'll tell it to you another time. He was only sick for nine months and he was only forty-five or something.

The last day I saw him, I accidentally stood on his oxygen tube and we laughed. He had set up a room off the kitchen on the ground floor. We talked slowly, laboriously, for quite a while. He asked me to take care of the insects for him, told me some chores to do in the backyard, explained how he should have been putting down peat moss that week. He told me he loved me and I told him it back and kissed his forehead. Right before I left he earnestly asked me to play 'Paper Scissors Rock' with him. Okay, Morphine Man. I was standing and he was sitting and the sun was setting. He won. "Paper covers rock," was the last thing he said to me as his hand clasped around my closed fist. He fell instantly and soundly asleep and I peeled his hand off my fist and left quietly. It would be years before I was myself again.

I'm sorry, Ed; I think I just kind of used you. I'm telling my story, so I talked about you, but I sort of put violins at the end.

Well, yes, I guess I heard them at the time, too.

Good Lord, it takes such a very long time to say something true about oneself.



*The writer's desire to finish is fatal to the truth. The End unifies. Unity must be established in another way.*

*John Berger*

I am intensely grateful for language. My life has left me without doubt that writing is doing something, that words change people and things. What we do with language is important and real; its effects can be evolutionary or instantaneous. The novels of Cormac McCarthy ended my childhood forever. A passage in an essay written by my philosophy teacher stopped me from throwing a cigarette butt off my porch.

Another scene from the porch: I was with my friend Anne, wobbly after a long night of indulgence. My mouth was dry, and I was confused over the porch light; it kept coming on every time I moved! Going off when I was still! After I gained intellectual mastery over that phenomenon, I wriggled my foot to keep it on as I read the following aloud to her:

The elevator door opens  
unexpectedly on the third floor  
and you get in  
then both of you glide shut  
[big silence]

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Some days I feel like I have nothing to look forward to.

UN investigators have confirmed reports of human rights violations committed by rebel troops during recent fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo, including rape, torture, arbitrary executions and cannibalism. The UN mission in DRC says soldiers from the Ugandan-backed Movement for the Liberation of Congo and two smaller factions were responsible for the atrocities which took place between mid-October and the end of December in North-eastern Congo.

The book I'm reading talks about "how to engage with that on *unphantasmagoric* terms". I take that book everywhere. I want to be good. But.

Some days I recoil from every inch of the known universe, such that I end up quite compressed. On those days I sit on a chair at my house, shaking like a leaf, reading about power in my book. By nightfall, I get up, to go buy cigarettes, and start writing in my head. I walk my way into thunderous silences and write my way to peace by the end of the block.

McCaul meets Queen and I have words that could save the world, re-constitute subjectivity... I sew reality right up into the limits of my skin and let it go again, as I walk South. I reach the store sane by the grace of the English language alone. So I'm giving you the chance here, to talk to a Real Live Poet.

Hey, Person - you with the face -  
Now is not the time, I guess, and this is not the place  
But since we seem to be going to the millionth floor

I just wanted to tell you that you're in the clear  
and I thought you'd want to know  
that my contempt for you has finally run out  
I don't think you understand how angry I was  
about the decline of the sea otter population  
The beautiful saints of the sea shriveling up for oil  
I beat my chest and bit my nails for almost two years  
I had a nightmare of the bad infinity; it just went on and on  
But I learned one thing during that time and that's  
*All hatred is self-hatred*  
Cause I was speechless when Katie asked me about  
The tar in my own shriveling lungs  
Katie always knows what's going on with me  
So if I can forgive you for driving an SUV,  
For all the rest, can you ever forgive me?

More than 350 witnesses and victims interviewed by the UN rights investigators confirmed...allegations that rebels from the MLC had committed widespread human rights violations during their recent advance on the town of Beni. In one case, investigators heard how a young girl was cut into small pieces by the soldiers and then eaten. In others, how hearts and organs were cut out of victims and forced on their families to eat.

So a citizen goes up to a poet and says,  
"Can you describe this?"

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In the electric space between the Yes and the No  
This is where I have chosen to stay.  
This space is my home.  
Because, my friend, I do not remember  
The days before we began to make ghosts out of one another.  
I take it on faith, and I'm only a student,  
poring over the hagiography of the blind saints who crowded the  
horizons before the beginning of time. They gathered together in  
the dark and if there had been any light, we'd have been able to  
see their breath as they discussed the making of the world.  
And when they set it all in motion, it was not light, but  
language.  
It was the alphabet that crashed in, to the nothingness.  
Each letter demanded the world, and called it into being.

Since then, all that has ever mattered to me is you.  
Of course you don't remember why, that's okay. Neither do I.  
But that's not enough to make me stop  
this pacing back and forth  
in front of the gates that guard this moment from  
the rest of time.

After a brimming quiet moment, she did not tell me it was good. She did, however, say *Wow, that's a lot of responsibility*. It was intensely gratifying to have how I actually experience writing reflected back to me in her words. Because it does feel as serious as all that. But the martyr image has never fit; for one thing, I would dearly love to think it's just not my style, and for another I am too blessed. In one respect I have never had to carry any burden totally on my own; I have had a great deal of luck, and a great deal of help:

Ed came back to me finally. In a dream. It did not feel like a normal dream. It felt like a visitation.

I was lying in my childhood bed, winter frost on the window. Made with hot breath and gentle, circular rubbing, two circles of clear window appeared, each with a cat's face in it. *Of course*, I thought, *the cats of death*.

The harbingers then disappeared and Ed climbed over the sill into my room. He took me up and we slow danced around my room. I could hear his thoughts: he knew he was dead, he knew how I'd missed him, how much I'd been thinking of him. Then he asked, *Do you want to see where I live?*

*Of course I do.*

We ran outside - it was suddenly a bright summer day - to the crest of a hill, with decadent people under umbrellas, sipping around the matching miniature umbrellas in their cocktails. Death was a resort!

Ed started running down the hill, leapt up and took off flying! I hung back, saying *I can't...* But I wanted so fiercely to follow, so I started flying. *It's so easy...it's so easy!*  
We flew over this terribly strange landscape that alternated sunny apple orchards and deep dark abysses, in undulating turns. Orchard, abyss, orchard, abyss. Finally he landed and stood on the ground near an apple tree. I landed in front of him and I knew that I had a very short time left there. I was going to fade away. I knew I had time to ask only one question, and I was wracking my brain but I couldn't think of a question that seemed important enough. So I finally, at the last second, asked, *Will I ever see you again?*

He began to morph, his face to melt, into all these people who were peripheral to my life at that time: the vegetable man at the IGA, the cafeteria lady at school, that stage manager guy at school who I always nodded at but didn't talk to, my upstairs neighbour.  
Then he was gone, and I awoke. No one ever answers my questions as unequivocally as he used to.



### Exile dispatch: Japan

Exile is loss, but not in-the-middle-of-loss. It is a territory after loss. There is a quiet centripetal force; yes, it's empty but it's not bad. It is where everything that happens, happens and all that is, is. Here there is only one story that has ever been told, can ever be told. Each molecule is so... acute, and precisely what is possible: no more nor less than what is actual, nothing impossible ever happens.

*Atashi no tomodachi wa jisatsu suru.* Is Japanese for *My friend committed suicide. Back home, in Canada, yes. No, there's no use in my going home, I know. Sorry, excuse me... I don't think my understanding of your question is good. Kanojo wa hazukashi ja nai. Shiranai.* I said these things over and over, in March and in June, on behalf of two different friends. I forget the translation for *She killed her baby daughter first.*

They were traumatic months. In Japan each little neighbourhood has a public bath, glowing from the inside and smelling like flowers; steaming away late into the night, like an engine recharging the women. I began to go every day. After a long while, the old women stopped poking my belly, pulling on my piercings and rubbing my tattoos. It helped when I learned the Japanese for *I feel rather like a bear in the circus at this time.* Which sent us all into fits of laughter.

I understand that suicides do not await my forgiveness any more than God awaits my approval.

### Exile dispatch: Prague

*Muj kamarad si sebevrazdil.* That's the Czech, which I learned a few years later. Every time someone died, I became extremely promiscuous for a few weeks. I will never forget some of those brave and interesting strangers with whom I shared a very bizarre intimacy.

While in Prague, I dreamt that I dreamt the history of the world as written in a big book by an Indian Chief, and my mum didn't believe me. When I opened the book to prove it to her, it was the Prague phone book. Then my mum turned to me and told me she thought heaven was very far away.

### Exile dispatch: Manitoba

So I was at a bar very late at night and I bummed a few cigarettes off these three Palestinian guys because I missed the store. Around closing time they came back and asked for my help dealing with this really wasted prostitute harassing them at their table. So I went over with my friend and sat down and this blond woman with a hectic miniskirt and that sickly sweet milky vomit breath started hitting my leg and asking if I wanted to hear some poetry. Said she knew I was all booksmart and all that but had I ever heard this? No I hadn't, she continued, because it was *alloriginal*. After the first slurred poem about the nature of love, she made a second offering.

It took me only a second to figure it out, to see it. Recognition gave way to weightlessness. The poem relentlessly conjured up places, one place, that place where the gravel road meets the paved road in front of Willie's. In the poem someone writes indian in the dust on the back of a car. In it someone kicks their dog and will not feed it and calls it mutt and falls, sighing, confessing that it is not the only mutt in the house. Is it.

I lock in. *Where are you from?* I ask in a clandestine tone, and she understands my understanding immediately. She reminds me of Eve, suddenly naked, as she says, *Central Manitoba – you wouldn't know*

it. My head floods with words but all I say is *Try me*. After some prodding she names a reservation near Moosehorn. I tell her my mother's family lives just outside a reservation at Dog Creek. By now we are shouting, elated, grabbing hands... Rosalie asks for my family's name. *Spence*.

She wells up: *Oh, Spence, Spence from Dog Creek! Norman Spence took my virginity; He was my one true love; Broke my heart; That's why I'm like this; I'll never forget; O You Spence!* (Now, I did say outside the reservation, didn't I?) *Do you know Norman? His mum's name's Rosalie, just like mine. Big guy with freckles?*

Now the crazy part is that years ago I went to a bar in Moosehorn and met a bunch of Indian guys who claimed to know who I was: I was Granny's granddaughter. They told me they were related to me. The next morning I told my granny what these boys had said in the bar, and of course she said those boys were making things up; nothing new here. But! One of them was a fat guy with freckles named Spence, and all this I told Rosalie.

She was too wasted to hear the silence in my story, to see the gaping hole. Good thing – otherwise I would have had to ask her to believe the utter science fiction I have been asked to believe all my life: Our family just happens to live very close to a reservation, in the middle of absolutely nowhere. Though my grandfather looked like a brown Asian man and spoke a language other than English, though about half of his children look brown too ('Suntans from being out on the tractor all day' was what my mother *actually said to me* when I was little), though some of my first cousin have status cards, though the name Spence is dominant *on that reservation*, though... everything, still, we are white. 'Just plain old regular Canadians'. Because Indians are drunk and dirty and can't take care of things. Their dogs are scary, their beaches are dangerous, their cars are dusty.

Oh my earth, and my place upon it... My Rosalie. I tried to take her home, to feed her, to take care of her. *Come on girl – what are you doing? At least take my number and address*. When I turned to fetch a pen to write them down, she took off. She was incredibly fast. I ran out onto Spadina, searching for her.

My white body is still walking through the amazingly dark and endless night.

### Exile dispatch: Cambodia

I am here then, I am with you  
I have dreamt of you forever,  
now I'm here. Pressing my forehead  
against yours staring into your eyes.  
DO YOU LOVE ME BACK?

The world is the size of a postage stamp,  
and most of that is underwater.  
I could lay down and die for every person I see,  
and after these million deaths,  
the dusty expanse of the vast vast landscape  
would still be located  
on my finger tip.  
So I stare and do not stop,  
my finger in the air.



Years ago, Ed dreamt that he had a big, important-looking book on his lap. When he opened it to the first page, it was blank. He began to flip the pages, curiously at first, then desperately. Each and every page of the book was blank! But at the bottom of every single page was written one sentence:

**Turn the page, there is no poem.**

Though we discussed the meaning and significance of this for weeks, I don't think I have to explain it to you. Not to you.



**Come in.** You enter me from the inside. I am not one, I am (at least) two. Scattering and melting under your gaze, my impulse to give myself to you is reconfigured as thirst and hunger; metaphysical and physical desires scramble together. Here I am fearless and never confused, when the surface of your body is continuous with every other surface in the universe.

Only once in a while do I even long to feel at home. Because as my mind heals and my consciousness clarifies, as I patiently age, I get more skilled and faster at building makeshift structures; little tents for us at the side of the road. Do you remember what I built for you in the desert? In that alleyway in Osaka? The word made flesh, in a high-speed train screaming through the Italian countryside. I became half a million slaves to build that altar for you.

*It is not myself I will give you. Not the self of mine. Or, if I were you, and believe me I can at this moment imagine it as easily as I can turn the palm of my hand upwards or downwards – or if I were you, the self of you. If you want to number me part by part I shall be as any other, for nobody has found the judge of parts, nobody has found the nipple to judge the breast... But I am not the sum of my parts. See me as wholly as your own dear life demands that you see yourself. I have as many hairs on the back of my neck as you may have ways of touching me. It is not myself I give you, it is the meeting of the two of us that I offer you. What you offer me is the opportunity for me to offer this. I offer it. I offer it.*

*John Berger*

But always sober up from there, again and again, return to chastity. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah – abused and dissimulated for millennia now – only had one message to impart: *This* is no way to treat a guest.



Bumping along at the back of a sunny streetcar, late but at peace. A mother, her three sons, and the middle son's friend surround me, and somehow include me in their energy, so I am listening and grinning.

She is teaching the youngest one the concept of multiplication, explaining then running these little drills. He can only handle a wee bit of abstraction, then he makes an error, then she smiles and cuddles him and explains again. After several rounds of this, the middle son takes a stab at explaining it. Marginal success. His skinny Vietnamese friend jumps in to the conversation, making self-deprecating comments

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about how he failed math and is failing everything and can't do anything. They all laugh heartily. Moved, I become conscious of the fact that I will write this down later.

The mum challenges them then: how about division? The eldest explains it so well even I flash back to the time I still knew the operation. And the skinny friend lights up. **Yeah! That's why there can be a remainder!**

At this point, all four of them look at *me*. The poetry does not escape me, and I smile, and I nod. Why yes, there certainly can be.



These passages have been sketches of some of the places my devotion to refugees comes from. They have also described some of what I have to offer them. I understand very little about either of these things, but am certain of this:

I have never done anything just in my entire life. I have not yet made my first move forward; I have yet to say the first word.

Turn the page.